University of South Australia

Mental Health and Relational Safety in a COVID-19 World

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Overview

1. Strategies necessary for mitigation and elimination have mental health impacts.
2. Why taking a ***trauma informed*** approach can be helpful.
3. Working in sync; getting the balance right with our ***emotional brain*** and our ***thinking brain*** for optimal mental health and wellbeing, and relational safety during COVID-19.
4. Some tips for having a sense of normality when working from home.

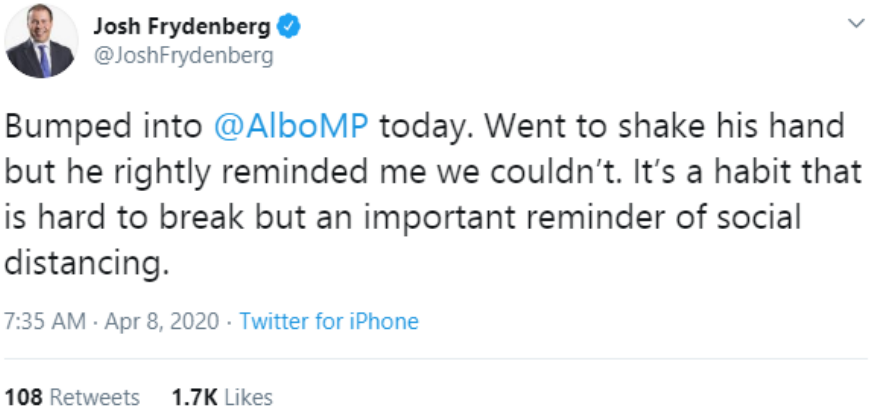
Uncertainty, fear and information overload

- COVID-19 is a hostile disruption to our lives and our core business, triggering fear, uncertainty and danger.
- Information is constant; it’s normal to feel overwhelmed.
- When the nervous system is overwhelmed by stress, it sets off a range of powerful thoughts and emotions, and they can often come and go in waves.

A virus that triggers danger by exploiting the very things that humans do well

- What makes this virus particularly contagious and dangerous is that it uses invisibility to exploit the naturally occurring pathways through which humans interact with each other.
- As humans are ‘wired up’ to come together in close proximity to each other; to work alongside one another in teams, **to embrace, to shake hands and show outward signs of affection**.
- This virus takes advantage of our natural human instincts to threaten us, to prevent us from living a flourishing life, be close to friends, family and colleagues, and to kill us.

A virus that triggers danger by exploiting the very things that humans do well

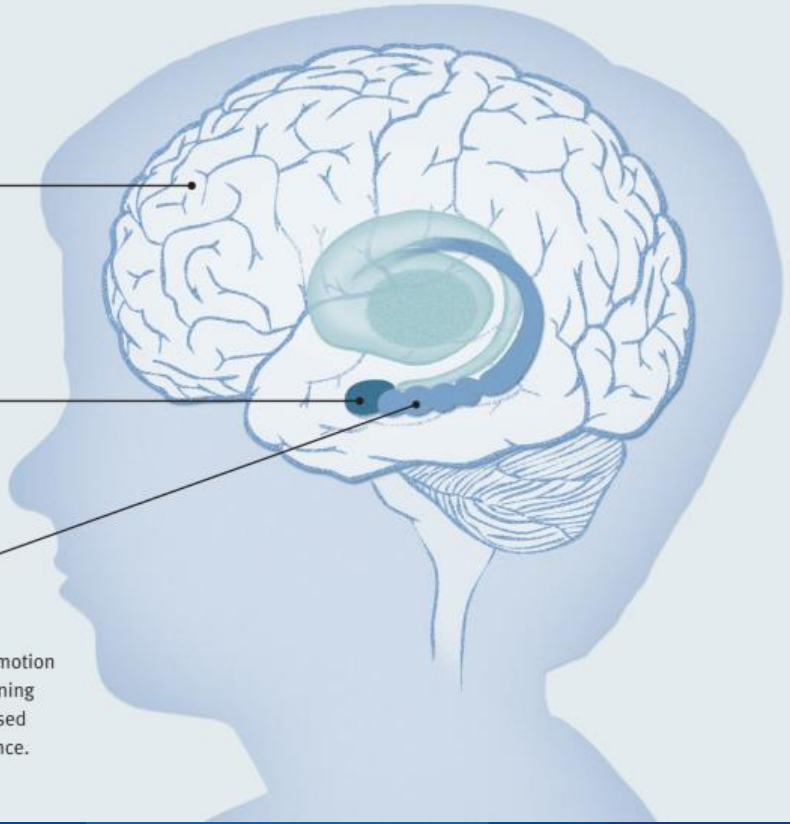


Josh Frydenberg via Twitter 8/04/2020
https://twitter.com/JoshFrydenberg/status/1247646788921823234

Fears and emotions can vary

- For some people with past experience of war, conflict, detention, the experience of the current pandemic can be a triggering to the brain's fear centre – causing a re-experiencing of past traumas.
- Reactions and emotions can and will vary.
- Fear and helplessness, to anger, guilt and shame – moods can swing from edgy and cross to detached and numb – so we need to be self-aware and prepared to find these responses in ourselves, and in others.

Fear and Anxiety Affect the Brain Architecture of Learning and Memory



PREFRONTAL CORTEX
Center of executive functions; regulates thought, emotions, and actions. Especially vulnerable to elevation of brain chemicals caused by stress. Matures later in childhood.

AMYGDALA
Triggers emotional responses; detects whether a stimulus is threatening. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect activity. Matures in early years of life.

HIPPOCAMPUS
Center of short-term memory; connects emotion of fear to the context in which the threatening event occurs. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect growth and performance. Matures in early years of life.

Amygdala: Our emotional brain's fear detection centre

- The amygdala, a tiny almond shaped structure deep inside the brain, serves as its fear center as **the engine room of a threat-related attention bias**, a consistently demonstrated characteristic of anxiety conditions.
- **The key role is to receive all incoming information — everything you see, hear, touch, smell, and taste — and answer the fundamental question: *"Is this a threat?"***
- It activates survival mode. It registers if a dangerous threat is present; it also produces fear in us. When this area is activated, we feel afraid, reactive, and vigilant.

As adults, we have a 24/7, always-on, better-safe-than-sorry *emotional brain*

- Our brain's '24/7, always-on, better-safe-than-sorry' threat detection system fires up at a moment's notice and triggers anxiety, whenever it perceives any threat at all.
- It fires up whether the threat is real or imagined, likely or unlikely, physical or social. It's doing its job. However, its hard to think straight in a crisis.
- **This is why, in a COVID-19 world, trustworthy information, people and reciprocal human connections are essential.**

The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)

- The ACC, or emotion regulation centre, is located next to the prefrontal cortex. This area is responsible (in part) for regulating emotion, and (ideally) has a close working relationship with the thinking centre. When this region is strong, **we are able to manage difficult thoughts/emotions without being totally overwhelmed by them**.

- **Example: April 2020.** A distressed and angry midwife in a moment of rage wanted to phone the pay office about not getting paid for "*working an extra shift and not having her sick leave listed on her pay slip".* Some immediate support - stepping through the issue combined with deep breathing helped regulate her emotion. She then stopped making the call. Those nearby also helped her to manage emotions so she didn't do something she might later regret. When calmer, she realised she never worked an extra shift. Rather, she was overwhelmed about overnight news reports of the death of a midwife in the UK, fearful of getting COVID-19 herself, fearful of infecting her family and fearful of not having adequate sick leave should she become unwell.

Tips for coping

Retain an active *thinking brain* through supportive trusting relationships

- Know your work and healthcare entitlements, what assistance is available and how to access it.
- Talk with friends and family and people you trust about how you feel. Let important people in your life know what is going on. Share how you are feeling. Ask for help.
- Accepting help and support from people who care about you and will listen to you can help a lot. Keeping secrets is very stressful for individuals and family members, and for most people having support and empathy is very helpful in moving through this emotional time.

Adapted and expanded from

https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/faculty-staff-help-center/resources/work-related/coping-emotional-impact-layoff

Tips for coping

Take care of your body and mind

- Exercise is an important antidote for stress.
- Being mindful about your eating and sleeping; it is important in trying to keep yourself functioning as well as possible.
- Maintaining a regular daily routine can be helpful.
- Also be mindful about use of alcohol and other drugs.

Adapted and expanded from

https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/faculty-staff-help-center/resources/work-related/coping-emotional-impact-layoff

Tips for coping

Nurture yourself

- Do something at least once everyday that helps you feel good. This is a time to be compassionate with yourself and to utilise stress reducing tools *that are right for you* that help you to feel calm.
- Try taking a walk, taking a warm bath, talking with someone interested in listening, mindfulness meditation, praying, listening to music or anything else that helps you to feel relaxed and make your situation safer.
- Calibrate media exposure on pandemic. Stick to one or two trusted sources.

Adapted and expanded from

https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/faculty-staff-help-center/resources/work-related/coping-emotional-impact-layoff

Tips for coping

Write

- Write down your ideas, thoughts and feelings.
- Writing can be a very useful way to vent negative feelings as well as clarify or make meaning over any issues that you might be struggling with.
- Journaling, writing in letter form, even list making can help to keep your head clear.
- Don’t worry about trying to make sure you use perfect spelling or grammar. In times like these it’s your thoughts and ideas that count.

Adapted and expanded from

https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/faculty-staff-help-center/resources/work-related/coping-emotional-impact-layoff

Tips for coping

Keep a positive mental attitude

- Stay aware of the messages that you are giving yourself. If you notice you are having self-critical thoughts (e.g., “I will never have anything good again”, “I feel worthless”), it is important to observe this, reach out to others - perhaps tell yourself to stop doing it. These thoughts can consume us and make us feel worse.
- The impact of COVID-19 reveals that we can not always be in control of what happens to us – (the entire world community, really). So take note of things you ***can control,*** work with others as necessary to build upon this.

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Tips for coping

Keep a positive mental attitude

- Remember that nothing ever stays the same, and tell yourself “this too shall pass”.
- Many Australian industries and services will re-build after COVID-19.
- Maintain a hopeful outlook and visualise what you want rather than worrying about what you fear.

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Trauma informed relational safety actions for leaders and managers during COVID-19

Building Trust

- Empathic communication style
- Ensuring an honest approach
- Supporting self-determination, facilitating choice, autonomy
- Helping employees to locate and use key trust networks

Portraying Genuine Care/ Support

- Encouraging ‘step through’ decision making with dignity
- Offering ‘step-through’ practical assistance
- Maintaining a connection through taking the least restrictive pathway

Support services

Adult

Lifeline: 13 11 14

lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467

suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

beyondblue.org.au/forums

MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978

mensline.org.au

Youth

Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800

kidshelpline.com.au

headspace: 1800 650 890

headspace.org.au

ReachOut: Reachout.com

Other resources

Head to Health: mental health portal

headtohealth.gov.au

Life in Mind: suicide prevention portal

lifeinmindaustralia.com.au

SANE: online forums saneforums.org

healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

1800 184 527 qlife.org.au - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex

mhima.org.au - Culturally and linguistically diverse

EVERYMIND Life in Mind lifeinmindaustralia.com.au

https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/lifeinmind/assets/src/uploads/Life-in-Mind-General-help-seeking-card.png

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Life in Mind

About Us | The Charter | News | Events | Contact | Need Help Now?

About suicide | Organisations | Programs & resources | For communities | For the sector | Research

Support for those impacted by adverse events

- **Coronavirus (COVID-19) mental health support**
- Mental health support for bushfire affected communities

- General information about trauma

Support for those impacted by adverse events

Coronavirus (COVID-19) mental health support

The COVID-19 outbreak may generate a range of impacts on community and individual mental health and wellbeing.

This may include preoccupation with specific details related to COVID-19 in addition to increased anxiety, stress or worry within individual families and communities.

https://www.lifeinmindaustralia.com.au/support-for-those-impacted-by-adverse-events/mental-health-support-for-covid-19

Beyond Blue

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Beyond Blue Support Service

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Get support | Personal best | The facts | Who does it affect? | Get involved | Healthy places | Media | Make a donation

Home > Get support > Online forums

Online forums

Before you can post or reply in these forums, please join our online community.

Forum membership is open to anyone residing in Australia.

Join the online community | Community rules | Coping during the Coronavirus outbreak

Forums / Staying well / Coping during the Coronavirus outbreak

Topic: Coping during the Coronavirus outbreak

316 posts, 0 answered

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ... Next Last

Oldest first | Newest first

Sophie_M
Community Moderator

13 March 2020

We recognise that many of us here in the community are feeling scared, worried and overwhelmed about the Coronavirus (COVID19) outbreak.

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https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/online-forums/staying-well/coping-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organicsocial_bb_mar20&utm_demo=all&utm_targeting=null&utm_format=link&utm_creative=illustration&utm_objective=null&utm_id=organicsocial_bb0309

When to seek professional help

- If you are concerned about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one speak with your doctor/ mental health professional.
- Feeling anxious and depressed, having trouble sleeping, not being able to enjoy activities that you are used to enjoying, increasing use of alcohol or other drugs can worsen and persist over time. Seeks help early.
- If these feelings do persist speak with your doctor and/or mental health professional. These times can put a lot of emotional stress on ourselves and our relationships. It may be useful to consult with a mental health professional about this as well.

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Some tips to help you have a sense of normality and work effectively from home

- **Change out of your pyjamas each morning** – While you don't have to dress as formally as you might when going into the office, getting out of your pyjamas can help you get in the right clothing can also help with getting into the right headspace to start your day.
- **Set up a dedicated workspace** – Choose a space away from household noise and activity with adequate lighting to set up your work desk. If possible, use an adjustable desk chair so you can work comfortably. Visit your local Worksafe advice site for tips on setting up a safe workspace.

Adapted and expanded from https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/d7cb8abd-3192-4b8f-a245-ace9b8ef44d5/20APS-IS-COVID-19-Isolation-P1.pdf

Some tips to help you have a sense of normality and work effectively from home

- **Set a strict schedule** – It can be hard to switch-off from work, so it is important to clearly define your working hours, ensuring you have regular breaks.
- **Be disciplined.** Disconnect from all work-related accounts (e.g., remote desktops, email) at the end of your working day to help maintain a clear boundary between your work and home life.
- **Close the door** on your work space at the end of the day.

Adapted and expanded from https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/d7cb8abd-3192-4b8f-a245-ace9b8ef44d5/20APS-IS-COVID-19-Isolation-P1.pdf

Some tips to help you have a sense of normality and work effectively from home

- **Limit distractions** – Being at home can mean you can be easily distracted by other people or tasks (e.g., household chores). Schedule set times where you can take a break from work to complete these tasks, rather than completing them randomly throughout the day where you can lose focus on your work as well as lose track of time.
- **Keep in touch** – Maintain regular contact with your manager/ colleagues (via phone, email or videoconferencing) to ensure you are each aware of your tasks, workload and timelines.

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