

Managing your Mental Health after COVID-19

How people might feel after being ill with COVID-19?

Being critically ill is a physically and emotionally overwhelming experience. Naturally, it can take time to recover. How you feel, and how long it takes to recover can depend how ill you were. Some common experiences after discharge from intensive care include:

- Feeling physically weak. Even simple things like getting dressed can take enormous effort.
- Fatigue. You might feel exhausted and need to sleep more.
- Feelings of breathlessness upon mild exertion, like walking up the stairs.
- Hoarse voice, especially if you had a breathing tube.
- You may feel like you have a 'foggy' brain, being more forgetful, or struggle to read.
- Emotional changes including feeling irritable, depressed, or anxious. You might not feel like going out or feel overwhelmed when you do.
- Concerns about getting ill again or worrying you will never recover.

Does any of this sound familiar? The body and mind take time to heal. Recovery can take longer than you might expect. It is important to be patient with yourself while you recover.

Engage in helpful behaviours:

It's normal to feel all sorts of feelings in response to the pandemic, including fear, sadness, anger, or to feel 'cut off'. Take action to protect yourself and engage in helpful behaviours to help ease distress.

- Engage in general self-care: Set regular times to go to bed and wake up, exercise at home, and eat with regular mealtimes. Avoid naps or shifts in your sleep cycle, avoid excessive alcohol and caffeine, or doing things you might regret (e.g., excessive on-line shopping).
- Engage in pleasant events: Pleasant events are helpful to improve mood. Brainstorm activities that you enjoy and engage in them every day. For example, listen to music, watch favourite movies, exercise at home, cook a nice meal and savour the food in the moment, read a book, play board games, arrange social events with friends and family via internet and telephone. Savour enjoyable

experiences by anticipating them, enjoying them in the moment, and reflecting upon them afterwards.

- Ways to deal with worry: While it is normal to worry and be focusing more on health at this time, you can take some steps to try to manage your degree of worry. One idea is to allow yourself to worry only at a specific time each day, or to postpone a worry to a later stage in the day. You could also try writing your worries into a diary. Another is to limit the amount of information you are reading on the internet (e.g. 30 minutes per day).
- Engage in problem solving using these steps: (1) identify the problem; name it, and be as precise as you can about the nature and extent of the problem, (2) generate potential solutions, (3) decide on a potential solution, (4) plan the chosen solution, (5) carry out the solution, (6) evaluate the result.

Ease physical stress and tension

- Anxiety and worry are natural and adaptive reactions when we face threat. This is often referred to as our body's 'fight or flight' response, intended to mobilize us to act. This 'fight or flight' response can be incredibly physical and even scary, including feeling short of breath, a racing heart, feeling hot and cold, or shivering.
- However, many of the worries you face cannot be resolved by immediate action or fighting the threat. For example, concerns about getting re-infected or never recovering cannot be resolved immediately. Slowly but surely, unresolvable worry can drain us physically.

Relaxation Exercises

Research shows that diaphragmatic breathing (slow, abdominal breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation exercises (alternating tension and relaxation to identify and combat signs of physical tension) are useful in reducing general physical tension and promoting relaxation. Applying these relaxation exercises in your daily life once you have learned them is optimal in gaining benefits. More information is available online that can help you learn these exercises. www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/

Breathing exercise for stress

- This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. You will get the most benefit if you do it regularly, as part of your daily routine.
- You can do it standing up, sitting in a chair, or lying on a bed or floor.
- If you're lying down, place your arms a little bit away from your sides, with the palms up. Let your legs be straight, or bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor.
- If you're sitting, place your arms on the chair arms.
- If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.
- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
- Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from 1 to 5 again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

Meditation/Mindfulness

These techniques may be useful in reducing worry and improving general wellbeing, and there are many resources available on the internet. Download some mindfulness tracks from the internet and listen to them before bedtime. Mindfulness practices can be found in the following e-books: Williams, M., & Penman, D. (2011). Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world, . Accessing meditation apps such as Headspace or Calm may also be beneficial.

Getting more help and information

IAPT psychological therapy services are available free, if you need more help. IAPT stands for Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). These NHS funded national services offer free therapies for low mood, anxiety and depression. They offer treatment over the telephone, via online platforms and video links. You can self-refer to your local IAPT service or be referred by your GP.

Here are the contacts for your local IAPT service.
Westminster Talking Therapies - 030 3333 0000
Islington iCope - 0203 317 7252
Camden iCope - 020 3317 6670
Waltham Forest Talking Therapies - 0300 300 1554
Haringey Let's Talk IAPT – 020 3074 2280
City And Hackney Talk Changes - 020 7683 4278

You can also search online:
<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/>

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Sources: Psychology Tools; BMJ, 319(7207), 427-429; www.nhs.uk

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First published: June 2020
Date last reviewed: October 2020
Date next review due:
Leaflet code:
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