Managing our Mental Health & Staying Well during a Virus Outbreak

Responding to 2019-nCOV

mindhk

February 2020

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt there is a lot of uncertainty around the current Coronavirus outbreak, particularly given that the situation is constantly developing and the information about the virus remains incomplete.

Understandably, this is causing a lot of worry and anxiety for people in Hong Kong, particularly around how to stay well and healthy. Given the recent recommendations by the health authorities around 'social distancing', staying in-doors and working from home (as a way to reduce our risk of exposure to the virus), it's likely that loneliness and isolation may develop for some.

It is therefore important to not only consider our physical health during such challenging times, but also to pay attention to our mental health. **It is normal to feel worried, stressed and anxious when we are faced with uncertain situations, but the sooner we acknowledge and learn to take care of our mental health, the healthier and better equipped we'll be to cope with the situation we're having to face.**

Taking care of your mental health and checking in on others can be something that we can all do, and **there are many ways in which we can protect our own and others' mental health.**

WAYS TO MAINTAIN YOUR WELLBEING

These things won't take away the threat of coronavirus, but **may help us to manage our wellbeing through this difficult time.** Although they may not make anxiety go away completely, they may improve the way that you are feeling.

- **Try to manage overwhelming feelings of anxiety**
  by recognising and acknowledging your emotions regularly, rather than avoiding them
- **Maintain a healthy routine and look after your physical health**
  Get enough sleep, eat regular nutritious meals, try to do some physical activity. This is especially important if you are currently working remotely or off work or school.
- **Connect with others**
  Talk to someone you trust and spend time connecting with friends or family who make you happy, but avoid talking only about the coronavirus and the current situation.
- **Try to manage feelings of uncertainty**
  - Try to separate what is in your control and what is out of your control
  - Attend to and action the things that you do have control over
- **Try some breathing and mindfulness exercises to help you relax**
- **Get outside or go for a walk**
  You can choose a less crowded area or a time when you know there are less people about to minimise your contact with others
- **Keep active/moving**
  Try to move your body each day, even if you are indoors, as exercise helps to elevate your mood and lower stress. If you are physically fit and healthy, your body will be stronger and better able to fight a virus.

- **Maintain Training**
  - If you regularly train at a gym or attend exercise classes, try not to let the fear of getting ill from sharing a space with others stop you going altogether. Most gyms maintain good hygiene and have taken extra precautionary measures to ensure people are able to train in a clean and safe environment.
  - In view of the current situation in Hong Kong, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has announced that most of the facilities and programmes will remain temporarily closed until 17th February. Meanwhile, non-fee charging land-based leisure facilities (including park, playgrounds outdoor hard-surface pitches, skateboard grounds, skateparks, roller skating rinks and cycling grounds) will maintain services.
  - If you do not feel safe going to the gym or a studio, please look into continuing your training routine by **working out at home or outside.**
- **Incorporate an activity from each of the "5 ways to wellbeing"** (Give, Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning) into your day*



- **Take a break / Switch off from the news**
  - Avoid excessively checking social media and the news
  - Distract yourself from what's going on to give yourself a break
  - Try moving key apps away from the home-screen of your phone for a while
  - Turn off notifications from key apps
  - Engage in an alternative and enjoyable activity instead

MANAGING ANXIETY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

Given the current situation around the Coronavirus outbreak, it is natural to feel stressed, anxious or overwhelmed. Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we perceive that we are in danger or under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. The anxiety that many of us are feeling around coronavirus is a valid emotion.

Our thoughts (how we think about things) are **interlinked with how we feel emotionally and physically.** If our minds are filled with a lot of 'catastrophic' and anxious thoughts (e.g. "I won't be able to keep my family safe during this outbreak"), then this is likely going to make us feel emotionally distressed and anxious, and in turn, **may impact us physically** - e.g. sleeping difficulties, poor appetite, difficulty concentrating, tiredness and low energy. **Changes in our mental well-being can compromise our physical health and wellbeing,** which may make us more vulnerable towards becoming physically unwell (i.e. making us more susceptible to contracting seasonal flu-like symptoms).

Most people will feel anxious at times and it's particularly common to experience some anxiety while coping with stressful events, changes or situations that we have little control over, especially if they could have a big impact on your life. **It is therefore really important to be aware of our feelings and to learn to recognise when we, or others around us, are becoming overwhelmed.**

SIGNS THAT WE MIGHT BE BECOMING OVERWHELMED BY ANXIETY

- Noticing your **mind being preoccupied** by stressful events (like how coronavirus is affecting our lives)
- Becoming **more sensitive** towards news or information regarding the situation
- Having **trouble staying focused** and/or concentrating on work
- Having **trouble falling asleep** or feeling restless
- Shallow breathing, faster heartbeat
- **Constantly checking social media** or news sources for information

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Unfortunately, since the emergence of the new Coronavirus, there has been a fair amount of speculation and fear-mongering on social media and in the press, which has contributed to a sense of hysteria and panic amongst the general public. For some people, frightening memories of the 2003 SARS epidemic are also heightening their fears.

The spread of "fake news" and unverified information about the virus is causing unnecessary stress and worry to many, leading to a detrimental impact on people's mental health. **As our mental health can greatly affect our overall physical health, the more stressed and anxious we become by reading such news stories, the potentially more vulnerable we are towards becoming physically ill.**

TIPS ON TAKING A BREAK AND SWITCHING OFF FROM THE NEWS

- **Avoid excessively checking** social media and the news
- Allow yourself to **check one reliable source once a day** if you wish to stay up to date, but try not to exceed this
- If you wish to stay up to date, **identify reliable sources** of information (such as the WHO and medical sources) rather than relying purely on social media or news media
- **Engage yourself in other activities** such as work, connecting with friends/family or hobbies
- **Try moving key social media and news apps** (that are particularly prone to sensationalism) away from the home-screen of your phone or disabling them for a while
- **Turn off notifications** from key apps

It's also important to remember that often, **the epidemic of anxiety can increase more rapidly than the epidemic of the illness itself.** And while doctors and public health officials have to plan for the worst-case scenarios, it doesn't mean the worst case is the most likely outcome. **It is entirely reasonable to hope for the best as long as we prepare for the worst.**

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Given the recent recommendations by public health officials around 'social distancing', staying in-doors and working from home (as a way to reduce our risk of exposure to the virus), loneliness and isolation may develop for some people. As social beings, most of us feel the need for social interaction and relationships. **Loneliness is the feeling we get when our need for social interaction is not fulfilled.**

Loneliness and isolation **can have a significant impact on mental health.** It can contribute to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. It is therefore **really important to learn to recognise these feelings early,** particularly as we are being advised to limit our social contact with others.

TIPS

For many people, overcoming loneliness is about increasing the level of social contact that they have with other people, and there are different ways to do this, despite the fact that we aren't able to go out as much.

- Learn to **recognise and acknowledge** feelings of loneliness
- If you aren't able to go out, **try alternative ways of making contact** with others. Phoning, texting, video calling or emailing friends and family can help you feel more grounded and remind you that there are people in your life who you can connect with.
- **Meet people online**
  - For many people, the internet is a good way to connect with people and make friends. There are a huge number of forums, social networks and dating sites that can put you in touch with people you share interests with. Some strong and long-lasting relationships start on the internet, including many where people only ever meet online.
- **Going outside for a walk and observing people** in the street, even saying hello to a neighbour or someone you know, can make you feel a little less lonely (you could choose a less crowded area or choose a time when you know there are less people about if you wish to minimise your contact with others).

- **Learn to spend time alone:** Given the current situation, it is understandable if the people around you are generally wanting to minimise their contact with you, which perhaps makes it really difficult to increase your social interactions. It may therefore be worth learning how to make the best of being alone and how to feel comfortable in your own company.
  - Spending time alone can be rewarding. Being on your own gives you a chance to **do something that you enjoy or are interested in.** This could be anything, from cooking something new to catching up on your favourite TV series.
  - Focus on the pleasure the activity gives you and the fact that **being alone can be a positive thing.**
  - If you usually avoid being on your own, learning to be alone can be hard and may involve facing difficult feelings. However, having time to think and reflect on things when you're on your own can be a **positive experience.** Techniques like yoga, meditation, or keeping a journal can help you to relax and replace negative thoughts and feelings with a calmer sense of self.

- **If you have a pet at home, spending some quality time with your pet can also help significantly reduce your feelings of loneliness.**



ABOUT MIND HK

Mind HK, established as "Mind Mental Health Hong Kong Limited," is a **registered S88 charity (91/16471)** committed to **improving awareness and understanding of mental health in Hong Kong.** We collaborate with other local and international mental health charities and provide online support and training programmes, based on global best practice, to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem and equip them with the resources they need. Through collaborative research, Mind HK is leading the way in understanding mental health problems in the city and providing its population with the right support and resources.

MIND HK'S MISSION AND VISION

- To ensure **everyone in Hong Kong living with a mental health problem has the recognition, support and respect they need to make the best recovery possible.**
- To provide partnership, collaboration, training, innovation and best practice to facilitate the work of all those involved in improving mental health in Hong Kong.
- To lead, promote and support the destigmatisation and transformation of community mental health care so that Hong Kong can become a global leader in the field and a model for other Asian cities.
- To research and audit these strategies and share them internationally.

RELIABLE INFORMATION ON THE CORONAVIRUS

Centre for Health Protection: www.chp.gov.hk/en/index.html
World Health Organisation (WHO): www.who.int/

If you want to learn more about loneliness, mental well-being and other mental health topics, please visit **our mental health A to Z**: **www.mind.org.hk/mental-health-a-to-z/**

If you like to learn more on **how to check in on others**, please visit: **www.howokayareyou.com**

#HowOkayAreYou
#你有幾OK
mind hk

If you are experiencing strong levels of distress or trauma which are interfering with your life, remember that you do not have to face it alone, and that help is available.

For emergency support please contact:

- **Emergency hotline:** 999
- **The Samaritans 24-hour hotline (Multi-lingual):** (852) 2896 0000
- **Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong 24-hour hotline (Cantonese only):** (852) 2389 2222
- **Suicide Prevention Services 24-hour hotline (Cantonese only)**: (852) 2382 0000
- **More crisis support services can be found here:** mind.org.hk/find-help-now
- **More non-urgent support services can be found here:** mind.org.hk/community-directory/



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