

# Managing health anxiety

## Information for healthcare workers during COVID-19



### What the fact sheet covers:

- Impacts of pandemics on mental health
- Tips to manage worries about health
- Where to get more help

### Worrying about your health is normal right now

Studies show that many health care workers are worried about catching COVID-19, for themselves, and out of fear of passing it on to vulnerable clients and/or loved ones.

This fear can be intensified by news stories of other health care workers unknowingly passing the virus on to their clients, with fatal consequences. The mental load of this stress, and the constant vigilance to avoid infection, can be draining.

It is normal to worry about your health, especially now during COVID-19. Since the pandemic started, you might find you're more aware of your bodily symptoms, worrying when you notice a cough or feel fatigued, or find yourself more obsessive with cleaning, hygiene, and distancing.

These concerns are completely normal and experiencing some level of health anxiety is helpful and adaptive. It helps detect illness early, it motivates you to take care of your health, and to engage in the behaviours that help keep yourself and others safe.

Studies from past pandemics show that while health anxiety is common during pandemics, the anxiety is usually transient and resolves once the threat has passed.

However, if you're noticing that anxiety about your health is getting too much, preoccupying you so much that you can't enjoy things, or it's having other negative impacts on your life, there are things you can do to help manage these worries.





## Tips on how to manage worries about your health

### 1. Put in place adequate safety measures to protect yourself

Health anxiety is fuelled by your perceptions of your risk of harm:

- How likely you think it is that you'll contract COVID-19
- How serious you think it would be if you did contract it (and how serious it would be for others)
- How much control you believe you have over preventing yourself from contracting it, or controlling it if you do.

The first thing to do is to control the threat and minimise the potential danger. This includes being accurately informed and having an adequate plan in place for keeping yourself safe at work. This might also mean planning with your family for keeping them safe.

### 2. Limit or avoid unhelpful media and misinformation

Being exposed to constant sources of information can contribute to feelings of anxiety and worry. The news is filled with sensational, alarming, and distressing stories and images. Myths and misinformation can spread rapidly through social media channels.

It might feel like you are staying informed, but if watching the television, listening to the radio,

scrolling through social media, or researching about COVID-19 is making you more anxious, then limit your exposure.

Limit yourself to accessing COVID-19-related information to 1-2 brief timeslots a day, and restrict it to trusted and reliable sources (e.g. the Australian government's coronavirus app). Find the balance between staying informed with the facts, while limiting exposure to information that fuels anxiety and fear.

### 3. Cut down or stop the behaviours that are fuelling your health anxiety

Notice when your anxiety increases, and learn what behaviours contributed to it. If it's related to certain things you are doing then limit or stop these, or replace them with more helpful activities.

Some behaviours known to fuel health anxiety are searching Dr Google, obsessively checking your body for signs and symptoms of illness, and focusing all your conversations around your health worries.

#### *Cutting down Dr Google*

With technology at our fingertips, it's so easy to access free information anytime anywhere. Although it's understandable to check your symptoms and learn about health concerns on the internet, Dr Google can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there are millions of potential sources of information about COVID-19, and other diseases available. On the other hand, this information can cause alarm, anxiety, and fuel fears for your health.



Keep in mind that search rankings are not necessarily reflective of how accurate the information is: usually the top search results are the most interesting, sensational, and reports of rare diseases and illnesses. Limit the amount you are searching Dr Google, and only check credible sources of information (e.g. government websites) and do so with 'scepticism' – keeping in mind that not everything you read will be true or accurate.

### **Shift your attention away from your body**

People who experience health anxiety tend to focus on their body a lot. During this time, we're also being told to 'monitor' our bodies and 'be alert' to signs and symptoms of COVID-19.

While it can help to stay alert for signs and symptoms of illness, you can get into a trap of being excessively vigilant to your bodily sensations and symptoms, which can fuel anxiety. The more you scan, check, and attend to your bodily sensations, the more anxious it can make you feel.

When you focus on your body, you might notice all sorts of different sensations you wouldn't notice if you were focusing on something else and find them more intense and upsetting. When you're alert to threat in your body you can end up noticing only the sensations that confirm your fears (called the 'confirmation bias') and ignore the sensations that tell you your body is ok.

If this is happening to you, try planning other activities that take your mind off your body, and focus on the present moment using mindfulness activities (focus on what you can see, hear, feel, smell, and touch).

### **4. Be aware of negative thoughts and keep your worries in check**

Thoughts can have a huge influence on how anxious you feel about your health. The difficulty with COVID-19, is that there is a real and serious threat of contracting the virus, especially for front line workers.

Learning strategies for managing your worries and keeping thoughts in perspective may help.

- Write your thoughts down on paper (or in your phone)– this simple thing can help you see your thoughts from a different perspective.
- Ask yourself: is there a more helpful way of thinking about this? What would I say to a friend who was in the same situation? How likely is the scenario I'm imagining? What is the most likely thing to happen? Is worrying about this helping? Is it leading to a plan or action?
- Shift the focus from your thoughts to something else (e.g., a fun activity, exercise, talking to a friend).
- Take a step back, and try to let worries pass

### **Helpful online tools and resources**

myCompass

[www.mycompass.org.au](http://www.mycompass.org.au)

Black Dog Institute Online Clinic

[onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

This Way Up

[thiswayup.org.au](http://thiswayup.org.au)

MindSpot

[mindspot.org.au](http://mindspot.org.au)



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