

Looking after your mental health

Coronavirus has brought us not only disease but stress and anxiety. Prof **Brendan Kelly** helps us to understand how to protect our mental wellbeing through difficult times

From the outset, Covid-19 has presented the world with two problems. The first problem is the illness caused by the new virus itself. The second problem is the anxiety and panic that the virus triggers in the minds of virtually everyone who hears about it.

Both problems are very real and both can be solved.

The solution to the first problem – the illness itself – lies in the hands of health authorities, the governments that fund them, and entire populations that are engaged in public health measures such as physical distancing. All around the world, public health officials are using established methods of infection control that were developed during previous outbreaks and are being adapted to this new challenge. By following public health advice, prompt testing of possible cases, and isolating affected individuals, Covid-19 will be controlled.

In relation to the second problem – the anxiety and panic triggered by the virus – there is a great deal that we can do to help us to get through this. These tasks are slightly harder for people who have what are now termed ‘underlying conditions’.

The term ‘underlying condition’ is, however, an exceptionally broad one that ranges from a person who is at home with a perfectly controlled long-term

condition to a person who is admitted to intensive care with multiple serious illnesses and infections.

Clearly, people with any underlying condition like diabetes, need to continue to adhere to their recommended treatment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Self-management of diet and lifestyle is still essential.

Seek medical attention if your diabetes changes or you require advice or services. Primary care teams are still operating as best as possible despite the outbreak. Hospital emergency departments, too, continue to be available for emergency care when needed.

Managing anxiety

There are many things we can do to help manage our anxiety about Covid-19. In the first instance, it is important to stay informed about the pandemic, but not to obsess. Limit your media consumption about the virus to 15 minutes twice per day focused on reliable sources such as the World Health Organization and the HSE. Don’t fill in knowledge gaps with speculation or random musings on social media.

At a time of global anxiety like this, it is useful to try to know yourself better. Take the time to consciously identify the stresses in your life and manage them as best as possible, and identify things that make you happy and optimise these,

albeit within the confines of physical distancing or even self-isolation. Devoting conscious, deliberate attention to these tasks will help you navigate current and future challenges more mindfully and with greater self-knowledge.

Try to focus on what you can control in this situation. This is especially important when explaining Covid-19 to children. It is useful to think of the well-known environmental slogan, ‘Think global, act local’.

Small actions (like hand washing) matter greatly, both in our own lives and in the bigger picture. These small actions also reassure children, who might need additional explanation if they understand you already have diabetes.

Thinking habits

Do your best not to fall into unhelpful thinking habits. It is useful to audit your thoughts from time to time, especially if you find yourself having continual negative thoughts that affect your mood or selectively focusing on bad news. Exercises such as ‘thought-labelling’ can help you to identify negative thought spirals and interrupt them with logic.

Think of others. We gain perspective when we see ourselves as part of a larger whole. Covid-19 has demonstrated just how inter-connected we all are. We can use this connectedness to strengthen each other and consolidate our response

COVER STORY

to this outbreak. The suffering of other people is continuous with our suffering – just as their happiness is continuous with ours.

It helps if you try to become more aware of your emotions. While quarantine, self-isolation, limited social interaction and physical distancing are effective public health measures, they create unusual social and emotional situations with which most people are unfamiliar. Recognising and labelling our emotions helps us to recognise their power and accept them for what they are: transient feelings that will pass.

Don't forget that emotions can disguise themselves as behaviours or facts – and can therefore mislead us. We can have several conflicting emotions at the same time or in quick succession. It is helpful if we practice the skill of sitting with uncomfortable emotions, rather than responding to them immediately. Meditation helps.

Community in the time of Covid-19

Talk to others about your feelings. If you want to be heard, listen. At a time of high anxiety, it is especially important that we label our feelings as emotions (rather than facts) and that we engage in direct, truthful communication. No matter how difficult it might seem, the truth is our strength.

Do not do things that increase panic without delivering any benefit. Follow the public health guidance. It applies to you. Adhering to the guidance will minimise your risk of Covid-19, help protect other people, and help keep your anxiety in check.

Public health advice is based on the best available knowledge. Going beyond the advice can have negative effects, so it is best to follow the guidance provided. There is great consolation in accepting the fact that the World Health Organization and others really do know what they are talking about.

Do other things. While physical distancing, self-isolation and general anxiety can place certain limits on our activities, there is still plenty that we can

do, both inside and outside: eat well, pay attention to sleep, go outside when possible and do some exercise. Also, find an activity that absorbs you and clears all your worries from your mind for a period of time: running, meditating, yoga, knitting or anything that clears and refreshes your mind.

Reward yourself for your achievements and consciously practice compassion for yourself and others. The current situation is difficult for everyone in different ways. Balancing sadness with hope is a real challenge, but it is possible. Focus on daily activities, short-term plans and cultivating compassion for everyone, including yourself.

At all times, remember that proportionality is the key. Even if you have an underlying condition, careful management of that condition will minimise risk, anxiety and distress. We have more control than we think.

Anxiety and panic can seem infinite, but nothing is truly infinite. While we cannot and should not ignore our emotions, we need to respond proportionately to them and leave room for logic, pragmatism and action. The Covid-19 pandemic demands no less. We are always bigger than our anxiety.

Finally, find time to rediscover the value of being with other

people. We all have public and private worries. If we can connect with other people – using whatever technology is necessary – we remind ourselves that we are not alone. We can only manage this situation together.

Brendan Kelly is Professor of Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin and author of 'Coping with Coronavirus: How to Stay Calm and Protect Your Mental Health' (Merrion). The e-book is available on [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk), costs €1 and royalties go to the Irish Red Cross

