



Birmingham Centre for Arts Therapies

SOOTHING PACK
Supporting positive
Mental Health



ART
DRAMA
MUSIC
DANCE
PLAY

www.beat.info

Inside this pack you will find a number of useful and informative activities and articles that will assist you in achieving positive mental health in your own space and time.

BCAT would like to thank the following people and organisations for their contributions:
 NHFT staff at HMP Swinfen Hall
 Dr Matthew Whalley & Dr Hardeep Kaur
 Claire Hilton at East London NHS Foundation
 St Georges University Hospitals
 Dr Ruth Harris



COVID-19 Managing Breathlessness

In addition to medication, there are things you can also do to help you feel less breathless.

Step 1: Positions to ease breathlessness

- The following positions support the muscles in the body that help us with breathing.
- Try to relax your hands, wrists, shoulders, neck and jaw as much as possible.



Make sure you are fully over on your side. Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.



Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.

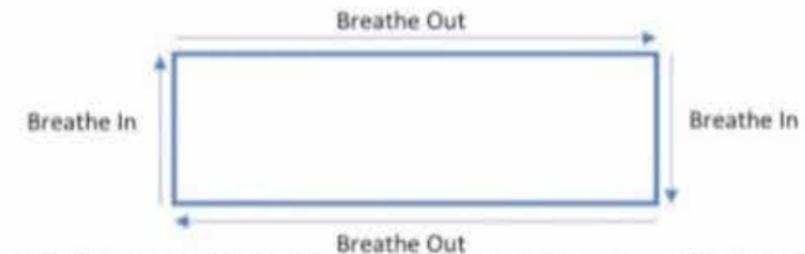


Experiment with your arm position, find what is comfortable with you. When sitting, sit upright, have your legs uncrossed and keep your head up. Leaning forward will also help.



Step 2: Breathing techniques

- The aim is to move from fast, upper chest breathing to relaxed, slow tummy breathing.
- Take slower breaths, in through your nose down into your tummy, then gently breathe out through pursed lips (as if you were going to blow out a candle) to create more room for the next breath in. Do not force your lungs to empty.
- You may find it helpful to rest your hand on your tummy as you do this, feel it rise and fall gently with each breath
- Remember 3 Rs: **Rise** the tummy as you breathe in, **Relax** the breath out, **Rest** and wait for the next breath to come.
- Follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you breathe in (nose) and out (pursed lips).
- Gradually slow the speed your eyes move around the edge of the shape to slow your breathing.



Practice these techniques regularly so they will feel more natural to use when you are breathless.

Step 3: Relaxation techniques

Breathlessness can make us feel anxious, which in turn can add to our breathlessness. The following relaxation exercises can help:

- Visualise** a relaxing scene, such as a favourite place, a walk, a garden, the beach or somewhere from your imagination that makes you feel happy and secure (not places that evoke bad or sad memories). Imagine what you can see, hear, feel and smell.
- Body scan:** Scan your body from head to toe, trying to release any tension in your muscles.
- Let go of thoughts.** Imagine you are sitting on a riverbank watching leaves drifting downstream. When a thought or feeling comes into your mind, try to see this as a leaf and let it drift away from you, and disappear.
- Velindre App:** This is a free App to download, use the relaxation exercises section.
- Relaxed Melodies App:** This is a free App where you can choose your favourite relaxing sounds.

CREATIVE
CALM
THROUGHOUT
CORONAVIRUS



I am grateful

We can be grateful for anything, even things that seem quite small.
Each day try to think of 3 things you are grateful for.

Today I am grateful for-

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Today I am grateful for-

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Today I am grateful for-

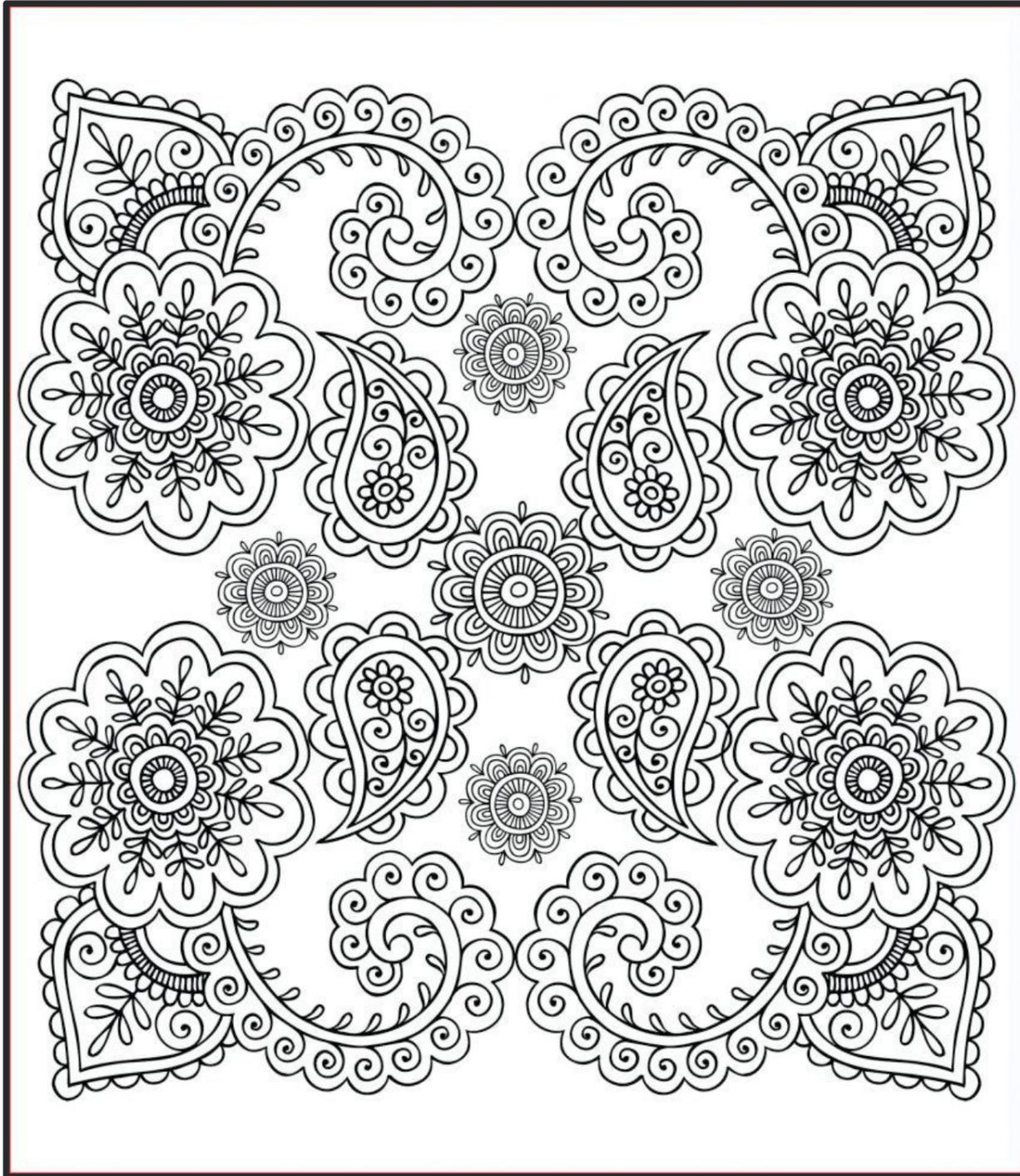
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Today I am grateful for-

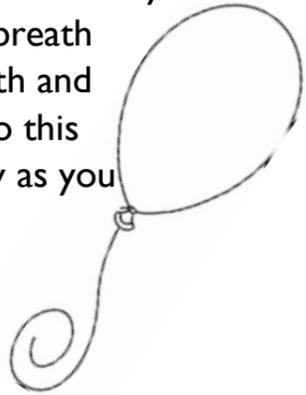
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Time to breathe

Colour me in



Balloon Breathing – Sit down comfortably, and place your hands around your mouth as though you are about to blow up a balloon. Take a big breath in through your nose, and then push the air slowly out your mouth and spread your hands as though you are blowing up your balloon. Do this over again until your balloon is as big as can be. Then, gently sway as you release your balloon up into the sky.

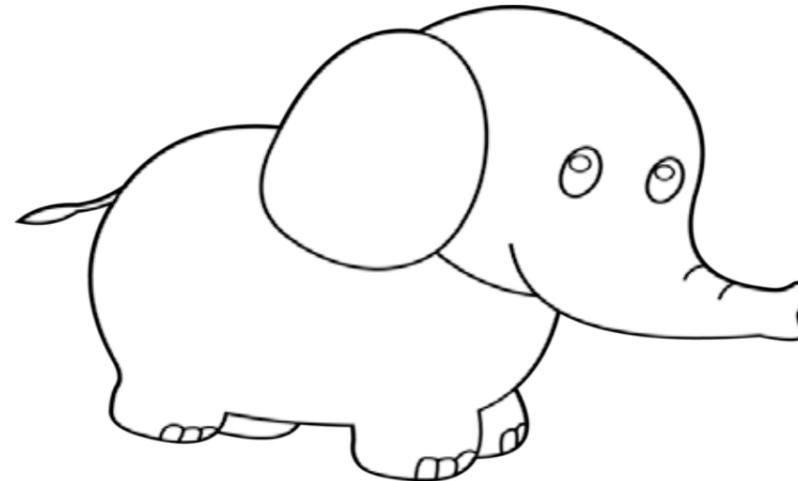


Tummy Breathing - Lie on the floor and place a little teddy (or something else small) on your tummy. Breathe in deeply through your nose and feel your little teddy rise, and then feel it lower as you slowly breathe out through your mouth. Rock your little teddy to sleep using the rise and fall of your stomach.



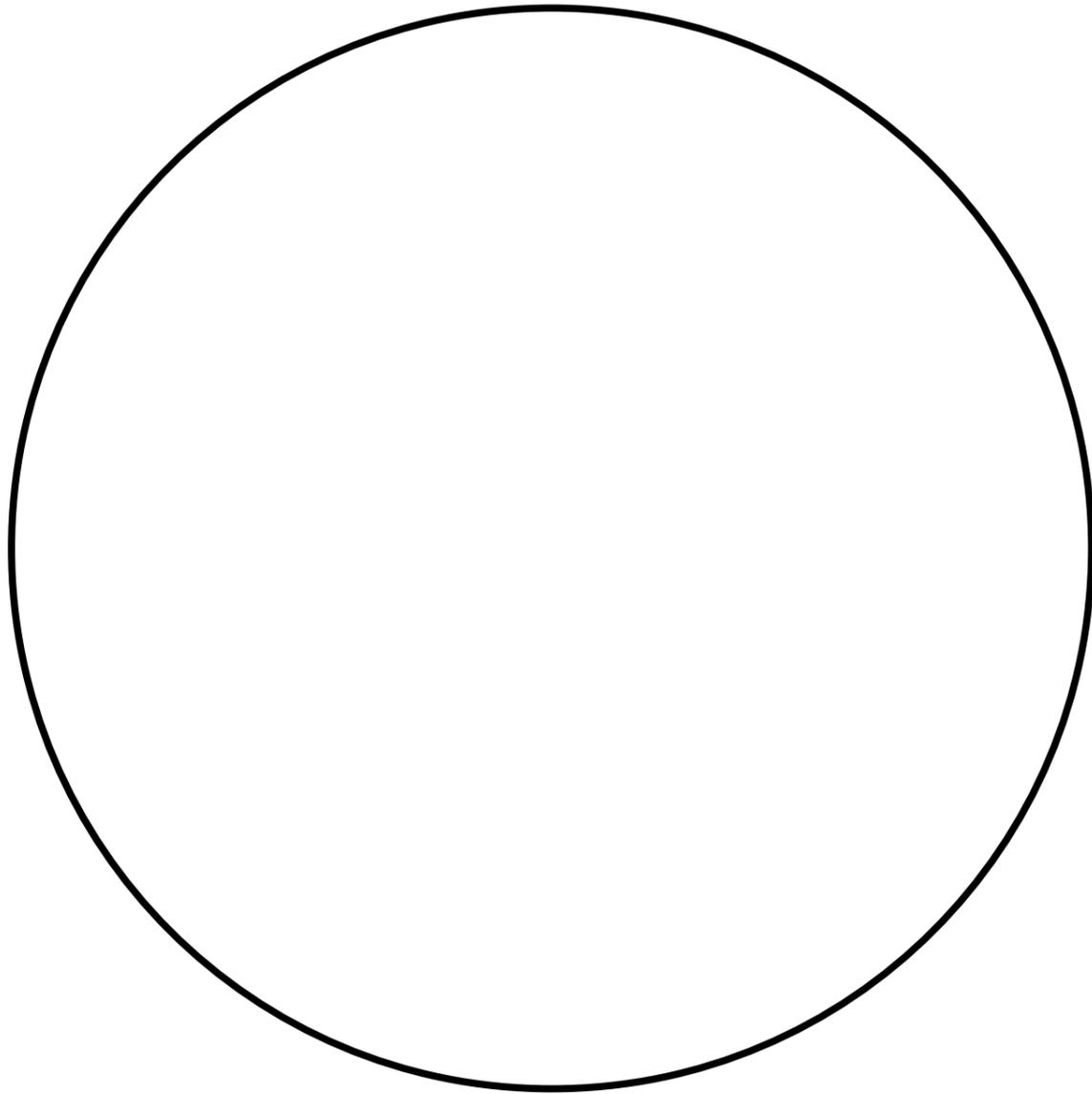
Bumblebee Breathing - Sit down comfortably, and gently place one finger tip in each ear, and close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose and then hum quietly as you slowly breathe out.

Elephant Breathing - Stand up with your feet wide apart and dangle your arms in front of you like an elephant's trunk. Breathe in deeply through your nose and raise your arms up as high as they can go. Breathe out through your mouth and slowly swing your arms down; you could even make an elephant trumpet noise!



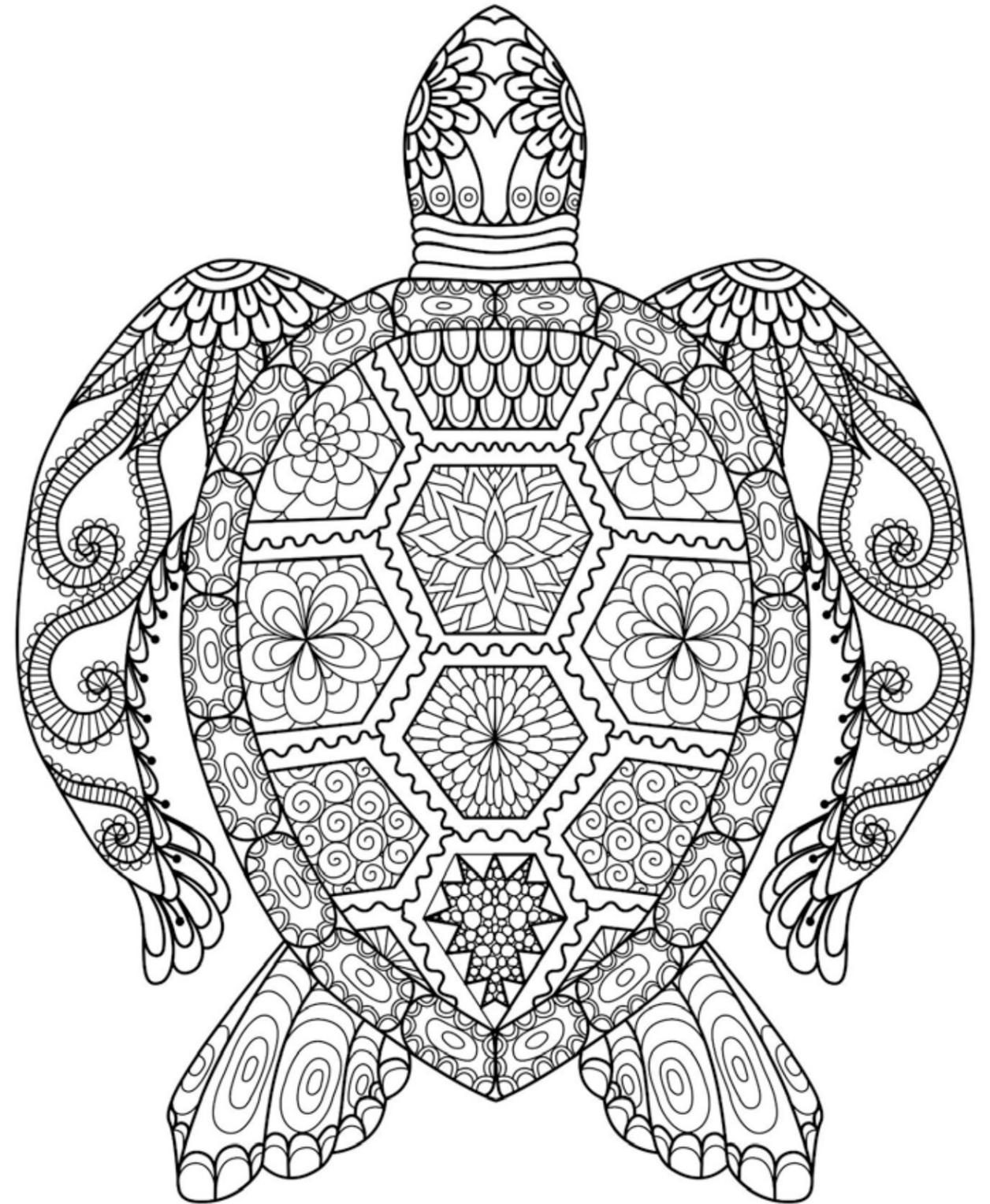
Create something

Draw, scribble, or write anything that comes to mind.



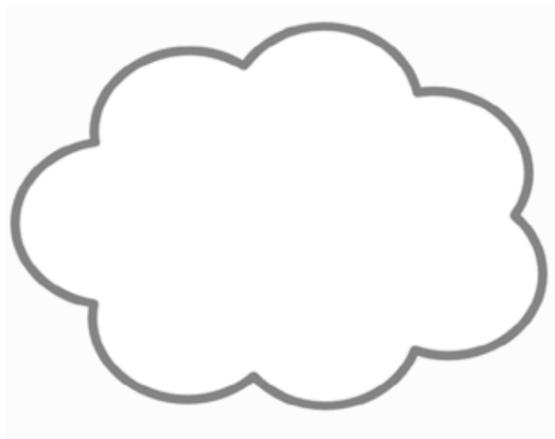
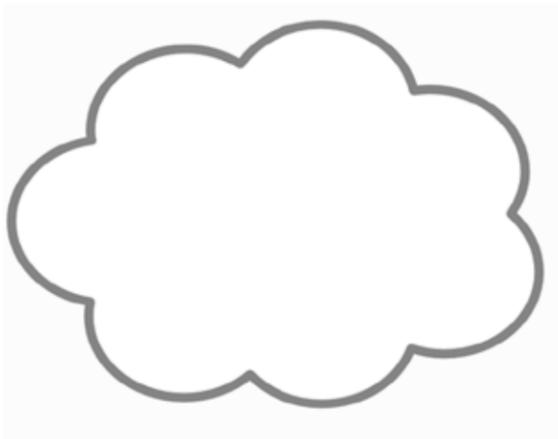
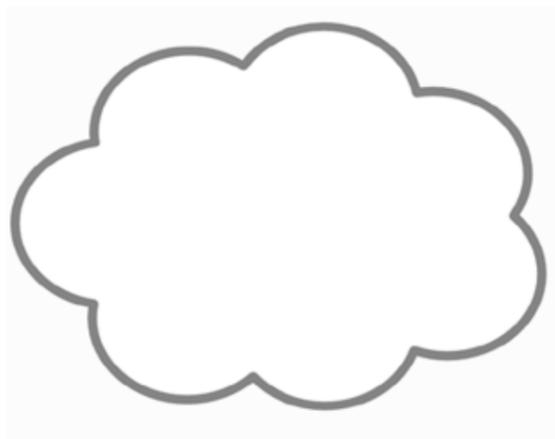
My creation is titled:

Colour me in



My Thought Clouds

Get yourself comfortable, and focus on your breathing. When you notice a thought pop into your head, write it on a cloud and let it float away.



My Comic Strip

1.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '1.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

2.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '2.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

3.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '3.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

4.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '4.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

5.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '5.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

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A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '6.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

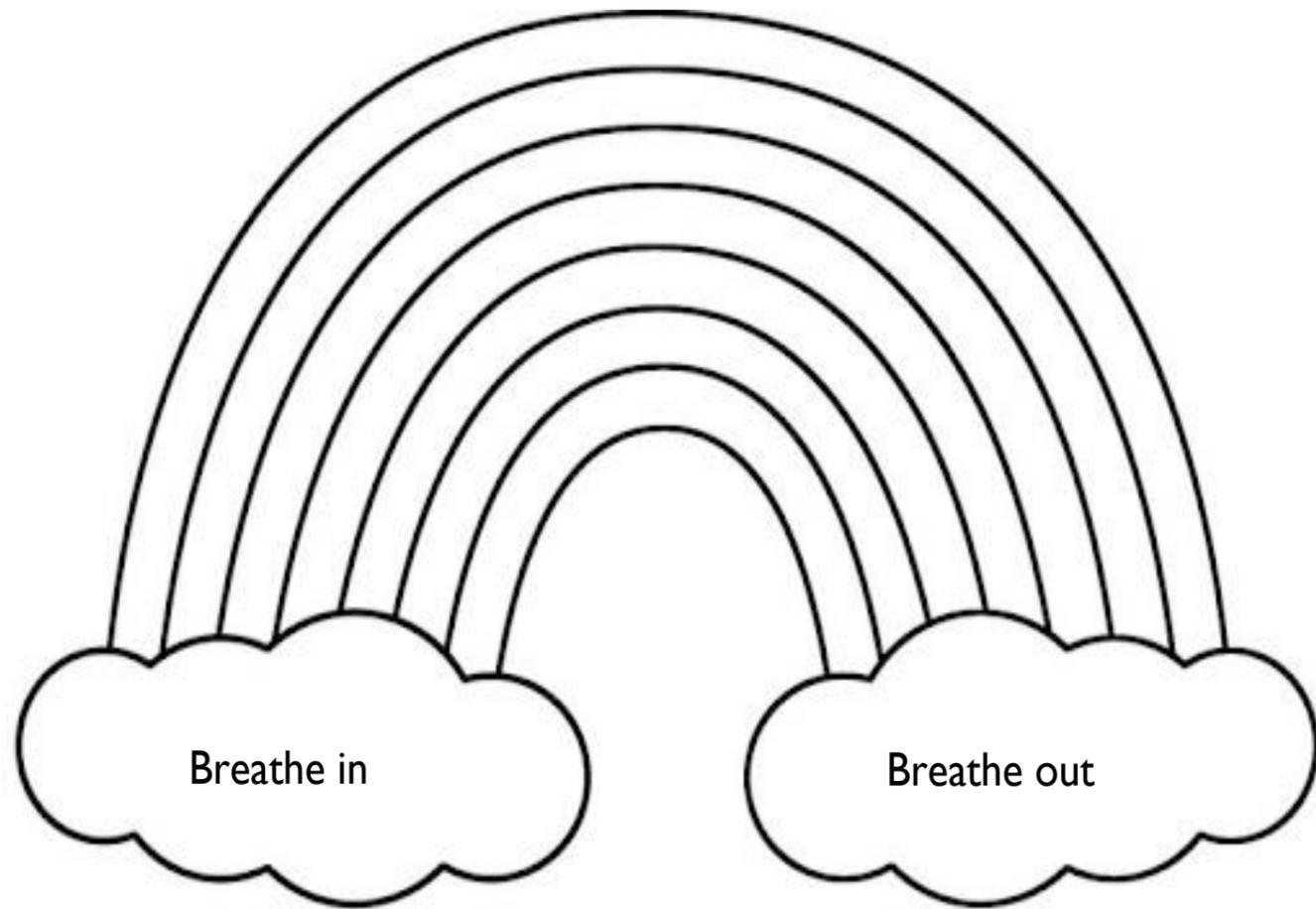
7.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '7.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

8.

A rectangular panel with a thick black border. The number '8.' is in the top-left corner. The panel is mostly empty, with a thin horizontal line near the bottom edge.

My Grounding Rainbow



Trace your rainbow with your finger while breathing in and out, then colour in your rainbow.

Other ways to create calm

Make some noise
Think of a song you haven't heard for a while- sing, hum or whistle it to yourself, with a soundtrack or without!

Get in touch with nature
Notice something amazing about nature- look out your window, open your door, or go for a walk if you can.

Notice your surroundings
Feel your feet upon the floor and your back against your chair, try to touch as many things in the room with as many parts of your body as you can.

Create a dish
Make a meal or snack using any bits you find in your house- then name your creation!

Think of some ideas of your own...

Coping with stress for adults

10 Minutes of Mindful Breathing

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. If you can sit down in the meditation (lotus) position, that's great, if not, no worries. Either way, all you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just a few minutes.

Start by breathing in and out slowly. One breath cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.

Let go of your thoughts. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let thoughts rise and fall of their own accord and be at one with your breath.

Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your sense of awareness on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life.

Then watch with your awareness as it works work its way up and out of your mouth and its energy dissipates into the world.

If you are someone who thought they'd never be able to meditate, guess what? You are half way there already!

This exercise and more on www.pocketmindfulness.com

Step-by-step guide for Muscle Relaxation

Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the floor or recline in a chair, loosen any tight clothing, and remove glasses or contacts. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Take a few slow even breaths. If you have not already, spend a few minutes just breathing.

Step 1: Squeeze the muscles in your forehead, holding for 15 seconds. Then, slowly release the tension in your forehead while counting for 30 seconds. Notice the difference in how your muscles feel and the sensation of relaxation.

Step 2: Repeat step one but focussing on the Jaw.

Step 3: Repeat step one but focussing on the Neck and Shoulders..

Step 4: Repeat step one but focussing on the Arms and Hands.

Step 5: Repeat step one but focussing on the Buttocks.

Step 6: Repeat step one but focussing on the Legs.

Step 7: Repeat step one but focussing on the Feet. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation sweeping through your body. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly.

Dealing with stressful situations

I need somebody to witness my...

During times of isolation it is important that our feelings, opinions and thoughts are valued. This can be hard when we have no one to share them with or don't know how to. Find someone who can be your confidant— this is specifically when you need to express your stressful day or your personal story.

This doesn't have to be a direct member of your family, often it can be more beneficial if it is a person on the side-lines, someone you have a connection with and that you trust. Most importantly this person will be neutral, impartial and able to listen to you whilst you offload, share, and express yourself.

Create your own personal Mantra...

Mantra repetition practice: "silent repeating of a word or phrase"

It has been shown to be effective at targeting anger, or the state of being constantly on guard. It can also reduce anxiety.

Design your own phrase or choose a word that gives you strength, do you have a favourite line from a song, line from a film...or is there something that resonates with you?

Use this to focus on and repeat silently until your mind quiets down and there is nothing but the words you are chanting.

It can be used in both stressful situations and during your quiet times.

Change the situation...

AVOID the stressor

Learn how to say no, avoid stressful people, take control of your environment, avoid hot topics, pare down your to-do list

ALTER the stressor

Express, don't bottle up your feelings, be willing to compromise, be more assertive, manage your time better

Change your reaction...

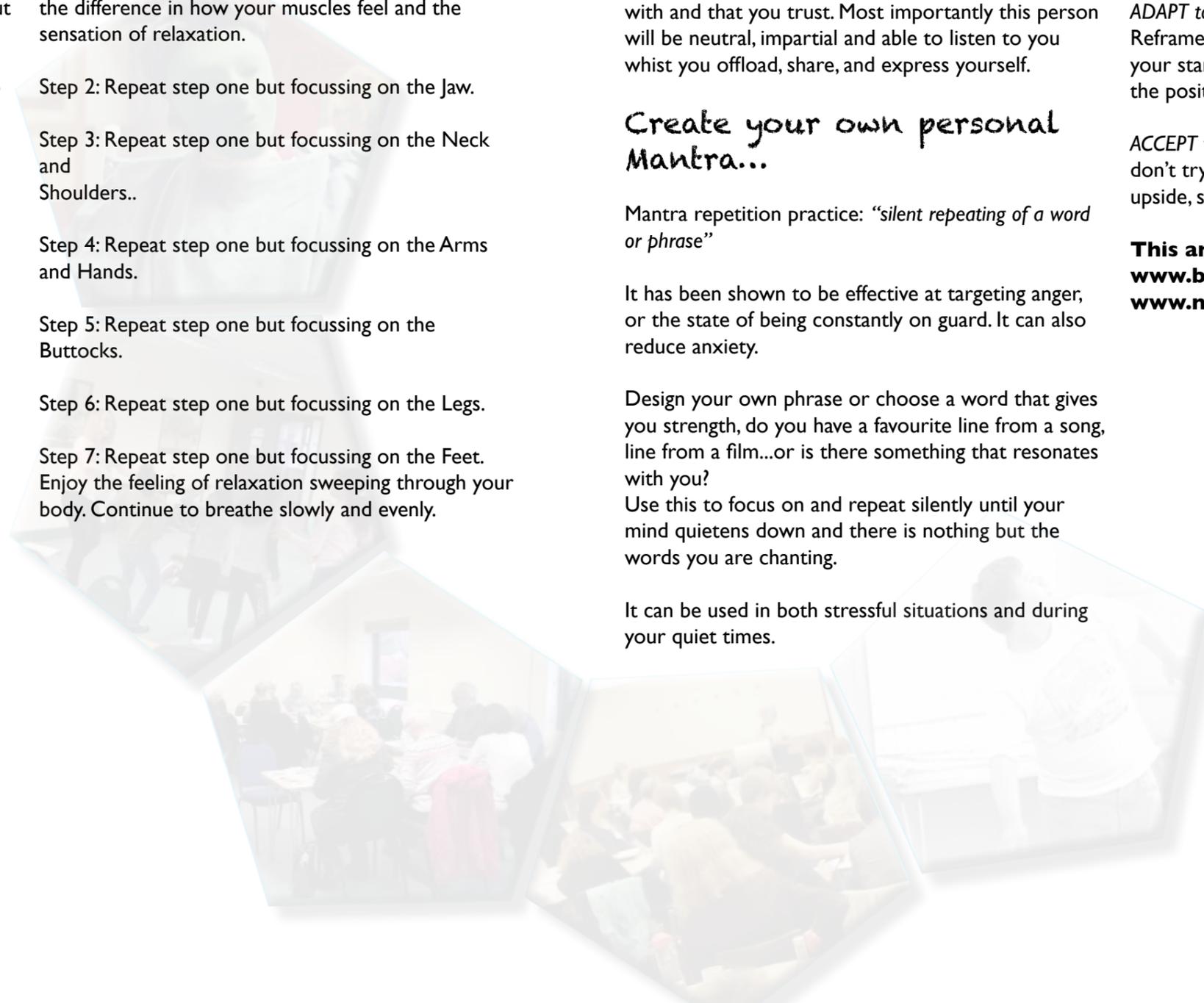
ADAPT to the stressor

Reframe problems, look at the bigger picture, adjust your standards - "good enough" is perfect, focus on the positive

ACCEPT the stressor

don't try to control the uncontrollable, look for the upside, share you feelings, learn to forgive

This and other tips like this from www.brainline.org and www.medicalnewstoday.com



Guide

UK English

Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty



Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty

About this guide

Our world is changing rapidly at the moment. Given some of the news coverage, it would be hard not to worry about what it all means for yourself, and for those you love.

Worry and anxiety are common problems at the best of times, and when it takes over it can become all-encompassing. At Psychology Tools we have put together this free guide to help you to manage your worry and anxiety in these uncertain times.

Once you have read the information, feel free to try the exercises if you think they might be helpful to you. It's natural to struggle when times are uncertain, so remember to offer care and compassion to yourself, and to those around you.

Wishing you well,

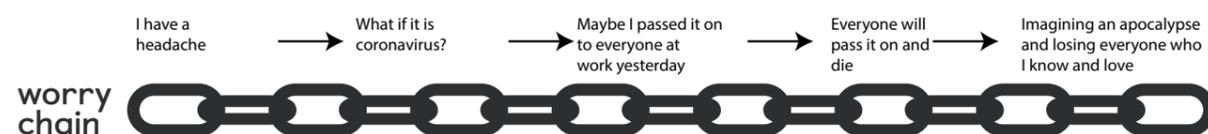
Dr Matthew Whalley & Dr Hardeep Kaur

What is worry?

Human beings have the amazing ability to think about future events. 'Thinking ahead' means that we can anticipate obstacles or problems, and gives us the opportunity to plan solutions. When it helps us to achieve our goals, 'thinking ahead' can be helpful. For example, hand washing and social distancing are helpful things that we can decide to do in order to prevent the spread of the virus. However, worrying is a way of 'thinking ahead' that often leaves us feeling anxious or apprehensive. When we worry excessively, we often think about worst case scenarios and feel that we won't be able to cope.

What does worry feel like?

When we worry it can feel like a chain of thoughts and images, which can progress in increasingly catastrophic and unlikely directions. Some people experience worry as uncontrollable – it seems to take on a life of its own. It is natural that many of us may have recently noticed ourselves thinking about worst-case scenarios. The example below illustrates how worries can escalate quickly even from something relatively minor. Have you noticed any thoughts like this? (confession: we both have!)



Worry isn't just in our heads. When it becomes excessive we feel it as anxiety in our bodies too. Physical symptoms of worry and anxiety include:

- Muscle tension or aches and pains.
- Restlessness and an inability to relax.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Feeling easily fatigued.

What triggers worry and anxiety?

Anything can be a trigger for worry. Even when things go right, you might manage to think to yourself "*but what if it all falls apart?*". There are particular situations where worry becomes even more common, though. Strong triggers for worry are situations that are:

- **Ambiguous** – open to different interpretations.
- **Novel and new** – so we don't have any experience to fall back on.
- **Unpredictable** – unclear how things will turn out.

Does any of this sound familiar at the moment? The current worldwide health situation ticks all of these boxes, and so it makes sense that people are experiencing a lot of worry. It is an unusual situation with much uncertainty, which can naturally lead us to worry and feel anxious.

Are there different types of worry?

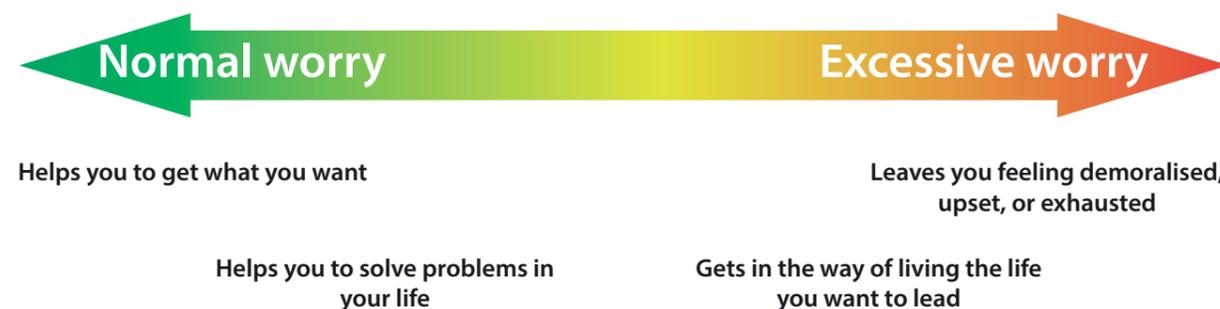
Worry can be helpful or unhelpful, and psychologists often distinguish between worries concerning 'real problems' vs. 'hypothetical problems'.

- **Real problem worries** are about actual problems that need solutions right now. For example, given the very real concern about the virus at the moment, there are helpful solutions which include regular handwashing, social distancing, and physical isolation if you have symptoms.
- **Hypothetical worries** about the current health crisis might include thinking about worst-case scenarios (what we might call catastrophising). For example, imagining worst case scenarios such as *most* people dying.



When does worry become a problem?

Everyone worries to some degree, and some thinking ahead can help us to plan and cope. There is no 'right' amount of worry. We say that worry becomes a problem when it stops you from living the life you want to live, or if it leaves you feeling demoralised and exhausted.



What can I do about worry?

It is natural for you to worry at the moment, but if you feel that it's becoming excessive and taking over your life – for example if it's making you anxious, or if you're struggling to sleep – then it might be worth trying to find ways to limit the time you spend worrying, and taking steps to manage your well-being. In the next section of this guide, we have included a selection of our favourite information handouts, exercises, and worksheets for maintaining well-being and managing worry. These can help you to:

- **Maintain balance in your life.** Psychologists think that well-being comes from living a life with a balance of activities that give you feelings of pleasure, achievement, and closeness. Our information handout *Look After Your Wellbeing By Finding Balance* discusses this in more detail. The *Activity Menu* on the following page contains suggestions of activities to help you to distract yourself and stay active. Remember that we're social animals – we need connections to thrive and flourish. We would recommend trying to do at least some activities that are social and involve other people. In times like these you might have to find some creative ways to do social things at a distance. For example, by keeping in touch online or by phone.
- **Practise identifying whether your worry is 'real problem' worry, or 'hypothetical worry'.** The *Worry Decision Tree* is a useful tool for helping you to decide what type your worry is. If you're experiencing lots of hypothetical worry, then it's important

to remind yourself that your mind is not focusing on a problem that you can solve right now, and then to find ways to let the worry go and focus on something else. You might also use this tool with children if they are struggling to cope.

- **Practise postponing your worry.** Worry is insistent – it can make you feel as though you have to engage with it **right now**. But you can experiment with postponing hypothetical worry, and many people find that this allows them to have a different relationship with their worries. In practice, this means deliberately setting aside time each day to let yourself worry (e.g. 30 minutes at the end of each day). It can feel like an odd thing to do at first! It also means that for the other 23.5 hours in the day you try to let go of the worry until you get to your 'worry time'. Our *Worry Postponement* exercise will guide you through the steps you need to give it a try.
- **Speak to yourself with compassion.** Worry can come from a place of concern – we worry about others when we care for them. A traditional cognitive behavioural therapy technique for working with negative, anxious, or upsetting thoughts is to write them down and find a different way of responding to them. Using the *Challenging Your Thoughts With Compassion* worksheet you can practise responding to your anxious or worrying thoughts with kindness and compassion. We have provided a worked example to get you started.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Learning and practicing mindfulness can help us to let go of worries and bring ourselves back to the present moment. For example focusing on the gentle movement of your breath or the sounds you hear around you, can serve as helpful 'anchors' to come back to the present moment and let go of worries.

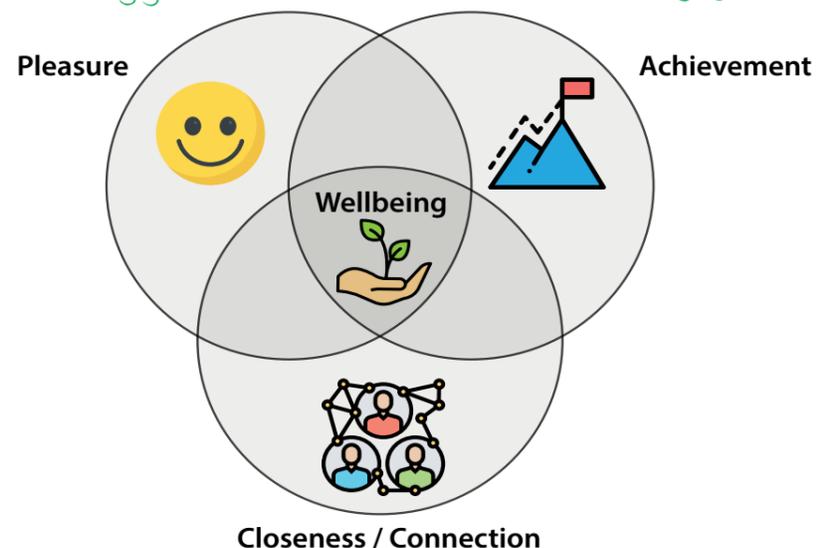
Look After Your Wellbeing By Finding Balance

With the current health situation, many of our normal routines and daily activities are changing. Naturally this can be unsettling, and we can find that the things we usually did to look after our well-being have become difficult. Whether you are working from home, or in some form of physical isolation or distancing, it can be helpful to organise a daily routine that involves a balance between activities that:

- give you a sense of **achievement**,
- help you feel **close and connected** with others and
- activities that you can do just for **pleasure**.

When we are struggling with anxiety and worry, we can lose touch with things that used to give us pleasure. Plan to do some activities each day that are pleasurable and make you feel joyful. For example, reading a good book, watching a comedy, dancing or singing to your favourite songs, taking a relaxing bath, or eating your favourite food.

We feel good when we have achieved or accomplished something, so it's helpful to include activities each day that give you a sense of achievement. For example, doing some housework, decorating, gardening, a work task, cooking a new recipe, completing an exercise routine, or completing 'life admin' such as paying a bill.



We are social animals, so we need and naturally crave closeness and connection with other people. With the current health crisis many of us may be physically isolated or distant from others, so it's important that we consider creative ways to connect in order that we don't become socially isolated and lonely. How can you continue to connect with family and friends and have social time in a virtual way? Perhaps using social media, phone and video calls you could set up shared online activities e.g. a virtual book or film club. You could also explore local online neighbourhood groups, and see if there are ways to be involved in helping your local community.

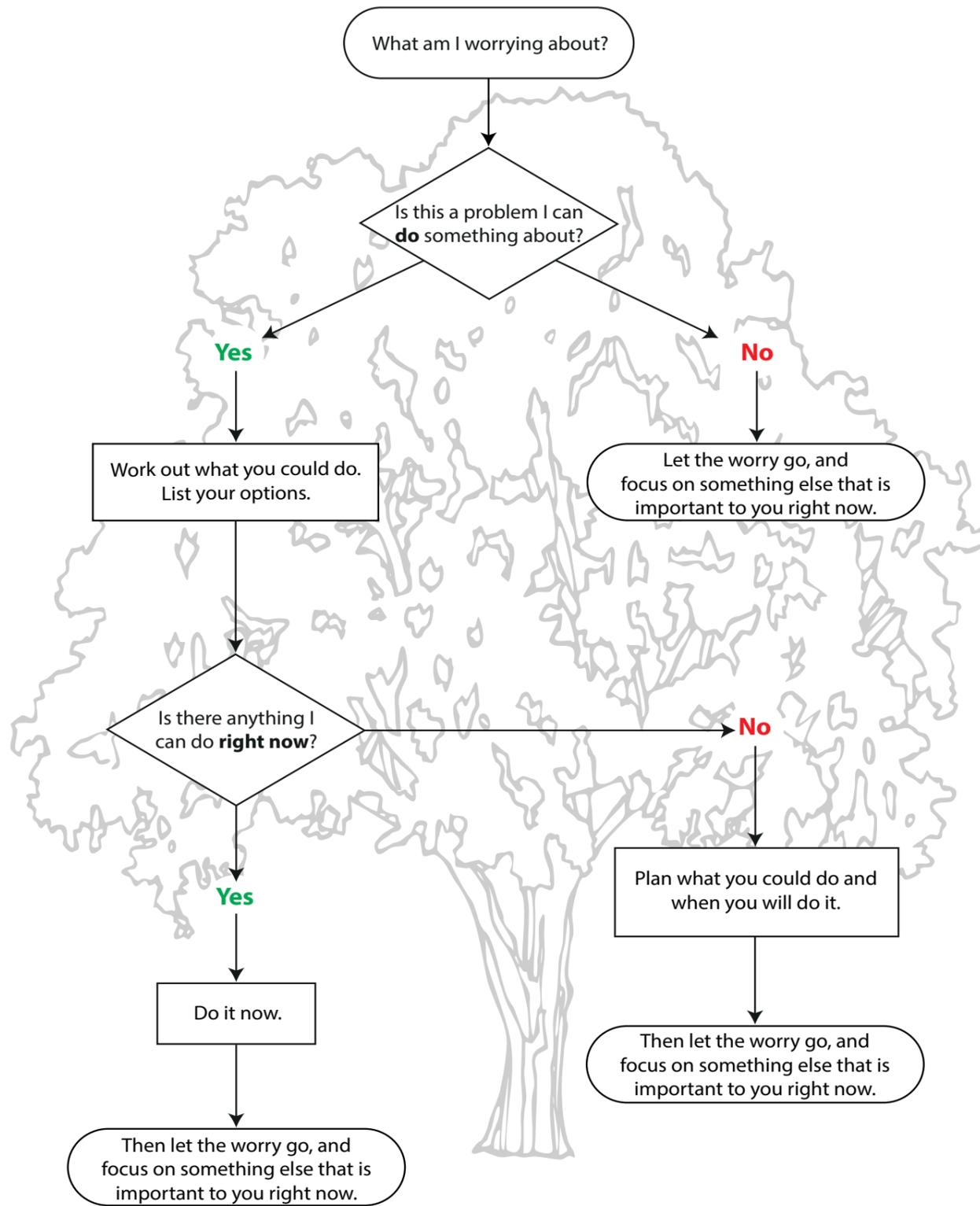
An imbalance of pleasure, achievement, and closeness can affect our mood. For example if you spend most of your time working with no time for pleasure or socialising, then you may start to feel low and isolated. Conversely, if you spend most of your time relaxing for pleasure and not doing other things that are important to you then this can also impact your mood.

At the end of each day could you check in with yourself and reflect on 'what did I do today that gave me a sense of achievement? Pleasure? Closeness with others?' Did I get a good balance, or what can I do differently tomorrow?

Use An Activity Menu To Give You Some Ideas To Stay Occupied

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
|  <p>Animals Pet an animal Walk a dog Listen to the birds</p> |  <p>Create Draw a picture Paint a portrait Take a photograph Doodle / sketch Organise photographs Make a photograph album Start a scrapbook Finish a project Do some sewing / knitting</p> |  <p>Mind Daydream Meditate Pray Reflect Think Try relaxation exercises Practise yoga</p> |  <p>Schedule Get up extra early Stay up late Sleep in late Tick something off your 'to do' list</p> |
|  <p>Be active Go for a walk Go for a run Go for a swim Go cycling Use an exercise video at home</p> |  <p>Expression Laugh Cry Sing Shout Scream</p> |  <p>Music Listen to music you like Find some new music to listen to Turn on the radio Make some music Sing a song Play an instrument Listen to a podcast</p> |  <p>Self care Take a bath Take a shower Wash your hair Give yourself a facial Trim your nails Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!) Take a nap</p> |
|  <p>Clean Clean the house Clean the yard Clean the bathroom Clean the toilet Clean your bedroom Clean the fridge Clean the oven Clean your shoes Do the washing up Fill / empty the dishwasher Do laundry Do some chores Organise your workspace Clean a cupboard</p> |  <p>Kindness Help a friend / neighbour / stranger Make a gift for someone Try a random act of kindness Do someone a favour Teach somebody a skill Do something nice for someone Plan a surprise for someone Make a list of your good points Make a list of things or people you are grateful for</p> |  <p>Nature Try some gardening Plant something Do some pruning Mow the lawn Pick flowers Buy flowers Go for a walk in nature Sit in the sun</p> |  <p>Try something new Try a new food Listen to some new music Watch a new TV show or movie Wear some new clothes Read a new book Do something spontaneous Express yourself</p> |
|  <p>Connect with people Contact a friend Join a new group Join a political party Join a dating website Send a message to a friend Write a letter to a friend Reconnect with an old friend</p> |  <p>Learn Learn something new Learn a new skill Learn a new fact Watch a tutorial video</p> |  <p>Plan Set a goal Create a budget Make a 5 year plan Make a 'to do' list Make a 'bucket list' Make a shopping list</p> |  <p>Watch Watch a movie Watch a TV show Watch a YouTube video</p> |
|  <p>Cook Cook a meal for yourself Cook a meal for someone else Bake a cake / cookies Roast marshmallows Find a new recipe</p> |  <p>Mend Repair something in the house Repair your bike / car / scooter Make something new Change a lightbulb Decorate a room</p> |  <p>Read Read a favourite book Read a new book Read the newspaper Read your favourite website</p> |  <p>Write Write a letter with compliments Write a letter to your politician Write an angry letter Write a grateful letter Write a 'thank you' card Write a journal / diary Write your CV Start writing a book</p> |

Use This Decision Tree To Help You Notice ‘Real Problem’ Vs. ‘Hypothetical Worry’



Worry Postponement For Uncertain Times

Psychologists think that there are two types of worry:

1. **Real problem worries** are about actual problems affecting you right now and which you can act on now.
 “My hands are dirty from gardening, I need to wash them”, “I need to call my friend or she will think I have forgotten her birthday”
 “I can’t find my keys”, “I can’t afford to pay this electricity bill”, “My boyfriend isn’t speaking to me”.
2. **Hypothetical worries** are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.
 “What if I die?”, “What if everyone I know dies?”, “Maybe this worrying is making me crazy”

People who are bothered by worry often experience it as *uncontrollable*, time consuming, and sometimes believe that it is beneficial to engage in worry when it occurs. Experimenting with postponing your worries – deliberately setting aside some time in your day to do nothing but worry and limiting the time you spend worrying – is a helpful way of exploring your relationship with worry. Follow the steps below for *at least* one week.

Step 1: Preparation

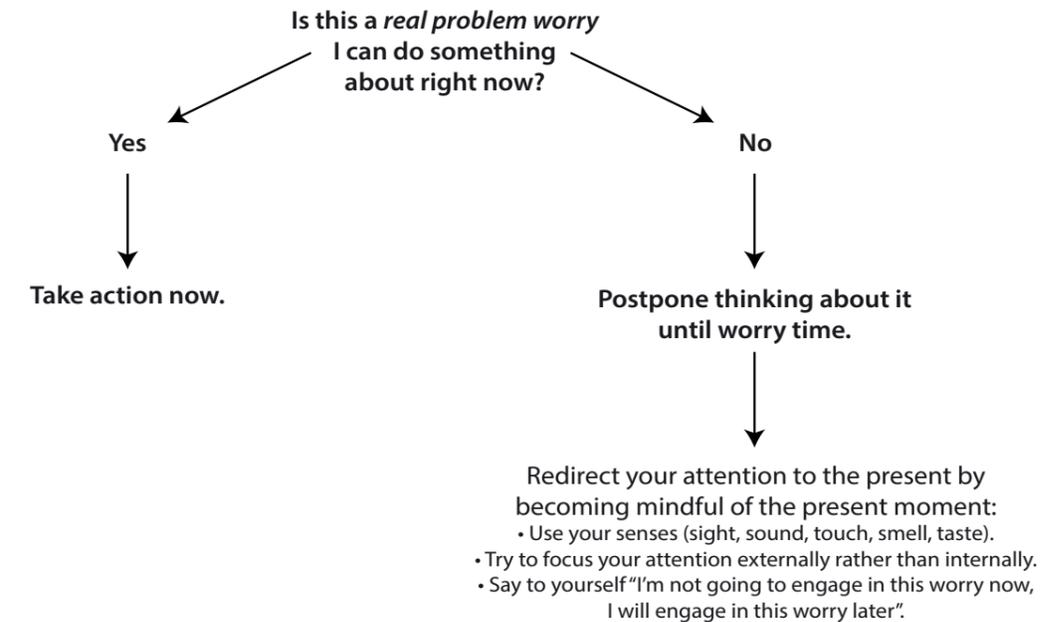
Decide **when** your worry time will be, and for **how long** it will be for.

- ‘Worry time’ is time you set aside every day for the specific purpose of worrying.
- What time of day do you think you will be in the best frame of mind to attend to your worries?
- When are you unlikely to be disturbed?
- If you are unsure, 15 to 30 minutes every day at 7:00pm is often a good starting point.



Step 2: Worry postponement

During the day, decide whether worries that surface are ‘real problem’ worries you can act on now, or whether they are hypothetical worries that need to be postponed.



Step 3: Worry time

Use your dedicated worry time for worrying. Consider writing down any of the hypothetical worries that you remember having had throughout the day. How concerning are they to you now? Are any of them the kinds of worries that can lead you to take practical actions?

- Try to use all of your allocated worry time, even if you do not feel that you have much to worry about, or even if worries do not seem as pressing at this time.
- Reflect upon your worries now – do they give you the same emotional ‘kick’ when you think about them now as they did when you first thought of them?
- Can any of your worries be converted into a practical problem to which you can look for a solution?

Challenging Your Thoughts Compassionately During A Global Health Crisis

| Situation Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen? | Emotions & body sensations What did you feel? (Rate intensity 0-100%) | Automatic thought What went through your mind? (Thoughts, images, or memories) | Compassionate response What would a truly self-compassionate response be to your negative thought? |
|--|--|---|---|
| | | If you had an image or memory, what did it mean to you? | Try to respond to yourself with the compassionate qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth, kindness, and non-judgement. • What would my best friend say to me? • What would a truly compassionate being say to me? • What tone of voice would I need to be talked to in order to feel reassured? |

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|--|--|---|---|
| watching the news for the second hour in a row. | Feelings of anxiety and an increasing sensation of panic. | This is terrible. So many people could die. What's going to happen to me and my family? | It's understandable that you're worried – it would be unusual not to be. What's the best thing that you can do for yourself to feel better right now? Maybe you could watch a comedy instead of the news, or get up and do something else. Try to respond to yourself with the compassionate qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth, kindness, and non-judgement. • What would my best friend say to me? • What would a truly compassionate being say to me? • What tone of voice would I need to be talked to in order to feel reassured? |

Some final tips

- **Set a routine.** If you are spending more time at home it is important to continue with a regular routine. Maintain a regular time for waking up and going to bed, eating at regular times, and getting ready and dressed each morning. You could use a timetable to give structure to your day.
- **Stay mentally and physically active.** When you plan your daily timetable, have a go at including activities that keep both your mind and body active. For example, you could try learning something new with an online course, or challenge yourself to learn a new language. It's also important to keep physically active. For example doing rigorous housework for 30 minutes, or an online exercise video.
- **Practice gratitude.** At times of uncertainty, developing a gratitude practice can help you to connect with moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure. At the end of each day, take time to reflect on what you are thankful for today. Try and be specific and notice new things each day, for example 'I am grateful that it was sunny at lunchtime so I could sit in the garden.' You could start a gratitude journal, or keep notes in a gratitude jar. Encourage other people in your home to get involved too.
- **Notice and limit worry triggers.** As the health situation develops it can feel like we need to constantly follow the news or check social media for updates. However, you might notice this also triggers your worry and anxiety. Try to notice what triggers your worry. For example, is it watching the news for more than 30 minutes? Checking social media every hour? Try to limit the time that you are exposed to worry triggers each day. You might choose to listen to the news at a set time each day, or you could limit the amount of time you spend on social media for news checking.
- **Rely on reputable news sources.** It can also help to be mindful of where you are obtaining news and information. Be careful to choose reputable sources. The World Health Organization provides excellent information here:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

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'FACE COVID'

How to respond effectively to the Corona crisis

by Dr Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap

'FACE COVID' is a set of practical steps for responding effectively to the Corona crisis, using the principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Here's a quick summary of the key steps, and in the pages that follow we'll explore them all in more depth:

F = Focus on what's in your control

A = Acknowledge your thoughts & feelings

C = Come back into your body

E = Engage in what you're doing

C = Committed action

O = Opening up

V = Values

I = Identify resources

D = Disinfect & distance

Let's now explore these, one by one

F = Focus on what's in your control

The Corona crisis can affect us in many different ways: physically, emotionally, economically, socially, and psychologically. All of us are (or soon will be) dealing with the very real challenges of widespread serious illness and the inabilities of healthcare systems to cope with it, social and community disruption, economic fallout and financial problems, obstacles and interruptions to many aspects of life ... and the list goes on.

And when we are facing a crisis of any sort, fear and anxiety are inevitable; they are normal, natural responses to challenging situations infused with danger and uncertainty. It's all too easy to get lost in worrying and ruminating about all sorts of things that are out of your control: what might happen in the future; how the virus might affect you or your loved ones or your community or your country or the world – and what will happen then - and so on. And while it's completely natural for us to get lost in such worries, it's not useful or helpful. Indeed the more we focus on what's *not* in our control, the more hopeless or anxious we're likely to feel.

So the single most useful thing anyone can do in any type of crisis – Corona-related or otherwise - is to: ***focus on what's in your control.***

You can't control what happens in the future. You can't control Corona virus itself or the world economy or how your government manages this whole sordid mess. And you can't magically control your feelings, eliminating all that perfectly natural fear and anxiety. But you can control *what you do* - here and now. And that matters.

Because *what you do* - here and now - can make a huge difference to yourself, and anyone living with you, and a significant difference to the community around you.

The reality is, we all have far more control over our behaviour, than we do over our thoughts and feelings. So our number one aim is to take control of our behaviour - right here and now - to respond effectively to this crisis.

This involves both dealing with our inner world – all our difficult thoughts and feelings - and our outer world – all the real problems we are facing. How do we do this? Well, when a big storm blows up, the boats in the harbour drop anchor – because if they don't, they'll get swept out to sea. And of course, dropping anchor doesn't make the storm go away (anchors can't control the weather) - but it can hold a boat steady in the harbour, until the storm passes in its own good time.

Similarly, in an ongoing crisis, we're all going to experience 'emotional storms': unhelpful thoughts spinning inside our head, and painful feelings whirling around our body. And if we're swept away by that storm inside us, there's nothing effective we can do. So the first practical step is to 'drop anchor', using the simple ACE formula:

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

C = Come back into your body

E = Engage in what you're doing

Let's explore these one by one:

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

Silently and kindly acknowledge whatever is 'showing up' inside you: thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, sensation, urges. Take the stance of a curious scientist, observing what's going on in your inner world.

And while continuing to acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, also

C = Come back into your body

Come back into and connect with your physical body. Find your own way of doing this. You could try some or all of the following, or find your own methods:

- Slowly pushing your feet hard into the floor.
- Slowly straightening up your back and spine; if sitting, sitting upright and forward in your chair.
- Slowly pressing your fingertips together
- Slowly stretching your arms or neck, shrugging your shoulders.
- Slowly breathing

Note: you are not trying to turn away from, escape, avoid or distract yourself from what is happening in your inner world. The aim is to remain aware of your thoughts and feelings, continue to acknowledge their presence and at the same time, come back into and connect with your body, and actively move it. Why? So you can gain as much control as possible over your physical actions, even though you can't control your feelings. (Remember, F = Focus on what's in your control)

And as you acknowledge your thoughts & feelings, and come back into your body, also

E = Engage in what you're doing

Get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on the activity you are doing.

Find your own way of doing this. You could try some or all of the following suggestions, or find your own methods:

- Look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
- Notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
- Notice what you can smell or taste or sense in your nose and mouth
- Notice what you are doing
- End the exercise by giving your full attention to the task or activity at hand. (And if you don't have any meaningful activity to do, see the next 3 steps.)

Ideally, run through the ACE cycle slowly 3 or 4 times, to turn it into a 2- 3 minute exercise.

If you wish, to help you get the hang of this, you can download some free audio recordings of 'dropping anchor' exercises, varying from 1 minute to 11 minutes in length. You can listen to these and use them as a guide to help you develop this skill. You can download or stream them from the left hand box on this webpage: <https://www.actmindfully.com.au/free-stuff/free-audio/>

NOTE: please don't skip the A of ACE; it's so important to keep acknowledging the thoughts and feelings present, especially if they are difficult or uncomfortable. If you skip the A, this exercise will turn into a distraction technique – which it's not supposed to be.

Dropping anchor is a very useful skill. You can use it for handling difficult thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, urges and sensations more effectively; switching off auto-pilot and engaging in life; grounding and steadying yourself in difficult situations; disrupting rumination, obsessing and worrying; and focusing your attention on the task or activity you are doing. The better you anchor yourself in the here and now, the more control you have over your actions – which makes it a lot easier to do the next steps: **COVID**

C = Committed Action

Committed action means effective action, guided by your core values; action you take because it's truly important to you; action you take even if it brings up difficult thoughts and feelings. Once you have dropped anchor, using the ACE formula, you will have a lot of control over your actions – so this makes it easier to do the things that truly matter. Now obviously that includes all those protective measures against Corona – frequent handwashing, social distancing, and so on. But in addition to those fundamentals of effective action, consider:

What are simple ways to look after yourself, those you live with, and those you can realistically help? What kind, caring, supportive deeds you can do?

Can you say some kind words to someone in distress – in person or via a phone call or text message?

Can you help someone out with a task or a chore, or cook a meal, or hold someone's hand, or play a game with a young child?

Can you comfort and soothe someone who is sick? Or in the most serious of cases, nurse them and access whatever medical assistance is available?

And if you're spending a lot more time at home, through self-isolation or forced quarantine, or social distancing, what are the most effective ways to spend that time?

You may want to consider physical exercise to stay fit, cooking (as) healthy food (as possible, given restrictions), and doing meaningful activities by yourself or with others.

And if you're familiar with acceptance and commitment therapy or other mindfulness-based approaches, how can you actively practice some of those mindfulness skills?

Repeatedly throughout the day, ask yourself 'What can I *do* right now - no matter how small it may be - that improves life for myself or others I live with, or people in my community?' And whatever the answer is – do it, and engage in it fully.

O = Opening up

Opening up means making room for difficult feelings and being kind to yourself. Difficult feelings are guaranteed to keep on showing up as this crisis unfolds: fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, frustration, confusion, and many more.

We can't stop them from arising; they're normal reactions. But we can open up and make room for them: acknowledge they are normal, allow them to be there (even though they hurt), and treat ourselves kindly.

Remember, self-kindness is essential if you want to cope well with this crisis – especially if you are in a caregiver role. If you've ever flown on a plane, you've heard this message: 'In event of an emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.' Well, self-kindness is your own oxygen mask; if you need to look after others, you'll do it a whole lot better if you're also taking good care of yourself.

So ask yourself, 'If someone I loved was going through this experience, feeling what I am feeling – if I wanted to be kind and caring towards them, how would I treat them? How would I behave towards them? What might I say or do?' Then try treating yourself the same way.

For more on self-kindness, also known as self-compassion, read this eBook:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_Q3Uct9Q8VuSbiRm7x7-xjaxy5xkrba/view?usp=sharing

V = Values

Committed action should be guided by your core values: What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis? What sort of person do you want to be, as you go through this? How do you want to treat yourself and others?

Your values might include love, respect, humour, patience, courage, honesty, caring, openness, kindness or numerous others. Look for ways to 'sprinkle' these values into your day. Let them guide and motivate your committed action.

Of course, as this crisis unfolds, there will be all sorts of obstacles in your life; goals you can't achieve, things you can't do, problems for which there are no simple solutions. But you can still live your values in a myriad of different ways, even in the face of all those challenges. Especially come back to your values of kindness and caring. Consider:

What are kind, caring ways you can treat yourself as you go through this?
What are kind words you can say to yourself, kind deeds you can do for yourself?
What are kind ways you can treat others who are suffering?
What are kind, caring ways of contributing to the wellbeing of your community?
What can you say and do that will enable you to look back in years to come and feel proud of your response?

I = Identify resources

Identify resources for help, assistance, support, and advice. This includes friends, family, neighbours, health professionals, emergency services. And make sure you know the emergency helpline phone numbers, including psychological help if required. Also reach out to your social networks. And if you are able to offer support to others, let them know; you can be a resource for other people, just as they can for you. One very important aspect of this process involves finding a *reliable and trustworthy* source of information for updates on the crisis and guidelines for responding to it. The World Health Organisation website is the leading source of such information: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> Also check the website of your country's government health department. Use this information to develop your own resources: action plans to protect yourself and others, and to prepare in advance for quarantine or emergency.

D = Disinfect & distance physically

I'm sure you already know this, but it's worth repeating: disinfect your hands regularly and practice as much social distancing as realistically possible, for the greater good of your community. And remember, we're talking about physical distancing – not cutting off emotionally. (If you aren't quite sure about what this means, read this: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>) This is an important aspect of committed action, so align it deeply with your values; recognise that these are truly caring actions.

In Summary

So again and again and again, as problems pile up in the world around you, and emotional storms rage in the world within you, come back to the steps of FACE COVID:

F = Focus on what's in your control
A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
C = Come back into your body
E = Engage in what you're doing

C = Committed action
O = Opening up
V = Values
I = Identify resources
D = Disinfect & distance

Well, I do hope there's something useful in here for you; and feel free to share this with others if you think may find it helpful.

These are crazy, difficult, scary times, so please do treat yourself kindly. And remember the words of Winston Churchill: *'When you're going through hell, keep going'*.

All the best,

Cheers, Russ Harris