



# Psychological Distress and Coronavirus

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Advice for Professionals Providing  
Support to People in Self-Isolation

# Background

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In general, in the face of stress and difficult circumstances, most people show great resilience, although temporary distress is normal, understandable and predictable. Evidence shows that social connectedness is a key element of good coping under stress.

In terms of helping people cope with self-isolation, evidence suggests that the impact on some people can be substantial and, for some, last beyond the actual self-isolation. This is dependent on various factors such as availability/ ability to access support networks, pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as previous mental health difficulties and other sources of stress.

The literatures indicated special attention should also be given to children, those with a learning disability, and those in minority groups at risk of discrimination.

## **The evidence (including a recent Lancet Rapid Review) suggests that the following are useful:**

- having as much information as possible
- sufficient supplies
- ways to reduce boredom
- enhanced virtual communication are all protective.
- there is also evidence that encouraging people to reduce their use of the internet and television to find out about the virus can be protective.

There is also some growing evidence that psychological support may be helpful in preventing further psychological distress. As a general principle, for those in acutely stressful environments, or in the immediate aftermath, psychological first aid principals can prove very beneficial. Essentially this is formalised common sense with key listening skills. The goal being to promote: safety, calming, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope. It is important to recognise that only a minority will need formal intervention.

Distress which settles is the normal course for most people, and it is communities, people and families that are resilient and supportive. We should be looking towards promoting those connections in the first instance.

Training resources to support Psychological First Aid skills in the broad workforce are available [here](#).

## **Recent literature relating to coronavirus indicates that there are three key methods used in the SARS outbreak that could be useful in supporting people in isolation:**

- 1** | Ensuring there is clear communication with regular and accurate updates can help address uncertainty and fear by using principles of psychological first aid.
- 2** | Treatment plans, progress reports, and health status updates should be done in a timely manner and shared regularly.
- 3** | If people are continuing to show high levels of ongoing distress please seek advice from colleagues and/or follow local referral guidelines.

For the majority of patients and health workers, emotional and behavioural responses are part of a normal adaptive process to an extraordinary stress. The key is to normalise responses as far as possible and be clear with advice, guidance and instructions. Remind people this can be a time to focus on self-care and all the things people want to do in normal busy lives but never have the chance – e.g. reading that book they have put off for ages, spend more time with loved ones and finish things on their 'to-do-list'. Encourage people to not dwell on what might happen but to focus on what is important in their lives that they can control.

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## If anxiety is significant for the individual in isolation the following is recommended:

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**Following principles of Psychological First Aid is the recommended and evidence based psychosocial response which is designed to build on resilience and enhance recovery. This might include:**

- + Encourage people to use the time to strengthen existing social supports for instance family bonds and relationships that can be taken for granted when people are usually busy.
- + Health workers should be aware of the potential impact of people being in prolonged contact where there is risk of domestic abuse, substance abuse or other child protection concerns in the house.
- + Be aware that many anxieties will be very practical around perhaps financial or childcare concerns. Follow Psychological First Aid principles
- + Maintain a routine and keep busy where possible this is likely to be really helpful.
- + Suggesting people can use the time to develop skills and knowledge about new things and they may come out of self-isolation having a sense of achievement.
- + Suggest using technology to increase social connection such as making a call or using face time. Self-isolation can be anxiety provoking. It is unusual. Like all unusual events, stress, boredom and worries about health, family or work can be heightened so social connectedness is key.
- + If they have had previous mental health issues then let them know their normal worries may return or feel worse. Acknowledge that isolation can also cause practical difficulties as well which can cause frustration.

- + The key thing to remember is that these reactions are normal in times of distress. It is helpful to reflect that these are ordinary anxieties and normal reactions to anyone who is in an abnormal situation.
- + For most people symptoms are minimal and will likely resolve in the weeks following a return to normal activities.
- + If they want to find out some information encourage the use of reliable resources such as [NHS Inform](#), [NHS 24](#) or the [online 111 service](#). If they have general worries about coronavirus but are not unwell they can also call [0800 0282816](#) for support. If they are feeling low, anxious or depressed they can also call [Breathing Space](#) on [0800 83 85 87](#).

**It is possible that for a small number of people these symptoms of stress may persist in the few weeks beyond the period of isolation. The following recommendations can be useful to share:**

- + Remind people that if they are in contact with support services (either formal NHS systems, informal networks or 3rd sector support e.g. breathing space or Samaritans) then we would encourage them to make contact with those services and use the professional supports they have.
- + Many of these services will be able to be contacted via telephone and internet based systems. Isolation does not mean people cannot be in contact with their health or support network.
- + Family, friends, faith organisations and community groups can all be a source of support both during, and after, a period of isolation. Activities are often useful to help recover from periods of acute stress.

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## Here are some helpful free websites, on-line therapies and apps you can suggest that people use to help them manage their own feelings of distress:

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### When in Self Isolation Affected By Coronavirus:

- ⊕ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>
  - ⊕ [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2)
  - ⊕ <https://psychcentral.com/blog/coronavirus-anxiety-4-ways-to-cope-with-fear/>
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### General Self Help about managing your own mental health and sleep:

- ⊕ <https://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health/self-help-and-wellbeing>
  - ⊕ <http://mentalhealthsupport.co.uk/ns/>
  - ⊕ <https://breathingspace.scot/>
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### On line self-help programs you can access to help support your mental health and sleep:

- ⊕ <https://www.sleepio.com/>

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## Useful Apps:

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**Mind Shift** is a mental health app designed specifically for teens and young adults with anxiety. Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. It can encourage you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions, and face challenging situations.



**Self Help for Anxiety Management** might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time, and learn 25 different self-help techniques. You can also use SAM's "Social Cloud" feature to confidentially connect with other users in an online community for additional support.



**Happify**, Need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training program, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts.



The **Headspace** app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus. The app also has a handy "get some headspace" reminder to encourage you to keep practicing each day.



**Calm** provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music. This app is truly universal; whether you've never tried meditation before or regularly practice, you'll find the perfect program for you.



**Smiling Mind** is a way to practice daily meditation and mindfulness exercises from any device. Smiling Mind is a unique tool developed by psychologists and educators to help bring balance to your life. This is really helpful during times of stress and is a fun and unique way to help you put a smile on your mind.

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There are many other apps you could try which could be helpful; you might find your own that you like better. You can find a list of mental health apps recommended by the NHS [here](#).

There are also many organisations that can provide support which you might find helpful.

### CORONAVIRUS ISOLATION PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVICE (19th MARCH 2020):

- Dr Lynne Taylor, Director of Psychology NHS Grampian
- Mr James Anderson Consultant Clinical Psychologist Clinical Lead North of Scotland Trauma Network

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