

Coronavirus: Understanding your Emotional Responses

Is there a “Normal” Response?

A world-wide pandemic of this magnitude is something that most of us have never encountered. We have no experience or certainty of what it's like, what it will be like, and exactly how it's likely to impact on our lives in the future. Even when we became aware that coronavirus had affected other countries, it is normal that we assumed it would not affect us in this way.

Why do I feel anxious?

Faced with this degree of change and uncertainty, it is normal to feel shocked, anxious, confused, and concerned. There is an area of your brain - the "limbic system" - that is wired up to detect threats and dangers. It's our 'survival system', if you like. This part of your brain is likely working very hard for you right now - warning you of all possible dangers and eventualities that may occur - to keep you safe. This is why anxious thoughts around whether your loved ones will stay well, or whether your business will stay afloat, are natural.

Equally, our 'survival system' is being constantly bombarded by distressing images and accounts of people unwell, dying, people losing their loved ones, images of empty streets and people in masks - which can feel unworldly and frightening. Know that this part of the brain is trying to be helpful, even though it brings uncomfortable emotions.

When these mental alarm bells ring, you may experience body sensations that represent a 'Fight, flight, freeze' response. This is when the body gets ready to survive danger by releasing adrenalin and stress hormones. You may notice changes in your body, such as feeling on high alert; difficulty sleeping; discomfort in areas - e.g., headache; tight chest; 'butterflies in tummy'.

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Why do I feel sad?

Everything has changed so suddenly that we are experiencing a 'loss'. For some of us, loss of our jobs, our businesses, our leisure activities, contact with our friends and family, our freedom to travel, to go out and do as we please, loss of our daily routines and our children's last weeks and months at school. This takes time to adjust to. It's normal to experience a number of different emotions, which can change rapidly throughout the day. Even if we haven't been directly affected by the virus, haven't lost loved ones, it is normal to be experiencing a grief response.

Why do I feel angry?

Anger is a common response to threat and loss, and feeling that we cannot control the things occurring around us. Sometimes, often without realising it, it's easier for us to be angry than to feel sad and vulnerable. We can lash out at those around us, and push people away; making relationships more difficult, and often resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

It is easy to feel angry towards other individuals who are acting differently; for example, seeing someone 'stockpiling' at the supermarket as 'selfish'. Remember that this people will have their own anxieties that may cause irrational behaviour. Equally, we must recognise and challenge our assumptions and biases: Perhaps that person is shopping for others also.



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What Might Help?

- **Identify how you are feeling, and talk about it** as much as possible; with friends, family members, or a professional Psychologist. If you feel very alone, the Samaritans have a free 24-hour helpline: 116 123.
- **Know that all emotions pass in time.** See if you can observe these tricky thoughts/feelings and make 'room' for them; knowing they are a natural response. Know that even if the changes and the loss you are experiencing now continue longer term, you will find new strategies to manage and adapt, and you will develop new ways of feeling. We humans are incredibly resilient and even when faced with the greatest atrocities, we find ways to cope and develop a "new normal."
- **Reach out to others:** And find strength and comfort in the kindness of others. In times like this, it is common for people to reach out and help one another. Connect with friends via video / calls, or share funny anecdotes or clips.
- **Focus on what you can control.** Government plans; other people's reactions and actions; the supermarket supplies; are out of your control. Take care of what you can, in terms of looking after yourself and your family.
- **Limit your exposure to the news.** Watch it twice a day maximum if possible, and stick to reliable sources.
- **Give yourself some structure,** and try to do something each day that gives you a sense of accomplishment: Try using a [daily planner](#) to help balance your productivity with self-care across each day.
- **Ensure that you nurture your mind and body:** Fuel your body well; move your body; plan down-time... Staying physically active releases chemicals that help to combat anxiety and low mood.
- **Plan some mindful time.** The 'limbic system'/survival area of the brain loves to live in the future, and 'what ifs'. Find activities you enjoy that help you stay in the 'now' (be that baking; gardening; colouring; yoga...). Some good apps to help mindfulness practice are: "Calm", "Headspace", and "Smiling Mind"
- **Practice gratitude:** What things - however small - are you grateful for today? It's easy to forget the small stuff when we are in 'survival' mode: You might like to keep a gratitude diary and write down three things you are grateful for at the end of each day.