

# A weekly mental health check-in

## COVID-19 mental health resources for health care workers



### What the fact sheet covers:

- Ways to check-in on your mental health
- What to do if you are not coping
- Useful online resources & tools

Many health care workers are overwhelmed, worried and exhausted right now, either directly or indirectly because of COVID-19. Given how extraordinary this time is, it's important to pause and consider how you're coping and how best to keep on top of your mental health.

Fear of transmitting the virus means that many frontline health care workers are distancing from the people they live with. These are generally the people who are the first to notice changes in your mental health. If your work has transitioned to be remote/ from home, it's likely that your colleagues and teammates aren't checking in on each other as much as usual.

So, you need to do this 'mental health monitoring' for yourself at the moment. Here are 6 ways of checking in on how you're doing:

### 1. Feelings

Set a phone alarm or a calendar reminder for a set time each week and do a quick check-in

with yourself. On a scale from 0 ('not at all') to 10 ('extremely'), write down how stressed, anxious or down you're feeling.

It's normal for these scores to fluctuate throughout the day and week, but if your scores are increasing and remaining high, then it's time to prioritise your mental health.

### 2. Body

If you are experiencing stress or anxiety, it can show up as physical symptoms. Take a moment each day to notice any tension in your body, such as tight shoulders, chest, or jaw. Other common physical signs to look out for are dry mouth, difficulty breathing, racing heart and gastro-intestinal disturbances.

### 3. Sleep

Take note of changes to your sleeping patterns, such as difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night or waking earlier than normal with difficulty





getting back to sleep. Sleep disturbance can be a sign that your mind is unable to switch off and relax.

#### 4. Thoughts

Reflect on the thoughts you've been having lately. Are you worrying more than usual? Are you thinking about worst-case scenarios? Have you been wondering if things will ever get better, or if you have the capacity to cope?

Are you focusing on the 'what if' scenarios a lot? If you notice you've been having many more negative or worrisome thoughts than usual, it could be a sign to focus more on optimising your mental health.

#### 5. Reactions/behaviours

During stressful times, you might find yourself reacting and responding differently to people and situations. Are you finding yourself irritable with the people you live or work with? Are you struggling to focus or concentrate? Are you becoming dependent on alcohol or other substances to cope? Are you over or under-eating, or eating mostly unhealthy food? Keep an eye out for these behaviours as they might be a sign you aren't coping so well.

#### 6. Enlist a 'Check-In Buddy'

As health care workers, you've been trained to focus extensively on how others are doing. It can be difficult to accurately identify how you are doing. So, it can be useful to choose a Check-In Buddy to help you keep track of your mental

health. This could be a partner, housemate, friend or colleague – someone that you trust and can be open with.

Schedule a brief, weekly check-in conversation with them and be honest about how you're doing, and listen openly to their feedback.

This might feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar at first, so make it easier by sharing a few simple, concrete examples to illustrate how you are coping in your daily life. For example, 'It's been taking me longer to get to sleep, so I've been drinking more alcohol to wind-down.'

### What to do if you're not coping

If you've noticed signs that you're not coping, there are steps you can take to positively impact your mental health:

#### 1. Get physical

Exercise or physical activity, especially if done outdoors has many benefits. It's been shown to boost mood, increase hopefulness, develop perspective, release tension and improve sleep and appetite. Research shows that even one hour of exercise a week decreases depression and anxiety. The important thing is to do it daily if possible, even if it's only for 15 –30 minutes.

#### 2. Do something enjoyable

Think about the activities that give you a sense of pleasure and/or achievement – and then do one of these each day.





While some of your regular activities might not be available at the moment, consider things like catching the sunrise/sunset, cooking and eating a nice meal, listening to a podcast or music you love, reading a book, watching TV, having a conversation with friends, gardening, watching comedy, baking a cake, doing a puzzle or learning a new language.

Try new things. Enjoy the distraction of being totally absorbed in whatever you're doing.

### 3. Notice and adjust your thinking patterns

Every day brings new challenges. However, it is how you think about these challenges that will influence how you behave in response to them. Try and notice when you're thinking in unhelpful, negative ways. Ask yourself (or your buddy): 'Are there other, more helpful and positive ways that I could think about this situation?' Once you begin to change your thoughts, you can change how you respond to challenging situations.

For example, if you've been re-deployed to a different hospital department due to the virus, you could think of this move as unfair as you had other career goals for this year.

These thoughts may negatively impact the relationships you make with new colleagues, and the sense of reward and fulfillment you take from this new placement. However, if you think positively about the new skills you'll learn in this redeployment, and the important role you're playing for your community, then it's likely

that you'll generate positive interactions with colleagues and find fulfillment in the work.

Changing your thinking changes your behaviours – and this leads to different experiences.

### 4. Stay connected

Some people need a lot of connection with family and friends and others need much less. However, everyone needs some level of positive social engagement to thrive and experience a feeling of general wellbeing.

Particularly in times of adversity, such as now, your relationships contribute significantly to your sense of purpose and meaning in life.

There is evidence that a sense of social connectedness significantly reduces physical and psychological stress responses to stressful circumstances.

So, at this time when we are being asked to physically distance, the energy we put into creating and sustaining social connections is needed now more than ever.

At this time, conversations tend to circle back to COVID-19, which can be distressing and invoke feelings of helplessness, sadness, anger and guilt. In these circumstances, it is perhaps worth giving people some space to vent – and then finding ways of moving discussions onto other subjects.

You could organise a phone catch-up with a friend where you discuss something like a recent



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project, plan a trip for the future, or plan an event for when restrictions have lifted. Having conversations about something other than COVID-19 can help give you perspective and maintain positive social interactions.

Supporting and being kind to others has been shown to benefit the person reaching out just as much, if not more, than the person requiring help. Checking in and connecting regularly with vulnerable colleagues, friends and family is not just good for their mental health – it's good for your mental health too.

### 5. Get professional help when you need it

Fear and anxiety about a virus like COVID-19 can be overwhelming and cause strong emotional reactions. This experience can be intensified for health care workers whose work entails caring for people who are struggling physically and/or mentally with the impact of this virus. In addition, many health care workers are finding themselves financially impacted by the virus, creating a range of associated anxieties. So, if you've been feeling very anxious or down or like you're not coping, or if these feelings are impacting on your quality of life, it's time to get professional help.

There are a range of free and low-cost online programs that you can access from home, anonymously or with the support of a health professional. Telehealth counselling and therapy is now being reimbursed if you have a mental health plan from your GP (which you can also get online).

There are links on the website to help you with this. Before COVID-19, you may not have expected to need a counsellor or therapist,

but these are unusual times requiring unusual responses. To be able to effectively take care of others – as health care workers do – you need to be as physically and mentally well as possible.

### 6. Create a self-care plan

There is no 'one size fits all' way to manage mental health in response to COVID-19. Each person needs a customised plan of action to help track and protect their mental health. You can develop a plan by downloading and completing the self-care planning fact sheet and template.

### Helpful online tools and resources

This Way Up

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

MindSpot

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



### For more information

Visit our website [blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://blackdoginstitute.org.au)

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# Weekly Personal Mental Health Check-in Template

Use the table below to help you check-in with yourself and identify any changes in your ability to cope. If you notice any changes, make a note of what strategies you are going to try, to take care of yourself.

Week: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of check-in	Answer
<b>Feelings</b> Have you noticed any changes in how you have been feeling this week? Give yourself a score from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely) of how stressed, anxious or down you are feeling.	
<b>Body</b> Have you noticed any changes in your own body? Do you have tight shoulders or jaw, tightness in your chest, dryness of mouth, difficulty breathing or heart racing?	
<b>Sleep</b> Have there been changes in your sleep pattern? Are you struggling to get to sleep, waking in the night or waking earlier than usual and finding it difficult to get back to sleep?	
<b>Thoughts</b> Have you been focusing on 'what if' situations? Are you always worrying about the worst-case scenarios?	
<b>Reactions &amp; Behaviour</b> Have you been acting differently to those around you or how you treat yourself? Are you snapping at those you love, finding it extremely difficult to focus, or always depending on things like alcohol or food to cope?	
<b>Check-in buddy</b> Have you spoken to your check-in buddy about how you're feeling this week?	

## Strategies I will try this week

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make a self-care plan  | <input type="checkbox"/> Notice my thoughts and try to think in a helpful way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do physical activity or get fresh air each day                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Try an online course or program                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do something that gives me pleasure and/or a sense of achievement each day | <input type="checkbox"/> Get professional help                                |



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