

Coronavirus and anxiety:

A guide for families and carers supporting people with learning disabilities



Coronavirus has had a significant impact on the daily lives of everyone in the whole country. We are all adapting to living in a changed world with new restrictions and this is challenging for us all. When you are caring for someone with a learning disability, you will likely experience additional stress and perhaps increased levels of anxiety. The following information aims to look at how you might be feeling and why you might be feeling this way. It also contains some advice about how to look after your own wellbeing during these difficult times, when you are also expected to be looking after someone else.

It is OK to feel anxious

- If you are a keyworker, you may still be going into work and have mixed feelings about this. Given the current circumstances, it is normal to feel this way. Some of the clients you support may find adapting to the current necessary restrictions difficult and they may be more challenging to support. You may feel powerless in the current situation and may have to ask the person you support to do things you know they might struggle with, for example staying at home.
- The constant news stories, daily conversations and social media posts about Coronavirus can feel overwhelming just now. You may be worried about friends and family becoming ill or dying, becoming ill yourself, or the impact of the virus on education, employment, housing or your finances. All of these worries can take their toll and this may understandably put us in a state of heightened anxiety.
- You may feel under pressure to meet the increasing demands placed on you just now.
- You may feel stressed due to following the strict restrictions currently in place.
- You may feel that you are not doing a good enough job either at home or at work.
- You may notice changes in your mood such as feeling more irritable than usual, feeling low or anxious, or feeling exhausted, and finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks.

- You might notice an increase in physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, chest tightness, and difficulty sleeping.
- You may find it especially difficult to relax.
- The most important thing that you can do for yourself at the moment is to understand that you are not alone and that it is normal to feel this way in the current situation. You are trying your best to look after other people at a time when it is difficult enough to look after yourself.

Why do I feel anxious?

When we are faced with a threat, such as coronavirus, we become stressed and our body experiences a surge of adrenaline which can put us in “fight, flight or freeze” mode. This is our mind and body’s way of responding to threat and trying to keep us safe. When our bodies are in “fight, flight or freeze” mode, it may be difficult to use our memory, think logically or rationally, or consider how other people are feeling. Relationships may feel under threat too, as we are having to self-isolate from people who we care about or depend on. Relationships may also feel strained just now as families are forced to self-isolate together with limited opportunity for personal space or time to relax.

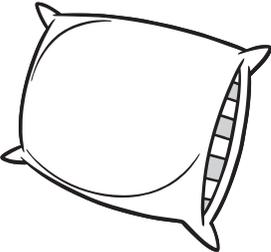
Managing your psychological well-being

So that you can support other people at this time, it is essential that you look after yourself first so you can function as well as you can. Your ability to care for others will rely on your ability to look after yourself.

Managing your anxiety and wellbeing at this time is just as important as looking after your physical health. Taking care of your basic needs and finding helpful ways of coping with stress and anxiety is key to both good physical and psychological wellbeing.

For self-care to be effective it needs to be sustainable and practical to your own lifestyle.

Here are some suggestions for you to consider:

	<p>News, TV, and Social Media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limit time spent watching news stories if you feel that they increase your anxiety. Set aside a small section of time of day when you can catch up with what is happening.
	<p>Sleep</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice good sleep hygiene- develop a consistent bedtime routine where you go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning. Try to avoid conversations about coronavirus just before bed, cut back on caffeine, and create a restful environment.



Be kind to yourself

- Develop your own self compassion*; stress and anxiety can make you act in ways you wouldn't normally. Don't beat yourself up if you don't feel you're not coping as well as you normally would.
- Try to eat healthily and exercise when you can.
- Try to make time to relax. Relaxation can help calm busy minds and calm the physiological reactions of stress and anxiety such as muscle tension, heart racing, not being able to think straight. Some suggestions to help you to relax include: reading a book, going for a bath, practising yoga or meditation, doing some mindful colouring can help relax anxious minds. There are lots of free resources online- see below.



Stay Connected

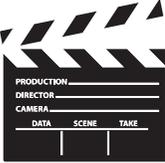
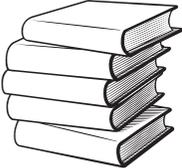
- Find ways to use platforms such as Skype, Facetime, Whatsapp video or Zoom to maintain connections where face to face contact is not possible.
- Body language and facial expressions are important and help us to feel more connected to each other than just hearing a loved one's voice on the phone
- You may find it helpful to discuss your feelings with someone else, such as a friend or colleague.

	<p>Staying Fit and Healthy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get fresh air when you can; walks and runs are still acceptable as long as you keep your distance from others. You might find it helpful to go for a walk on your own as well as with the person you are supporting- you are allowed to do this.
	<p>Daily Structure and Routine</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you are at home, try to create a daily structure and routine, building in some fun and enjoyable activities where possible.• Developing meaningful roles for everyone at home can help raise self- esteem and maintain purpose at a time where purpose may feel as though it has been lost.
	<p>Alcohol, tobacco, other drugs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try to avoid using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs as a way of coping with stress and anxiety. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical wellbeing.

Appendix 1:

My Self Care Plan

You can use the worksheets below to write down ideas to develop your self-care plans.

Appendix 2:

Things that help me relax

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

How will I make time for them?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

Resources

Websites

There are a number of helpful resources that you can access online to help you to protect your mental health and wellbeing at this time:

- <https://www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/health/looking-after-your-health/coronavirus-covid-19>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/your-health/health-issues/covid-19-coronavirus/for-nhsggc-staff/stayingactive-and-well/>
- **Compassionate Mind exercises:**
<https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/audio>
Recordings of addressing self-criticism, building the compassionate mind, posture, faces and tones, soothing rhythm practices. Free audios:
<https://jackkornfield.com/compassion-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>
<https://jackkornfield.com/steady-heart/>
- Compassionate Mind Foundation website (FREE)
<https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources>
- The Blurt Foundation website has helpful free downloadable resources to help with low mood. They also have free to download self-care planners.
<https://www.blurtitout.org/resources>
- Mind website has suggestions about managing wellbeing during whilst staying at home
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

Apps

- **Headspace** – free trial and then subscription required after that
- **Calm** - free trial and options to pay for additional functions if you want to)
- **Aware** – free (you can pay for additional functions if you want to)
- **The Happiness Trap App** is free for the next three months due to the corona virus outbreak. Download the App from Apple app store and then enter the code: TOGETHER on the subscription page to unlock all the app contents.

What if you feel that your mood is affecting your ability to provide support, or that you have tried everything and nothing is making you feel better?

If you feel that you have tried everything and nothing is helping there are various places that you can reach out for support. Your GP practice remains open during working hours. If you are working you can ask to speak to a senior member of staff for support. If you work for a care provider organisation, they will have processes in place to help employees when they are experiencing stress. If you feel that you are not coping because the person you are caring for is having difficulties, please remember that your local Learning Disability Team is continuing to function and is a source of support.

If you need someone to talk to outside of these hours call:

Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87 or Samaritans 116 123

