



## Maintaining your mental health during social isolation

To help control the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) across the country, all Australians have been asked to practise social distancing. In some cases people are required to, or may choose to, self-isolate. Understandably, the challenges associated with social distancing and isolation, including separation from loved ones, loss of freedom and reduced income, are leading some people to experience feelings of anxiety, boredom, frustration and fear.

This information sheet outlines some useful strategies you can use to maintain good mental health during this unprecedented time of social distancing and isolation.

### Stay connected

Positive social connections are essential for our mental health and can help us cope in times of stress. In the current crisis, we are being asked to distance ourselves from others so it is important that we maintain our social networks using available methods of communication. This can be as simple as phoning a friend to share your experience, using videoconferencing technology to check in with a family member, or spending quality time with the people you live with.

### Avoid difficult situations

At times, people will be required to self-isolate with others in their household. While this will provide opportunities for social connections, living with someone 24/7 with little or no time away from each other may give rise to arguments and/or tension. There are a number of things you can do to limit conflict with those you are isolated with, including:

- creating a roster to help you distribute chores equally and fairly
- identifying and taking part in activities you like doing together such as movies, board games, jigsaws, gardening
- sharing positive emotions and experiences, rather than anger, frustration and disappointment
- communicating about your worries and concerns, and seeking support from one another
- maintaining your sense of fun and positive humour
- remaining respectful of each other in times of conflict – walk away and take time to calm yourselves, returning to the discussion later and repairing any hurt caused.

### Structure your day

While in isolation it is beneficial to plan out your days to restore a sense of purpose and normality to your daily life. Schedule tasks such as cooking and laundry, as well as activities you enjoy to help you stick to your routine. Structuring activities around mealtimes and bedtime can also help you keep to your schedule while ensuring you eat regularly and get enough sleep.

Given the current need to practise social distancing and isolation, many people are also being encouraged to work from home where possible. Working from home can bring a whole new set of challenges and the need to provide structure to your day is even more important.

The information in this tip sheet is current as at 20 March 2020.

Some tips to help you have a sense of normality and work effectively from home are listed below.

- **Change out of your pyjamas each morning** – While you don't have to dress as formally as you might when going into the office, getting out of your pyjamas can help you get in the right headspace to start your day.
- **Set up a dedicated workspace** – Choose a space away from noise and with adequate lighting to set up your work desk. If possible, use an adjustable desk chair so you can work comfortably. Visit Worksafe Victoria for tips on setting up a safe workspace ([bit.ly/2Wr2vjL](https://bit.ly/2Wr2vjL))
- **Set a strict schedule** – It can be hard to switch-off from work, so it is important to clearly define your working hours, ensuring you have regular breaks. Disconnect from all work-related accounts (e.g., remote desktops, email) at the end of your working day to help maintain a clear boundary between your work and home life.
- **Limit distractions** – Being at home can mean you can be easily distracted by other people or tasks (e.g., household chores). Schedule set times where you can take a break from work to complete these tasks, rather than completing them randomly throughout the day where you can lose track of time.
- **Keep in touch** – Maintain regular contact with your manager/colleagues (via phone, email or videoconferencing) to ensure you are each aware of your tasks, workload and timelines.

### Tips to cope with self-isolation

Maintain a positive outlook during periods of self-isolation by:

- reminding yourself that this period of self-isolation is temporary
- thinking of the benefits of self-isolation to the wider society, including slowing the spread of the virus and protecting those most vulnerable in your community
- remaining mindful that medical and scientific experts are following strict protocols to contain the virus and treat those affected
- ensuring you have access to accurate, reliable and up-to-date information that communicates what is expected from you if you are in isolation
- maintaining relationships with family, friends and colleagues (e.g., via telephone or video technologies)
- not overusing social media as you are likely to be exposed to negative news and get drawn into doomsday discussions – try to keep your mind busy with activities you enjoy such as reading, watching movies, exercising and even spring-cleaning the house
- structuring your day when working from home – allocate specific work hours, schedule breaks and set-up a dedicated workspace where distractions are limited.

### Helping your child through self-isolation

While most schools in Australia have not yet closed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, many children are spending significantly more time at home, not taking part in out-of-school activities, and some are even required to self-isolate with their families. Below are some ideas on how parents can help their child cope with periods of social distancing or isolation.

- **Set a daily routine** – Routines can help children cope with change and help them understand what is expected of them. Work with your child to develop a routine that suits the whole family and includes a range of activities, for example,

schoolwork (literacy and numeracy), physical activity, creative play, family time and limited amounts of screen time.

- **Maintain social relationships** – Use technologies (such as FaceTime, Zoom or Skype) to help your child maintain contact with friends and other family members, such as grandparents. For older children and teenagers, it is important to monitor their use of social media accounts as excessive use can lead to increased levels of anxiety.
- **Have fun** – For many children, their out of school activities (e.g., swimming, football) have been cancelled but it is important for them to stay active. Harness their interests and have fun with them at home (e.g., play cricket in the backyard or dance to music inside). You can also take this opportunity to spend quality time with your child by teaching them a new skill or game, read with them, or research a new topic together.

### Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of self-isolation is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide [Find a Psychologist™](https://findapsychologist.com.au) service. Go to [findapsychologist.com.au](https://findapsychologist.com.au) or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

### More information

#### Australian Government Department of Health

The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about coronavirus (COVID-19), including translated resources. [bit.ly/380OwHe](https://bit.ly/380OwHe)

#### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention


The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about the coronavirus such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected. [bit.ly/39MEml8](https://bit.ly/39MEml8)

#### World Health Organization

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The Australian Psychological Society Limited  
PO Box 38, Flinders Lane, VIC, 8009  
Telephone: (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497  
Fax: (03) 9663 6177  
Email: [membership@psychology.org.au](mailto:membership@psychology.org.au)  
Web: [psychology.org.au](https://psychology.org.au)

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## Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety

As the number of coronavirus cases rise across Australia, the level of anxiety within the community is increasing.

Feelings of worry and unease can be expected following a stressful event, such as the recent declaration of a global pandemic, however, it is important that we learn to manage our stress before it turns to more severe anxiety and panic.

This information sheet outlines some useful strategies which can help both adults and children cope with the stress or anxiety experienced as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

### Learn the facts

Constant media coverage about the coronavirus can keep us in a heightened state of anxiety. Try to limit related media exposure and instead seek out factual information from reliable sources such as the Australian Government's [health alert](#) or other trusted organisations such as the [World Health Organization](#).

### Keep things in perspective

When we are stressed, it is easy to see things as worse than they really are. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario and worrying about it, ask yourself:

- *Am I getting ahead of myself, assuming something bad will happen when I really don't know the outcome?* Remind yourself that the actual number of confirmed cases of coronavirus in Australia is extremely low.
- *Am I overestimating how bad the consequences will be?* Remember, illness due to coronavirus infection is usually mild and most people recover without needing specialised treatment.
- *Am I underestimating my ability to cope?* Sometimes thinking about how you would cope, even if the worst were to happen, can help you put things into perspective.

### Take reasonable precautions

Being proactive by following basic hygiene principles can keep your anxiety at bay. The World Health Organization recommends a number of protective measures against the coronavirus, including to:

- wash your hands frequently
- avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- stay at home if you begin to feel unwell until you fully recover
- seek medical care early if you have a fever, cough or experience breathing difficulties.

## Practise self-care

To help encourage a positive frame of mind, it is important to look after yourself. Everybody practises self-care differently with some examples including:

- maintaining good social connections and communicating openly with family and friends
- making time for activities and hobbies you enjoy
- keeping up a healthy lifestyle by eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, getting quality sleep and avoiding the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs to cope with stress
- practising relaxation, meditation and mindfulness to give your body a chance to settle and readjust to a calm state.

## Tips for talking with children about the coronavirus

Children will inevitably pick up on the concerns and anxiety of others, whether this be through listening and observing what is happening at home or at school. It is important that they can speak to you about their own concerns.

### Answer their questions

Do not be afraid to talk about the coronavirus with children. Given the extensive media coverage and the increasing number of people wearing face masks in public, it is not surprising that some children are already aware of the virus.

Providing opportunities to answer their questions in an honest and age-appropriate way can help reduce any anxiety they may be experiencing. You can do this by:

- speaking to them about coronavirus in a calm manner
- asking them what they already know about the virus so you can clarify any misunderstandings they may have
- letting them know that it is normal to experience some anxiety when new and stressful situations arise
- giving them a sense of control by explaining what they can do to stay safe (e.g., wash their hands regularly, stay away from people who are coughing or sneezing)
- not overwhelming them with unnecessary information (e.g., death rates) as this can increase their anxiety
- reassure them that coronavirus is less common and severe in children compared to adults
- allowing regular contact (e.g., by phone) with people they may worry about, such as grandparents, to reassure them that they are okay.

### Talk about how they are feeling

Explain to your child that it is normal to feel worried about getting sick. Listen to your child's concerns and reassure them that you are there to help them with whatever may arise in the future.

It is important to model calmness when discussing the coronavirus with children and not alarm them with any concerns you may have about it. Children will look to you for cues on how to manage their own worries so it is important to stay calm and manage your own anxieties before bringing up the subject with them and answering their questions.

### Limit media exposure

It is important to monitor children's exposure to media reports about the coronavirus as frequent exposure can increase their level of fear and anxiety. Try to be with your child when they are watching, listening or reading the news so you are able to address any questions or concerns they may have.

## Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you or your child experience as a result of the coronavirus is impacting on everyday life, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals, skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

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## More information

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## Coronavirus (COVID-19) anxiety and staying mentally healthy

FOR OLDER ADULTS

As the number of COVID-19 cases rise across Australia, the level of anxiety within the community is likely to increase. It is important to take reasonable precautions, however, we also need to learn to manage our stress before it turns into more severe anxiety and panic. The following tips may help older Australians to keep stress and anxiety at bay during this challenging period.

### Learn the facts (but limit media exposure)

Stay up-to-date with factual information from reliable sources such as the [Australian Government Department of Health](#), the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), or the [World Health Organization](#), and follow their recommendations.

However, a constant influx of information and media coverage about COVID-19 will actually make us feel more anxious and concerned. Try to limit how often you are exposed to news updates on COVID-19. Take breaks from both media coverage and COVID-19 conversations throughout the day so you can focus on other things.

### Take reasonable precautions and keep things in perspective

As the pandemic continues to develop, we all worry about how this is going to affect our own and our family's health, work and finances. Try to keep your concerns in perspective. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario and worrying about it, ask yourself:

- **What are the actual levels of risk and are there other facts that are important to remember in this situation?**

Current evidence suggests that older adults are no more likely to contract COVID-19 than younger adults. Among those who do contract COVID-19, those over the age of 60 are at greater risk of serious or life-threatening health complications that may require medical intervention. However, even with this increased risk, the large majority of older adults who contract this illness will recover.

Remember there are qualified professionals working to keep people well and policymakers are working on strategies to manage the spread of COVID-19, and create economic support packages to assist people. Health professionals are working hard to help people recover. The scientific community is working on understanding the illness, and developing treatments.

Be familiar with the difference between symptoms of COVID-19 and cold/flu symptoms, but also try limiting how often you monitor changes in your physical sensations. For example, don't excessively check your temperature if you are otherwise feeling well.

- **Am I overestimating how bad the consequences will be and underestimating my ability to cope?**

Consider how you (or your family) have gotten through difficulties in the past, and whether these coping skills might help you to get through this situation. Also remind yourself



that even though things might be difficult now, many of the consequences are time limited (ill health, financial burden, supply shortages etc.), and will eventually improve.

Change some of your routine if needed. For example, discuss whether you should postpone non-essential doctor appointments, including wellness visits. If available, telehealth consultations can be a reasonable substitute. Call your pharmacist to enquire about access to prescription medications and alternative methods of collection if necessary.

Have respectful and open conversations with your family and caregivers about your health concerns. Ask about what precautions they are taking to reduce your health risks, and what to do if you are concerned about your health.

## Practise physical distancing but ensure social connection

Current recommendations advise practising social distancing as a way to prevent or slow the spread of COVID-19. This means keep your physical distance from others where possible. Unfortunately this can also result in reduced social contact, which can be especially problematic for people who are already socially isolated or feeling lonely.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 39 per cent of people aged 65 and over live alone. Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of physical and mental health problems.

Engaging in social activities is still possible while maintaining physical distance, but it does take creative and flexible thinking. Switch to virtual catch-ups via videoconferencing technology (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime, Skype) instead of face-to-face. Send a text or email. Call your friends and family on the telephone if you do not have access to video-based technology. If you are part of a community group or volunteering agency, enquire what alternative activities you can complete from home. Explore more ideas online about how to maintain social connections during this crisis ([bit.ly/2UsdXcm](https://bit.ly/2UsdXcm)).

Social distancing doesn't mean locking yourself indoors. If you practise good hygiene and keep your physical distance from others, you can still enjoy your backyard, do gardening, sit on the porch, get your mail and talk to neighbours (from a distance).

## Tips for supporting older adults distressed by the COVID-19 outbreak

- Check in with older relatives/friends and ask how they are feeling
- Talk to them about how they are managing changes to their routine
- Offer practical and/or emotional support if needed (e.g., offer to set up videoconferencing technologies on their computer/tablet via FaceTime, offer to deliver groceries)
- Encourage them to do things they enjoy
- If you think they are not coping, or are overly isolated, suggest they seek help from their GPs, or encourage them to speak with a mental health professional (see below for contact information)
- Keep up contact with elderly relatives by writing emails, calling them on the telephone, talking via videoconference, send them videos to watch via email, send photos or drawings from children via email, or to the facility where they are.

### Remember...

There are steps you can take to help protect yourself and those around you. Practising good hygiene, enacting physical distancing, and following government recommendations will help you make a difference. You can do things to help those around you, whether that is preventing the spread of illness or by supporting others socially or emotionally. As a community, we can work together to get through this challenging time and we all have a role to play.

## Seeking additional support

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of COVID-19 is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

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## Acknowledgments

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PO Box 38, Flinders Lane, VIC, 8009

Telephone: (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497

Fax: (03) 9663 6177

Email: [membership@psychology.org.au](mailto:membership@psychology.org.au)

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