

Mental Health during COVID-19



Many of us are worried about how COVID-19 is affecting our mental health. For those with existing mental health problems, things may be particularly difficult. Some may have encountered mental health problems for the first time during the pandemic.

A global health crisis is a scary and uncertain time, as such, it is completely natural that your wellbeing may be affected.

Although much of the focus has been on our physical health, it is also important that we protect our mental health during times of difficulty. Many factors of the pandemic could cause mental health difficulties, such as: physical health fears, social isolation, increased hygiene concerns, lack of routine

and job insecurity. Unfortunately if we do not tend to these issues and address them, they will remain and could worsen. However, the good news is there is a lot of control you can have over these issues with the right tools and guidance.

If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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Research on mental health and coronavirus

The UK went into lockdown on 23rd March 2020. The University of Sheffield and Ulster University carried out a survey of 2000 participants between 23rd March and 27th March. They found that on Tuesday 24th March 38% of participants reported significant depression and 36% reported significant anxiety. This contrasts with the 16% significant depression and 17% anxiety reported the day before the announcement. They also found that 40-50% of young people are feeling significantly more anxious than usual. These levels were even higher in those whose parents are key workers.

Researchers at the University of Melbourne and Swinburne University of Technology surveyed almost 4,500 people in April during the COVID-19 lockdown, finding that respondents with a mood disorder were 15% more likely than the general population to say restrictions were hurting their mental health. 20% were finding it very difficult to work from home - almost twice the general population. Overall, people with mood disorders were more likely than the general population to report having lost their job, having less social contact, and drinking more. They were also more likely to note sleep difficulties.



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Different Types of Mental Health Problems

There are a variety of mental health problems that may be affected by or developed during coronavirus, but some are more prevalent than others. Although each of these will manifest differently between people, you can look out for some common symptoms.

Anxiety: Anxiety is a feeling of unease, worry or fear.

Everyone experiences moments of anxiety at some point in life, for example before a job interview. But, people with an anxiety disorder frequently experience intense anxiety that can significantly impact their daily life. Anxiety has been one of the most commonly reported mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may occur for many reasons: worry about catching the virus, job concerns, financial difficulties, feeling isolated and the large crowds in places such as supermarkets. Anxiety displays in many ways, these may include: feeling tense or nervous, having a sense of dread or fear, seeking lots of reassurance or feeling unable to make decisions alone, having panic attacks, feeling disconnected, body aches and pains, sweating and a racing heartbeat.

Depression: As with anxiety, many people experience periods of feeling depressed or down, particularly during difficult periods. But, when intense sadness - feeling helpless, hopeless, or worthless - is prolonged for many days to weeks and keeps you from living your life, you may be suffering with depression. If you have suffered with depression in the past, you may find that the symptoms become

stronger during COVID-19 or you may be experiencing depression for the first time. These feelings may arise for a number of reasons, for example if you: feel more isolated, have had routine changes, have had your career affected or are finding it difficult not seeing people face to face. You may feel restless, bored and have sleeping difficulties, you may feel more tired. You may be finding it difficult to take pleasure in life, feel down, upset or tearful. You may also feel a sense of loss of reality, especially due to the life changes COVID-19 has brought about, or general hopelessness and despair.

OCD: Obsessive compulsive disorder is a mental health disorder that occurs when a person gets caught in a cycle of obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that trigger distressing feelings. Compulsions are behaviours an individual partakes in attempt to get rid of the obsessions and/or the distress. People who suffer with OCD may experience increased obsessions and compulsions during the pandemic. Coronavirus itself can bring about new obsessions and compulsions, such as: obsessions about you or someone you know getting the virus, compulsions about sanitation, for example repeatedly washing your hands, home or things around you, repeatedly accessing news and information about coronavirus, and obsessively discussing the virus with others.

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PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder triggered by one or more traumatic experiences. Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares or flashbacks accompanied with distressing psychological symptoms and emotions such as fear and guilt. If you suffer with PTSD, things may be especially difficult during coronavirus. This may be because you feel: isolated and abandoned, disconnected, stressed, unsafe or uneasy. This may bring about flashbacks or dissociation. You may also feel claustrophobic or trapped due to lockdown. The lockdown rules could also make it more difficult to avoid things that you associate with the trauma you have experienced.

Bipolar: Bipolar disorder is a mental health condition that affects your moods, which can swing from one extreme to the other, with periods of depression that switch to periods of mania. These are not simple mood swings; the episodes can last for weeks. These high and low phases can be so extreme that they begin to interfere with the individual's daily life. Those with bipolar disorder may find the COVID-19 pandemic particularly difficult and their bipolar may worsen. This could be because of changes to your life affecting your mood, for example: changes to your routine, such as being at home more or having less regular contact with others, having difficulty sleeping, changes to do with your job. You may also experience stress, anxiety or panic about coronavirus.

Eating Problems: During coronavirus, it may feel difficult to live with an eating problem for many different reasons. You might feel isolated, especially if face-to-face contact usually helps you to manage difficult feelings and behaviours around eating, or you may experience anxiety about food shopping. You may be concerned about whether the foods you normally eat will be available, or you going to the supermarket may be stressful because of social distancing guidelines. You might feel overwhelmed by an increase in news stories and conversations about food and exercise, or use food or exercise as a way of feeling more in control.

Physical Symptoms

Most mental health disorders also have physical symptoms. These can range from feeling hot, sweating, nauseous, headaches, stomach aches or digestive problems, difficulty sleeping or tiredness, bodily aches and pains, racing heartbeat, difficulty breathing, and others.

Some of these sensations may feel similar to the symptoms of coronavirus. If you are concerned about any symptoms you are experiencing, you can talk to your GP, call 111 or visit the NHS 111 website.

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Taking care of your mental health during coronavirus

If you are finding your mental health is struggling during the pandemic, it is important to remember that there is still a lot of support and resources available to you. If you are experiencing mental health difficulties for the first time, taking some of these steps may seem frightening. Go at your own pace and do what you are comfortable with, but it is important that you address the issues at hand. For those with existing mental health problems, it is key that you continue any support you were having before lockdown measures and perhaps explore other methods to protect your mental health.

Talk to trusted people: If you do not feel quite ready to begin professional help, a good first step is to talk to people you trust about the issues you are facing. Sharing your experiences and talking through them can make a significant difference in how you are feeling. Although you may feel limited in how you can talk with your loved ones at the moment, you may even find it easier to talk over the phone or on a video call. You can also consider meeting up with these people if you are able to maintain social distance, you may find it easier to talk in an outdoors natural environment rather than an enclosed indoors space.

Journal: Many people find it helpful to journal about their feelings or keep a mood diary. This is helpful because it replicates talking to a person about how you are feeling, allowing you to express and work through your difficulties. But, it is also great as a tool to assess your mood patterns. For example, you may see you often have a low mood when you have not been out of the house for a couple of days. Perhaps, when you are alone is when your mental health begins to struggle. This allows you to understand what triggers your mental health difficulties, which in turn will help you reduce these.

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is a way of giving your full attention to the present moment rather than worrying about the future or past, or being distracted or preoccupied in the moment by your thoughts. Mindfulness uses techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and yoga. It is known to help people become more aware of their thoughts and feelings. Many people find that mindfulness helps them to manage their thoughts and feelings rather than being overwhelmed by them. Mindfulness can be a particularly useful tool during coronavirus as it will help you to focus on the present matter and facts of a situation, rather than worrying about what could happen.

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Look after your physical health: Many studies show that physical exercise and activity has benefits for your mental health. In 2018, a study discovered that individuals who exercised had fewer days of poor mental health in the past month than individuals who did not. Their findings indicated that all exercise types were associated with a lower mental health burden than not exercising. The highest results found that those who exercised for 45 minutes, three to five times per week. Due to lockdown, you may find that your physical activity has declined. But, there are many exercises you can do at home or in parks. Even a 20 minute brisk walk can be enough.

Access treatment and support: The most important thing you should do if you are concerned about your mental health is talk to a specialist. This could be your GP, a counsellor or a helpline. If you were already accessing regular support and treatment before lockdown, it is very important you continue this to whatever degree you can. Although the conversation may take a different form - counselling over Skype rather than face-to-face - it will still be greatly beneficial for you to receive this support. If you are looking into this kind of help for the first time, the CiC 24/7 AdviceLine is a great place to start. Our confidential counsellors can help you with coming to understand your emotions and how to manage them.

Additional resources

Many helplines and organisations are supporting people with mental health difficulties through the pandemic. A lot of these organisations have set up web chat services for those who may not be able to talk freely at home.

- ▶ Anxiety UK - 03444775774, www.anxietyuk.org.uk
- ▶ Bipolar UK - 07591375544, www.bipolaruk.org
- ▶ CALM (for men aged 15 to 35) - 0800585858, www.thecalmzone.net
- ▶ No Panic - 08449674848, www.nopanic.org.uk
- ▶ OCD UK - 03332127890, www.ocduk.org
- ▶ PAPYRUS (young suicide prevention society) - 08000684141, www.papyrus-uk.org
- ▶ Refuge (advice on dealing with domestic violence) - 0808 2000 247, www.refuge.org.uk
- ▶ Alcoholics Anonymous - 08009177650, www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
- ▶ National Gambling Helpline - 08088020133, www.begambleaware.org
- ▶ Cruse Bereavement Care - 08088081677, www.cruse.org.uk
- ▶ Beat (support for eating disorders) - 08088010677 (adults) or 08088010711 (for under-18s), www.b-eat.co.uk