

Worrying about coming out of isolation: It's normal isn't it?



While going into isolation was worrying, coming out of isolation can also cause anxiety for many people. Everyone is different and some people need more support than others.

This is a troubling time for **everyone** and it is normal to worry about what lock-down and isolation means for you and your family. It only becomes a big problem when it stops you doing things you need to and has an impact on the rest of your life.

These hints and tips are designed to help you manage fear or worry and keep it in proportion so you can go about doing the things you need to do.

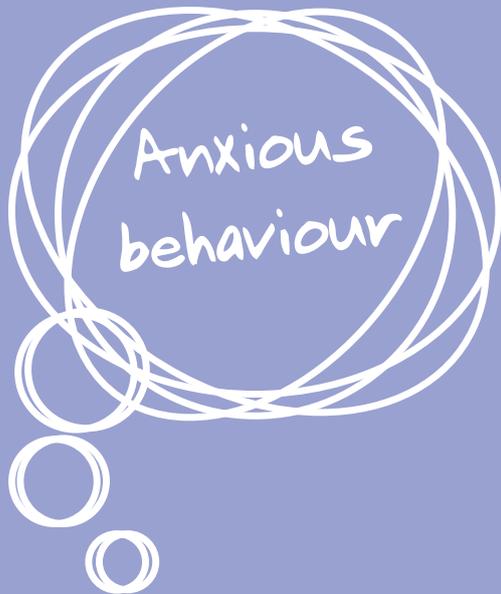
Let's understand that 'stress' response first...

Events that are UNPLEASANT; UNPREDICTABLE and UNCONTROLLABLE generate an alert response. How you respond to this will determine whether you see it as a challenge or a threat. If you see it as a threat, this can make you fearful and fear happens when we believe we can't control events. Stress has three parts:



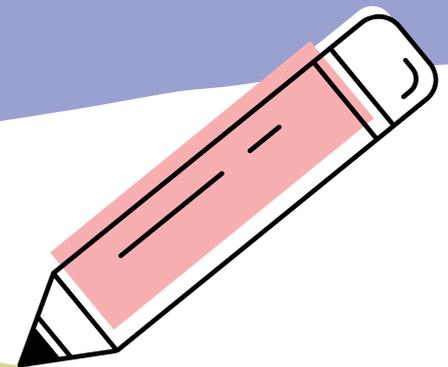
The problem usually starts here, when we are on 'high alert' we begin by giving more attention to things that scare us. For example, you see a number of people waiting outside the post office and think "how will I know if the person in the post office queue has covid-19?", "what if I have a panic attack in the shop?" and so on. This creates that familiar feeling of fear.

You will remember from taking exams, completing your driving test or meeting someone for the first time, the sensations that let you know you are 'on alert'. Stomach churning, heart beating faster, shallow, rapid breathing, sweaty palms, these are all common signs. These symptoms are called the '3 Fs': Fight, Flight, Freeze response. Try to remember back to the last time you felt this response.



These feelings are designed to give us a boost of energy to help us live with challenging events. They tend to make you want to either: 1. Run away; 2. Freeze; 3. Fight off the threat. Once again, these feelings are normal and everyone will have experienced them at some time, but how would you know? Most people manage to hide the feelings and don't usually talk about them as they see them as part of life's challenges. If we want to control our reaction we need to recognise the feelings for what they are and examine which thoughts set off the chain reaction. Keep a diary for a week and see if you can identify any patterns in the thoughts.

Now let's look at how you can manage this behaviour...



1. Think

Given that thinking is a big part of the problem, it follows you can think about **solutions** too. When you learn which anxious thoughts push your specific buttons, either avoid those situations in the short-term if you can, or pace yourself, approaching them in stages. Only you know what these situations are but they usually include encounters with other people which we know as social anxiety. It is not silly to be worried about some situations, you need to understand why they make you worried and what you can do to control your reactions.

Draw all of your attention to things you **can** control rather than what you **can't** control. An anxious mind will wander back to the threat but consciously bring your thinking back to what you are controlling. For example, you can wear a mask, keep your distance and go out at quieter times of the day. You can't control others' behaviour so keep your energy for controlling your own. Gently remind yourself of what you **are** doing to keep the threat manageable. Remind yourself that you have felt anxious before and managed those scary feelings too. Try to remind yourself that the feelings you are experiencing are helpful not harmful, they are your alert system and help you to be aware of what you need to do to stay safe.

2. Plan

Talk to health-care staff about what you really need to avoid and how to stay safe. Once you have a clear idea of what you need to do, sit down and make a plan. Plan the times you will go out, to the shops, to see family, to collect your medicines etc. Tell a family member or friend you are doing this planning, and ask them to help you through it the first few times.

They can support you in a number of ways, by going with you or talking to you before and after going out on the phone to check you are ok. You might even want to arrange a quick call with them half way through the outing to check in. Some people like having the phone as a way of reminding themselves someone is at the other end of the line and helping them manage it.

Sometimes that first step is the most difficult. You might just want to spend a bit more time outdoors but start locally such as just going outside your front door to get started. Make a list of things you might need when you eventually have to go further such as any medication, hand sanitiser, face covering, water, glasses, purse or wallet, anything that you might otherwise forget because when we are anxious we forget things as our mind is so busy 'on alert' dealing with possible threats. Check the list before you set off!



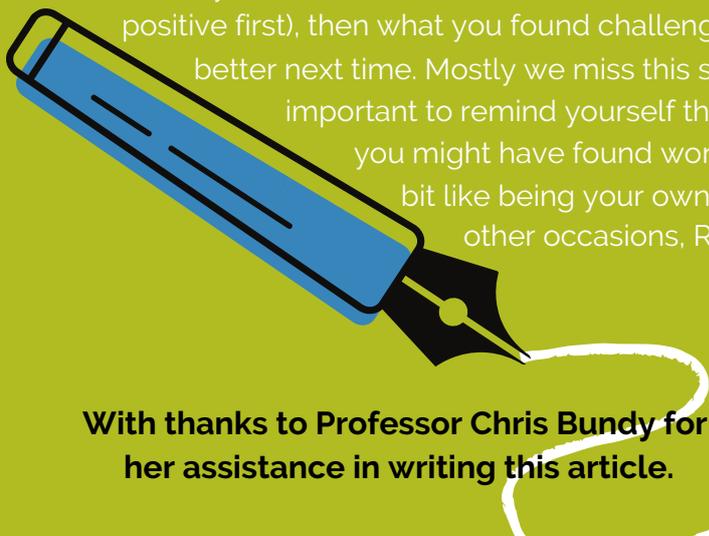
3. Do

Plan a route to your destination, in the safety of your home, plan the route in your head, imagine the trees, houses, all of the usual things you see on the route and concentrate on deep, slow, steady breathing as you mentally take yourself around the route... and back to your home, safely.

When planning, be less ambitious than you would normally be for the first few times, go shorter distances because worry saps energy and you may get tired. When you get tired you feel more stressed and a vicious cycle starts up. **It's always better to do less, successfully, than fail at trying to do more.** You will know when you are ready to stretch yourself and do more. Once you have the confidence to do shorter outings you can build up. For some people this takes more time, for others, when they have done it once they are ok with repeating the outing. Make a plan that works for you.

4. Reflect

When you have been out and returned, make a brief note of what went well (always attend to the positive first), then what you found challenging and how you dealt with it and what you would do better next time. Mostly we miss this step out when doing something challenging but it's important to remind yourself that you thought, planned, and accomplished something you might have found worrying. We call this process 'guided exposure' and it is a bit like being your own therapist as it lays the foundations to be successful on other occasions. Remember, even small steps lead places!



Good luck!

With thanks to Professor Chris Bundy for her assistance in writing this article.