

A stack of five smooth, rounded stones in shades of brown and tan, balanced on top of each other against a blurred background of a beach and ocean.

Looking after your mental health

Taking care of your mind as well as your body is always important, but now more than ever it is essential to look after your mental health.

For many people it is the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus which is the most difficult part to deal with. But, there are many things you can do—even in the face of this unique crisis—to manage stress, anxiety and fears.

In this short guide, we would like to take you through some tools to help and support you, your team and your family and friends during this time.

Covered in this guide is:

- The 3Ps of Positivity
- Managing Stress
- Meditation techniques to improve mental health



The 3 Ps of Positivity

We may all experience negative thoughts during this time and so it's important to ensure we try and structure our days and weeks to include as many positive elements as we can.

A good and simple way to remember to this is by using the 3 Ps of Positivity.

Positive Interactions - Who are the people that, when you are around them, lift your spirits? People often talk about people being 'mood lifters' (energy givers) or 'mood hoovers' (energy vampires), make sure you continue to catch up with all the 'mood lifters' in your life.

Positive Activities - Try and include as many activities in your days and weeks that make you happy or that you derive some form of benefit. At the moment, this may mean substituting a competitive sport for a competitive board game, or recreating the cinema in your living room - get creative and have fun.

Positive Thinking - This is the hardest of the 3Ps to master, but this is our ability to try and block out, or limit, the negative 'noise' (the news for example) and to actively look for positive, inspiring information for our brains, like books, audible, podcasts etc.



Managing Stress

It is vital for our mental health that we can identify and recognise when our stress levels might be increasing. There are three stages to look out for:

Stage One - the experience of free-floating anxiety. Free-floating anxiety is a vague, urgent feeling of unease or dread. Tension and other symptoms may indicate that your body is preparing itself to either run away or fight, sometimes referred to as 'fight' or 'flight' mode. You can tell when you are in this zone because you overreact to some things and under react to others.

When someone enters free floating anxiety, the best short-term solution is to wind back the stress levels. Making sure you are getting enough sleep is a good option, together with trying to make sure you are eating well and at regular intervals. Also, try if you can to do some form of exercise, even a short walk or some gentle stretching exercises may help. It's important to try and reduce the stress enough to get yourself back to your normal energy levels.

Stage Two - If you remain in the stressful situation by trying to use your will-power, determination and energy you will ultimately move to the second stage of stress which is normally an inability to control your emotions and to motivate yourself. Again, it is important to try and recognise this stage and wind back as much as you can. As well as sleep, eating well and exercise, try and reach out to a friend, family member or colleague to talk through what you are experiencing. It can also help to write down what you are feeling each day to offload some of your thoughts and feelings.

Stage Three - If the stressful situation continues you will then move into the third stage of stress breakdown which has three elements.

1. Firstly, you will find that many forms of stimulation become disagreeable which forces you to withdraw emotionally in an attempt to avoid sensory stimulation. This avoidance may include people interacting with you, music, bright lights and noise.
2. The second symptom is that you may lose the ability to not react to things that in the past would not have impacted on you. Things that you once loved in a person now become a significant annoyance.
3. The third symptom is when it appears that you are undergoing a personality change. This can be very frustrating because often-important issues in your life are ignored and you overreact to what others perceive to be relatively unimportant issues.

If you go through all three stages and continue to try and cope with your stress you may then become ill and this may take the form of a mental illness, emotional illness and ultimately a physical illness.

We would ask that you reach out for help. This link provides a variety of organisations who can assist with mental health issues: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/dealing-with-a-mental-health-crisis-or-emergency/>



Meditation techniques to improve mental health

Meditation techniques can be used to reduce our stress levels and improve our mental health. It is not for everyone but this short introduction to meditation has been created to give a general understanding to help yourself or others in your team. Like most skills, meditation needs to be practised regularly to perfect it.

How to meditate (for beginners)

If you follow the simple steps below and practice the technique at least daily you will find a noticeable improvement, even after just a few days.

- Sit upright or lay on the floor, don't be too comfortable as you may fall asleep.
- Close your eyes, relax your body, making sure you minimise any distractions around you.
- Focus on your breath. Notice how the breath goes in and out of your nose. Observe your body during the breathing. If your mind wanders (which it will initially) just bring your focus back to your breath. Even if the distraction is for a minute or two, just bring the focus back to your breath.
- Initially see if you can keep the focus for around five minutes, that's a good result when you're starting out.

Practice makes perfect, the more you do it the longer you will be able to do it for. Over time the benefits will increase, and your stress levels will reduce noticeably.

The benefits of meditation are significant and include the lowering of blood pressure, heart rate, a reduction in anxiety levels, and of course, stress. We do not need to wind our stress back to zero, just a few notches so that we have it under control.

Other resources to look at, many of which offer a free version or free trials are:

