



Saint John of God Hospital

**Minding our Mental Health
during the COVID-19 crisis:**

A Resource for Carers



Introduction

This is an unprecedented time for Ireland as a nation; COVID-19 has brought many changes to our lives. It is a time of uncertainty and many of us are feeling stressed, anxious and vulnerable. Being in the role of a carer comes with added pressures as some of the supports and services that you relied on to help you in your role are not currently available.

This handbook aims to provide you with tips for maintaining your wellbeing during this period, in order to allow you continue to care for your loved one. All of the wellbeing advice within this handbook is relevant at any time in our lives but is especially important in times of stress.



Normal human responses to a global pandemic

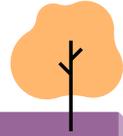
That do not need to be pathologized or treated as abnormal

- Food and eating challenges & difficulties
- Resurgence of compulsive or addictive behaviours
- Obsessive or intrusive thoughts, memories or fears
- Generalised fear, anxiety, panic & feeling overwhelmed
- Depression, dissociation, shutdown, freeze, hopelessness
- Feelings of abandonment or loneliness or isolation
- Sense of loss of control or powerlessness, feeling confused
- Anxiety around money, shelter, food, and other survival needs
- Past traumas being triggered, activated or re-experienced
- Health anxiety heightened (about Covid19 and otherwise)
- Feeling unheard or unseen amidst the flood of stories
- Feeling like existing chronic needs are being ignored
- Thoughts and feelings about death and dying
- New and old grief surfacing
- Feelings of anger, irritation and frustration
- Caring for everyone to own detriment, compassion fatigue
- Feeling exhausted, fatigued, unmotivated, lethargic
- Hyper-focus, surges of energy, keeping 'doing' to distract
- Immune system depleted, other illnesses starting, chronic flares

And if you do need support with any of it, that's okay too.



Tips for family & friends supporting someone with a mental health difficulty



Someone who is feeling depressed or anxious will often find the following helpful...

- **Talking about their feelings**

If someone is feeling depressed or anxious, or something very upsetting or traumatic has happened to them, they may find it helpful to talk to someone close to them about it. (Patience and understanding will be more helpful than trying to get the person to 'cheer up'). Open communication during this crisis, when we are all experiencing heightened levels of anxiety, is very important.

- **Help them maintain routine in their day**

In ordinary circumstances you and your loved ones would shower, dress, have breakfast and have to go outside each day. Try to replicate this routine and resist the urge to spend the whole day on the couch in your pj's. Rising at the same time daily, showering and dressing, having breakfast and getting out for a walk as well as planning some activities around the house (cooking, wardrobe clear out, reading time, movie night) will help reduce anxiety and give purpose and structure to the day.

- **Support them in maintaining social contact with other people**

This will help them to feel less isolated. Despite COVID-19 restrictions on physical proximity to others, we can still maintain social connection by interacting with others in the same household, encouraging communication with friends and family over the phone or using video calling apps like Skype and Zoom. You can even get creative and help plan an online group catch up, book club or table quiz.



- **Persevering with treatment**

With changes in regular routines there is a heightened risk of forgetting to take prescribed medications. Those close to the person should encourage them to keep taking their medication (maybe set reminders on phones) or to continue to engage with their therapist over the phone or video conferencing if possible. This support and consistency with treatment may be more valuable than ever. Liaise with your local pharmacist to ensure regular prescriptions can be filled and collected in a timely manner.

- **Keeping active**

Physical exercise is good for relieving feelings of anxiety and depression, and can also help people with sleep problems and apathy. Supporting the person to do other activities that they enjoy will often also help. Despite COVID-19 restrictions which limit us to a 2km radius of our homes, it is still possible to exercise regularly. 2km equates to about a 20 min walk at average pace, so 40 mins there and back home again. Those cocooning can engage in home workouts or use the living room for Yoga practice; there are lots of free guided videos on YouTube.



- **Eating a healthy diet**

A poor diet can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression, as can alcohol and caffeine. This can also disrupt sleep, which is essential to our mental health. With more time at home there may be temptation to increase the consumption of snack foods and alcohol, so try to keep this intake at a moderate level. Fresh fruit and vegetables as well as frozen varieties continue to be readily available in our supermarkets. You can even plan meals together and spend time in the kitchen making new recipes to help add structure and a sense of achievement to the day.



- **Helping those with memory difficulties to remember the rules of cocooning**

Change in routines and the introduction of restrictions are difficult for all but particularly for those with memory difficulties. Visual reminders, such as a white board or a sign, in key locations around the home can be helpful in aiding remembering. (See back inside cover of this booklet for a useful cut-out).

You wouldn't let this happen to your phone



Don't let this happen to you, either

SELF CARE IS A PRIORITY, NOT A LUXURY



Tips for carers



- **Pace yourself**

Monitor yourself for disrupted sleep, excessive fatigue, irritability, poor focus and marked anxiety. If we run on empty, we can't care for those depending on us. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

- **Breathe**

Try mindful breathing several times a day. Take a moment for low and slow breaths before you get up, before you walk up or down the stairs or before you enter a room. Breathing helps us to calm down and improves our concentration.

- **Maintain good health habits**

As stress and demands increase, healthy habits often take a hit. Make sure you eat at meal times and maximise healthy eating, limit alcohol, try to get enough sleep, prioritise aerobic exercise and get some sunlight.

- **Exercise, exercise, exercise**

Aerobic exercise is vital for stress reduction. For home exercise and yoga videos there are many options available online (see Online Resources Section). A short aerobic walk or workout is better than nothing.



- **Take breaks where possible**

Plan down time, it helps us refuel physically and emotionally.

- **Promote teamwork**

Are there other family members who could step up and help out? Don't be afraid to ask.

- **Connect, connect and connect again**

Reach out to family, friends, and your favourite community groups for social contact. Call, Facetime, Zoom, Skype or try Google Hangouts to reduce your isolation. Meaningful and fun connection, emotional support and healthy problem solving are vital to your health and well-being. Consider joining another family or friend for a meal by social media to reduce isolation for everyone.



- **Flexibility is essential**

Increased demand for care, social distancing and other unique stressors will test our flexibility and adaptability. We will all have to practice outside of the box—especially when things go wrong and are chaotic. It's OK. Ask for support, evaluate, modify and move forward.

- **Anxious or worried?**

Increased anxiety is common as we navigate COVID-19 and its broad consequences, especially when the demands on us have increased. Action is one of the best treatments for anxiety. Share your concerns and problem solve with family and friends to plan coping steps.

Ideas for minding your own mental health

As already mentioned, increased anxiety and low mood are very common in times of crisis. Thus it is important that we look after our own mental health to allow us continue to care for those dependent on us.

What can we do when we feel like things are getting on top of us and we feel overwhelmed?

Recognise threat emotions

These are intense emotions that take control of our mind and make us act (fight, flight, avoid, freeze, collapse). There are 3 intense threat emotions, these are:

Anger & Frustration

All kinds of sources of anger: anger at the situation, anger at not having the right supports. It is important that we are able to articulate our anger and frustration and normalise and empathise with the sense of frustration and anger that we might have when we are in these high stress situations.

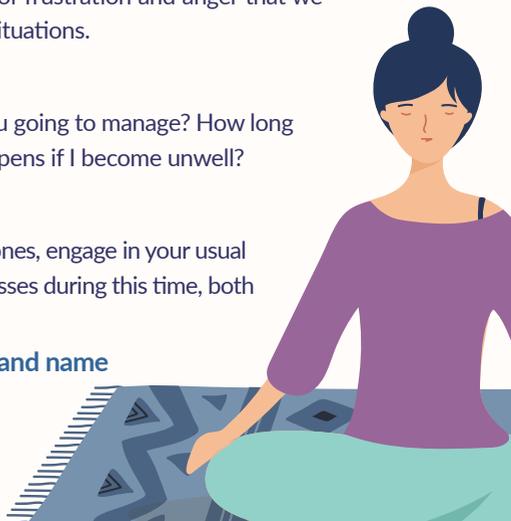
Threat & Anxiety

Worry about future, mistakes etc. How are you going to manage? How long will this last? Will I be able to cope? What happens if I become unwell?

Grief and sense of sadness

Sadness due to being unable to be with loved ones, engage in your usual activities, and socialise as usual. Grief for the losses during this time, both general and personal.

It is important that we are able to recognise and name these emotions when they occur.



Manage those difficult threat emotions

Cultivate slowing, calming and settling – what is it that gives you a sense of feeling grounded and how can you do these things? For example:

Breathing exercises – slower, deeper, more rhythmic breathing.

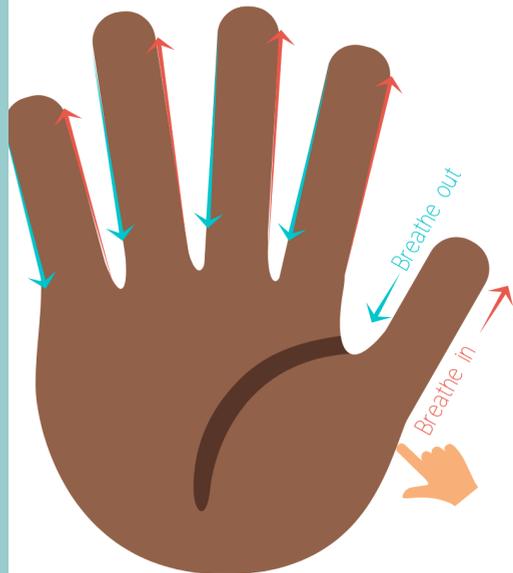
Breathe in for 5 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, breath out for 5 seconds. Breath smoothly and deeply, full breath in and full breath out. Ensure if you are sitting that you sit upright with shoulders back and open your chest. Focus on a theme in your mind that connects you to what your breath is doing – bring your attention to something you find peaceful and calming, picture it. For example, a still lake, a gently lapping sea, a tree with no breeze – whatever image works for you. Strengthen the image by tapping into as many senses as you can (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) and slowly repeat the mantra (in a calm and soft tone voice) “my mind is slowing down”, “my mind is slowing down”.

3 minute breathing space: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1POTKL8

Breathe app or The Breathing Zone app (see Online Resources Section for details)

5 Finger Breathing:

1. Stretch one hand out so that you have space between your fingers.
2. Hold up your pointer finger from the other hand.
3. Start at the bottom of your thumb. Use your pointer finger to trace up your thumb as you **slowly** breathe in through your nose.
4. When you get to the top of your thumb, **slowly** breathe out your mouth as you trace down the other side.
5. Repeat for all fingers until you have traced your whole hand.



Manage those difficult threat emotions (con't)

Be aware not to be pulled too much by your rumination (thoughts)

– feel grounded.

Grounding

Grounding is a technique that helps keep someone in the present. It helps re-orient a person to the 'here and now' and to reality. Grounding skills can be helpful in managing overwhelming feelings or intense anxiety. They help someone to regain their mental focus from an often intensely emotional state.

Grounding skills occur within two specific approaches:

Sensory Awareness and **Cognitive Awareness**

Sensory Awareness

Grounding Exercise 1

Begin by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and label each finger as one of the five senses. Then take each finger and identify something special and safe representing each of those five senses. For example: Thumb represents sight and a label for sight might be butterflies, or my middle finger represents the smell sense and it could be represented by lilacs.

After writing and drawing all this on paper, post it on your refrigerator or other safe places in the home where it could be easily seen and memorise it.

Whenever you get triggered, breathe deeply and slowly, and put your hand in front of your face where you can really see it – stare at your hand and then look at each finger and try to do the five senses exercise from memory.



Sensory Awareness

Grounding Exercise 2

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you.
- Name 4 things you can feel (“chair on my back” or “feet on floor”)
- Name 3 things you can hear right now (“birds chirping” or “tv”)
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

Other Grounding Activities

- Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details.
- Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a ball.
- Place a cool cloth on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of soda.
- Listen to soothing music
- Put your feet firmly on the ground
- Focus on someone’s voice or a neutral conversation.



Cognitive Awareness

Grounding Exercise

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What is today?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?

Control the Controllable

Often when we become overwhelmed with stress and anxiety we can get distracted by things that are outside of our control. We need to learn to focus our energy on the things we can control – Control the Controllable.



THINGS I CAN CONTROL

Washing my hands and practicing good hygiene

Staying home

The things I consume (food, water, media & news)

Self-care

My thoughts and actions

Reaching out for support and to help others

Knowing that I am doing everything I can and being at peace with that

The world's situation and spread of the virus

What other people do or don't do to take care of themselves

The government's response

Statistics and facts

Laws and regulations

THINGS I CAN'T CONTROL

Shift your mindset



- I'm going to get sick ● -----> I will self-isolate and wash my hands, this will significantly **DECREASE** my chances of getting sick.
- I can't cope ● -----> This is a very difficult situation and I am doing the best I can and that is good enough.
- I will run out of items at home during self-isolation ● -----> I have prepared for this and I will use my items wisely. I have everything I need for now.
- Everything is shutting down, I'm panicking ● -----> The most **IMPORTANT** places, such as medical centres, pharmacies and grocery shops remain open.
- There is too much uncertainty right now ● -----> While I can't control the situation around me, I **CAN** control my actions. Doing breathwork, calling loved ones, getting enough sleep and proper nutrition, prayer, and doing activities I love at home will all help during this time.

Accept “good enough”

You cannot change the facts of life, so don't take on responsibility that isn't yours. This can lead to an overwhelming sense of sadness – stay separate and empathise.

- Learn to tolerate and accept one's limitations
- Accept “Good Enough”.
- Watch out for attacking self-criticism, it is not helpful. Replace with **compassionate self-correction** – be encouraging and supportive to yourself. If you find this hard to do for yourself, imagine it is a friend/family member or child that you are talking to.
- High levels of self-criticism can lead to depression.
- Notice and be aware of the difference between compassionate self-correction (which is inspiring, supportive and promotes learning) and attacking self-criticism (which will undermine you). Notice attacking self-criticism and switch into your compassionate self.

Developing the Compassionate-Self

- Cultivating a compassionate mind – what you focus on has a big impact in your brain.
Example: If you are hungry and you see a delicious meal, smell a delicious meal or think (fantasise) about a delicious meal, it will stimulate your hypothalamus and you will start to salivate. Your imagination has a powerful impact on your body.
- A compassionate mind will change your brain and body, and triggers helpful internal systems.

How to Develop a Compassionate Mind

- Use your body to support your mind:
 - Breathing exercises
 - Posture
- Close your eyes and ask yourself “what would I be like if I was at my most compassionate best?” Compassion is about being courageous and wise.

What does your ‘compassionate best’ look like? If you are at your courageous best and at your wisest, what would you be like? What qualities would you have?

Imagine a time you were at your compassionate best, a time when you were courageous and wise, notice **what** emotions you are feeling and **where** in your body you are feeling them. You probably feel kind, tolerant, strong and capable. Where in your body are you feeling this? Intensify these feelings.

Tell yourself “I have the courage to engage with suffering” and “I have the wisdom to know what to do.”

- Sometimes the beginning of wisdom is to recognise “I don’t know what to do?”, “I need to find out”, “I need support”, or “I need to ask for help”.
- Think about the qualities you would have if you were your most compassionate self. Bring to mind all these qualities and practice them.

With practice, you will be able to switch your mind into a compassionate state of mind.

Your threat system is automatic but your compassionate mind is learned, it is a skill and requires practice.



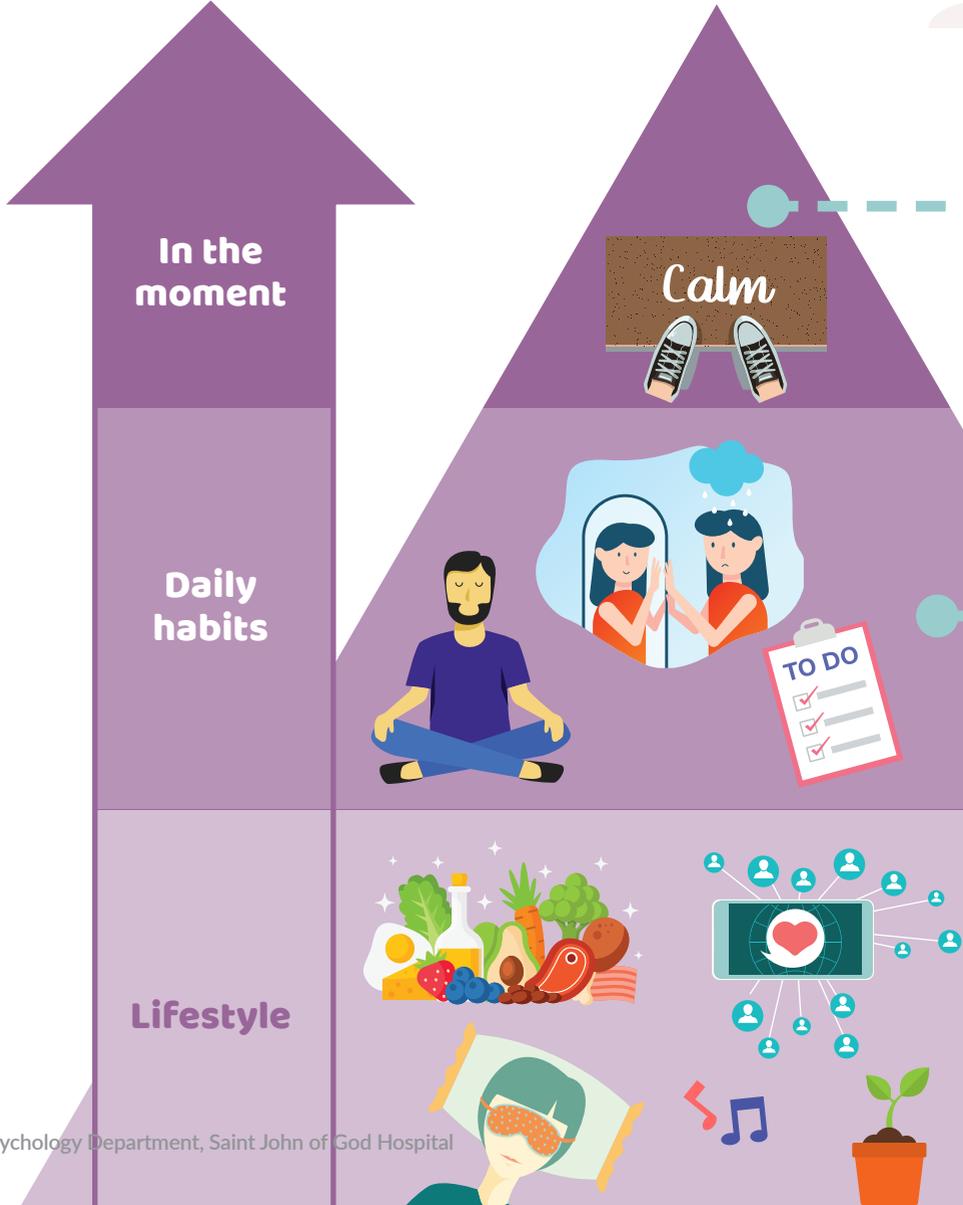
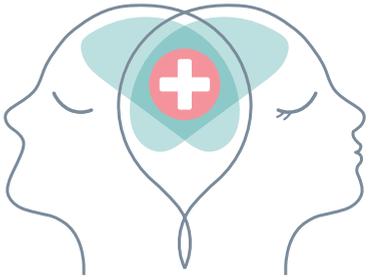
Summary

In summary, you need to train for compassion because your threat system will *always* take priority in a stressful situation, through no fault of your own. So,

1. Learn to notice
2. Breathe and slow down
3. Focus on posture
4. Focus on your compassionate state of mind
5. Create the conditions so you can perform at your best.
6. Notice the good – the brain is orientated for threat and noticing bad things, balance this by deliberately bringing to mind the things that have gone well. Internalise the good.

Mind your mental health:

A toolkit for carers





Stay grounded

- Notice your **breath**/your feet on the ground
- Remember **this will pass**
- Pay attention to the present - **what can I do right now?**

Manage distress

- Visit www.beaumont.ie/marc
- Relaxation
- Breathing

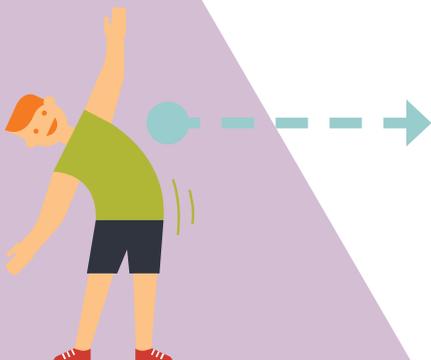
Control the controllable

- Short to-do list
- **Small goals**
- Remember your values



Self-compassion

- Being kind, not critical to ourselves. **This is a difficult time.**



Lifestyle

- Eat well
- **Sleep** routine
- **Exercise**
- Stay **socially connected**
- Create something/use humour to take a **mental time-out** from the situation
- Manage your **media diet**



List of Community Supports

- **Local authorities** have set up helplines for all vulnerable persons in the community where requests can be made for community supports such as medication/grocery collection, transport to essential medical appointments, meals on wheels, social supports, and Garda related matters. A full list of helpline numbers is available at: www.agefriendlyireland.ie

| | | |
|---|-------------|--|
| • Dublin City Council | 01 222 8555 | www.dublincity.ie |
| • Fingal County Council | 01 890 5000 | www.fingal.ie |
| • South Dublin County Council | 01 414 9000 | www.sdcc.ie |
| • Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council | 01 271 3199 | www.dlroco.ie |

- **I Love Terenure Community Outreach Support** Volunteer page <https://sites.google.com/view/iloveterenure/help>
- **Alone**, in conjunction with the Department of Health and the HSE, have a COVID-19 Support Helpline 8am-8pm 7 days per week: 081 8222 024. Further info on www.alone.ie
- **Age Action** and **Irish Red Cross** have set up a Hardship fund: www.ageaction.ie/how-we-can-help
- **Senior Line** have a helpline for older persons worried about COVID-19: 10am and 10pm every day 1800 804591 www.thirdageireland.ie
- **Family Carers Ireland** have developed an Emergency Care Plan which may be useful for all to complete: www.familycarers.ie
- **For Medicine Delivery**
Email : covid19medicinedeliveries@gmail.com
- **Siel Bleu** is running free exercise videos on Siel Bleu Ireland Facebook & YouTube daily at 11am and 2pm for people of all abilities. Links and videos at www.sielbleu.ie/home/at-home-guides/
- **South Dublin County Sports Partnership** have live keep fit sessions Mon –Thurs at 12.15pm www.youtube.com/sdcsp

Online Resources

Advice for Mental Health and Wellbeing during the Coronavirus pandemic:

- Coronavirus: How to protect your mental health
www.bbc.com/news/health-51873799

- Coronavirus and your wellbeing www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/#collapse8eca7

- Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During COVID-19 Outbreak
www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf

- 'FACE COVID'; a set of practical steps for responding effectively to the Corona crisis, using the principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).
<https://onehotmessalaska.blogspot.com/2020/03/face-covid-by-dr-russ-harris.html>

- Taking care of your mental health during COVID-19: Doctors Without Borders short video clip: <https://msf.org.au/covid19/mentalhealth>

Working with Fear & Anxiety:

- Rick Hanson Podcast on Fear and Coronavirus
www.rickhanson.net/being-well-podcast-fear-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/

- 60 second Anxiety Hack
www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hA0VvB9qak

- A Technique to Reduce Very Intense Emotion
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVHtjDgc_XU

- Meditation to Calm the Anxious Mind
<https://soundcloud.com/user-157823577/calming-the-anxious-mind>

- Working with Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf5BRK9kVX0&t=321s

- Coronavirus Anxiety: How to Cope if You're Feeling Anxious About the Outbreak
www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2020/28-february-coronavirus-anxiety-how-to-cope-if-you-re-feeling-anxious-about-the-outbreak/

- The ACT Approach to Handling Anxiety Like a Human Being: Dr Rob Archer:
www.linkedin.com/pulse/act-approach-handling-anxiety-like-human-being-dr-rob-archer

- Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty
www.psychologytools.com/assets/COVID-19/guide_to_living_with_worry_and_anxiety_amidst_global_uncertainty_en-gb.pdf

Online Resources

Developing Resilience Through Self-Compassion and Mindfulness Meditation:

- Online Seminar in developing Self-Compassion in the midst of Covid 19 <https://centerformsc.org/self-compassion-in-the-midst-of-COVID-19/>
- Discover the Power of Self-Compassion - 3 free video sessions https://product.soundstrue.com/power-of-self-compassion/free-video-series/?_=eyJrbF9lbWFpbCI6ICJvbGl2aWEucmFtc2F5QGhvdG1haWwuy28udWsiLCaia2xfY29tcGFueV9pZCI6ICJKTURnYXEifQ%3D%3D
- Resilience in Challenging Times, A Care Package - from the sounds true community <https://product.soundstrue.com/resilience-in-challenging-times/>
- Livestream meditations from leading teachers in the US <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/online-meditation/>
- Pandemic Care Resources, Tara Brach <https://www.tarabrach.com/pandemic/>
- Mindfulness Self-Care for Troubling Times <https://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk/mindful-self-care-for-troubling-times>
- Free half day 'at home' mindfulness retreat with Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach <https://product.soundstrue.com/power-of-awareness/free-retreat/>
- The 3 Minute Self Compassion Break <https://www.mindfulness.com/meditation/self-compassion-hard-times/#player>
- Meditation to Help you Feel as Safe as you Reasonably Can www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWinRAX-E4c
- Mindfulness meditation <https://unleashpotential.ie/mindfulness-from-the-inside-out/>
- Practice During The Pandemic. An Online Guided Meditation and Talk with Mark Coleman www.youtube.com/watch?v=yl6sxjUR7Qo&feature=youtu.be



Mindfulness & Breathing Apps:

- 3 Minute Breathing Space <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1POTKL8>
- Insight Timer <https://insighttimer.com/>
- Smiling Mind <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>
- Stop, Breathe & Think <https://www.stopbreathethink.com/>
- Headspace <https://www.headspace.com/>
- Calm <https://www.calm.com/>
- Coherence Heart Trainer (You'll need a device to track your heart rate e.g. Polar 7) <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/coherence-heart-trainer/id1046439206>
- The Breathing Zone <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/breathing-zone/id369838631>
- Breathe+ <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/breathe-simple-breath-trainer/id1106998959>
- Brightmind Meditation <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/brightmind-meditation/id1303790148>

Support Services

- Cruse - Support dealing with Grief and Bereavement
www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief
- The Help Hub - Live chat support for those feeling alone and isolated
www.thehelphub.co.uk/
- Irish Hospice Foundation Grief Hub
<https://hospicefoundation.ie/covid19careandinform/>

Music to Uplift our Souls from the Rotterdam Orchestra:

- From Us, to You - <https://youtu.be/3eXT60rbBVk>

Source: Adapted from <https://thepsychologycompany.co.uk/psychological-therapy/resources/>





STOP



**Remember – the virus
COVID-19 is in the
community.**



**ALL OVER 70s MUST STAY
AT HOME TO STAY SAFE.**

To keep safe and stop anyone in our family getting the virus – you **MUST** stay in the house or back garden.

Call _____ if you
need any messages or deliveries.



Saint John of God Hospital

Stillorgan, Co Dublin

Telephone : 01 2771400

www.stjohnofgodhospital.ie



facebook.com/sjogmentalhealth



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