

The psycho-oncology team

Managing anxiety about COVID-19

What's a 'normal response'?

We are being asked to take unusual measures to reduce the rate at which COVID-19 spreads in the population. A near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel threatened.

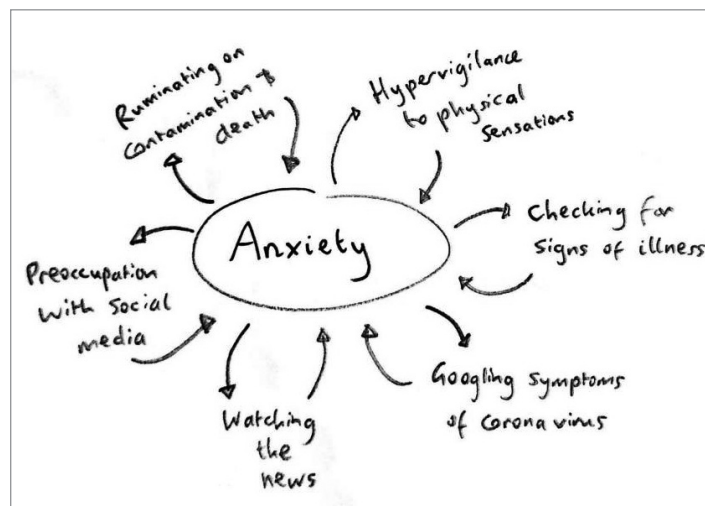
Fear is a normal response to threat. Our fear response is ultimately designed to keep us safe. However, when faced with this level of exposure to a possible threat, coupled with further uncertainty about what the future will hold, this may easily spiral out of control to cause severe anxiety, especially if you already experience anxiety.

Fear commonly involves a 'fight, flight, freeze' response – it is normal to experience feelings of anxiety and panic, for your heart to be racing, your breathing more rapid/shallow, to experience fatigue, concentration and sleep difficulties. You might find yourself preoccupied and overwhelmed with worries about getting the virus, having the virus, and fear for yourself and your loved ones.

What keeps my anxiety going?

With anxiety it helps to understand that what we pay attention to and what we do as a result of the information we gather, can have a considerable impact on our anxiety levels.

The 'vicious flower' model is often used to understand how anxiety is maintained and spirals. So each petal on the flower represents a different type of concern that feeds into your anxiety. For example if you have a tendency to worry about your physical health, you may be more hypervigilant to symptoms, or if you already have a fear of contamination or germs, your sense of threat may increase which will increase your anxiety.



Prevent anxiety from increasing by changing your coping strategies:

1. Limit your news intake to once a day, around the same time (or less if possible).
 - a. Watch a reputable news program which summarises the day's news.
 - b. Get your updates from reputable sources so you are dealing with facts rather than panic related advice from general media sources, see www.nhs.uk
2. Stop googling COVID-19 symptoms. If you have concerns related to your current illness or illness status, talk directly to your medical team.
3. Give yourself a break from social media. Limit your time online and aim to increase the time away from social media news updates to longer and longer, bearing in mind staying connected is important.
4. Thinking about whether you have been contaminated will increase your hypervigilance for symptoms and your anxiety. Instead:
 - a. If you are concerned take decisive action. Decide if you have the main COVID-19 symptoms (e.g. high temperature of more than 37.8° or a continual cough).
 - b. Contact your oncology team or call The Christie Hotline on **0161 446 3658**.
 - c. If you haven't got any new symptoms, give yourself permission to stop thinking about it.

Reduce your anxiety by using anxiety management techniques

5. Be KIND to yourself. It is understandable you feel anxious or low. This is a very uncertain and difficult time and we are all in it together. Anxiety management techniques are most useful when you feel anxiety is controlling you rather than you being in control of it. Anxiety management reduces the bodily symptoms of anxiety and helps to engage your brain's ability to think clearly and logically. This is usually our biggest asset in such situations – and is most available when we are calm and normally active.

Use a reputable/professionally reviewed anxiety management smartphone app or self help leaflet:

- Free app MINDSHIFT which is based on cognitive behavioural techniques to manage the thinking and behaviours that increase our anxiety.
- NHS self-help guide on anxiety, available on www.nhs.uk

a. Grounding techniques

- Establish that you are safe enough right now, by looking around you and naming out loud
 - 5 things you can see (describe them and look at them closely)
 - 4 things you can touch
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste

b. Diaphragmatic breathing

- Deep breaths using the diaphragm rather than the chest and back muscles. Breathe in gently and slowly for 4 seconds, hold for a second and breathe out gently and slowly with a slightly longer outbreath, for about 6 seconds. Do this for about 4 minutes until your breathing slows down and your heart rate returns to normal. You may feel a little shaky or tired afterwards; this is related to the hormones that are released when we experience anxiety and will pass.

c. Brief mindfulness pause

- This is another way of bringing your attention completely into the present rather than the worries and ruminations you have been preoccupied with. MINDSHIFT has a mindful breathing recording and you can find several 3 minute breathing space recordings on www.bangor.ac.uk

Stay connected to what is important to you

6. Anxiety may make us want to hide away. However, recognising we are in it together and maintaining a sense of community can help us feel stronger. So connect, reach out, and find ways to stay in contact.
7. Protect yourself first and be supportive to others where you can. Assisting others in their time of need can benefit the person receiving support as well as you. There are many mutual support groups that have started up to support those in self-isolation and vulnerable people in our communities, see www.covidmutualaid.org
8. Keep focussed on what is important to you and pay attention to your own needs, feelings.
 - a. Keep things in perspective – public health agencies and experts worldwide are working on the outbreak to ensure the availability of the best care to those affected.
 - b. It can be tempting to sit in front of the TV all day and fixate on the awful things happening across the world which will increase anxiety. Focus on the good news too.
 - c. Make a two column list of things you can and cannot control about COVID-19. Keep the list handy to remind yourself to focus your efforts/thoughts on what you can actually do to control this threat. (e.g. self-care, protective and preventative measures such as handwashing/staying healthy).
 - d. Stay connected with others as a priority via e-mail, social media, video conference and telephone.
 - e. Maintain or establish daily routines. Exercise regularly, keep regular healthy sleep/eating routines.
 - f. Engage in healthy activities; what do you enjoy and find relaxing? Think about creative activities and projects. Do remember to pace yourself.
 - g. Find ways to exercise, walk about the house/garden/park or find online yoga/exercise classes.
 - h. Get some fresh air and time outside. Look at the sky, listen to the birds, and connect with nature.

Remember that this period is finite, it will pass and 'normal' life will resume again.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **patient.information@christie.nhs.uk**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



Contact The Christie Hotline for
urgent support and specialist advice
The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week