

Worrying and COVID-19

Worrying is **healthy and a normal** part of life. It can help us **prepare** for the **future** and **anticipate** things. For example, when we come back from shopping we may decide to wash our hands to help prevent the spread of the virus. This ability to **think ahead** and **problem solve** is actually a **handy tool** that we naturally use to make **life easier** for ourselves.

But **worrying** usually comes with **anxiety**, which might build a sense of dread or fear in us. This is **natural** and usually it is **short lived**. How helpful would it be if we felt NO anxiety at all? However, worrying can become **overwhelming** when it is happening **too often**, is about **multiple unrelated things**, and if we struggle to **switch off** from our worries.



What triggers worry?

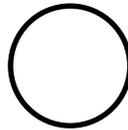
Anything can cause worrying. Even if things are going well, we can still think, “**But what if?!**” Sometimes, an image, a memory, a news story, a conversation, or our favourite TV programme can start off a chain reaction of intense worries.

The very **unpredictable times** we now find ourselves in and the **constant stream** of new information regarding the COVID-19 virus can make this **worse**. It is **helpful** to be **educated** on the pandemic, but the **ambiguity and uncertainty** around it will naturally make us **worried**. The fact that we are receiving daily updates and have access to so much information on the internet can **encourage** us to **chase** our worries and **feed into** them.

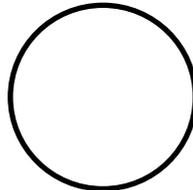
When does worry become unhelpful?

Sometimes, our worry can start small, like a snowball. But then it can lead to another worry, which makes the snowball bigger. Then another worry pops up, making the snowball even bigger. Eventually, the tiny snowball has become an avalanche!

Trigger: A news report



“What if I get ill tomorrow?”



“What if I don’t get better?”



“What if I get coronavirus?”

Ways to manage worrying

Worrying can quickly become **unhelpful**, when it suddenly takes over our **whole day**, and we are no longer able to focus on anything else. We lead busy lives, and even during the current pandemic, there are things we enjoy doing and want to achieve. But if we are spending the **majority** of our time worrying about what might happen in relation to the COVID-19 virus, then we **miss out** on the things that give us a sense of **joy and achievement**.

A)



B)



The mind can be like the above pictures. Sometimes, worries can be all over the place and clutter up, to the point where it feels like we can't do anything (A). What we can do instead is organise our worries, so that we have the space for them and other things, which can make it easier for us to go about our day (B).

The COVID-19 virus has affected all of our lives and we will naturally worry, perhaps even a bit more than what we are used to. The aim is not to switch off all of our worries about it, but learn how to manage our worries so that they do not take over our lives.

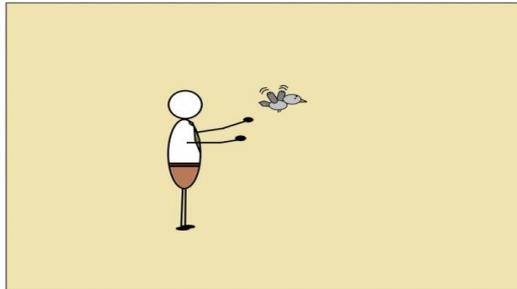
The Nature of Worries

Generally, there are two different types of worries: **hypothetical** and **practical**. And to manage our worries, it is important to first understand what type of worry we are currently having. Each one is managed in a slightly different way.

- **Hypothetical (H):** These are worries about potential future events, which may or may not happen. More importantly, they are out of our control. For example, “**What if the lockdown carries on forever?**”

If it is hypothetical, all we can do is try to **let it go**:

Being kinder to ourselves is important. The nature of worries can almost drives us to try and resolve them immediately. But if what we're worrying about is not currently happening then it is ultimately out of our control. Refocusing our attention on something else can ease up the burden of the worry.



- **Practical (P):** These are worries about current situations that need solutions right now. Also, we are able to control these as they are currently happening. For example, “**What if I forgot to wash my hands when I came home from shopping just now?**”
 - If it is practical, we can try to **problem solve**:
 - We tend to do this naturally without putting a name on it. This includes resolving the worry by developing an action plan to deal with it. We should still be kind to ourselves, and keep in mind how much we can realistically do in current circumstances.



Letting go of hypothetical worries

Part of letting go involves **acceptance**. Namely, accepting what we realistically **can and cannot do** in any given moment. For example, following government guidelines on self-isolation, keeping good hygiene, and phoning 111 for health advice are all within our ability to do to ensure we are keeping ourselves and those around us safe.

Letting go can be **tricky**, as it might be hard to figure out what exactly we can and cannot control. Some useful questions to ask ourselves can be:

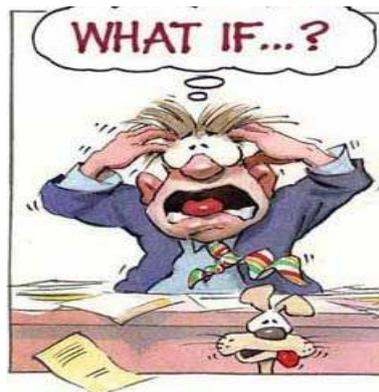
- ***“Can I do anything about it right now?”***
- ***“Is this something that needs a solution right now?”***
- ***“Can I realistically do anything about this right now?”***

If the answer is **NO** to any of the above questions, then it is probably a hypothetical worry.

To let go, things like relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and limiting our chances to worry can be helpful.

How else can I manage hypothetical worries?

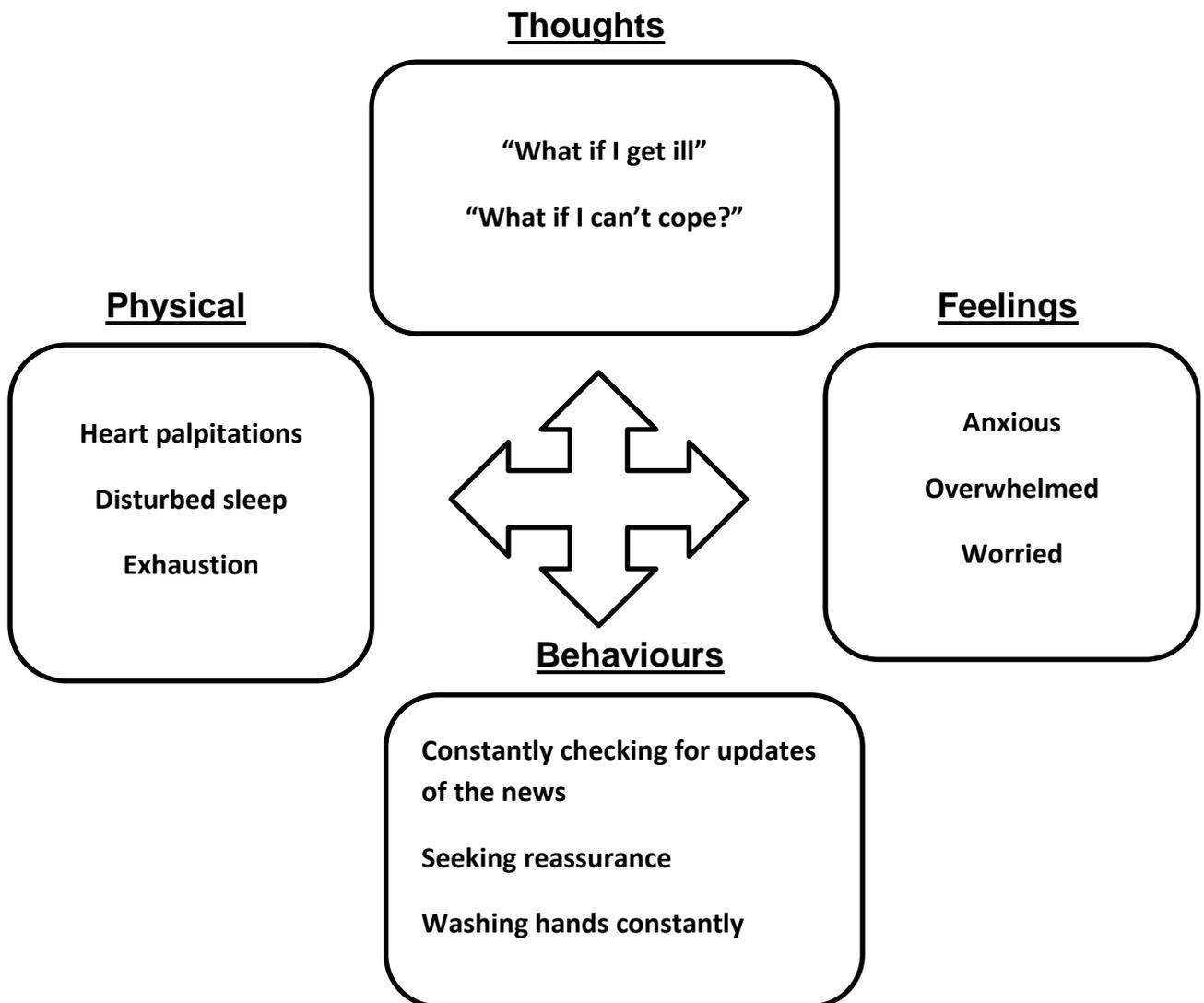
As **hypothetical** worries are usually about **future** events and about things we often do not have control over, we can learn to **let these go** by using a technique called ‘**worry time**’. This is a dedicated time that you will choose, which allows you to focus on those spiralling worries that have come to your mind throughout the day.



How will this help me?

If our minds are constantly **pre-occupied** by worries, it can be extremely difficult to **switch off** from these thoughts. We may even start to feel **physically** and **mentally** drained which means that it can start to impact our daily functioning. When worries come into our mind throughout the day, instead of placing a focus on them, we can

postpone them for the allocated 'worry time'. Here is an example of the vicious cycle of worrying. Excessive worrying can start to affect how we feel, behave and impact us physically, especially at this time when we may be feeling increasingly anxious in relation to the COVID-19 virus.



Worry time- A step by step guide

Step one: Choose what time you would like to set your worry time

- ✓ It is important to make sure this is at the **same time** everyday to help build up a **routine**
- ✓ Make sure this is enough time to go over your worries from throughout the day e.g. 6pm for 20 minutes each day
- ✓ Make sure this time is **free from any distractions**



Step two: Write down your worries

- ✓ When a worry comes into your mind during the day, **write them down** using whatever method you prefer e.g. your phone or on a notepad
- ✓ If worries come into your mind before bed, it will be useful to keep a notepad near you so you can write these down and add them to the 'worry time' for the following day
- ❖ This may be difficult at first, but once you have written these worries down, it is important to **refocus** your attention back to the **present moment**.
- ❖ If you start to recognise your worries are **practical**, then you can use **problem solving skills**. But if not, then you can continue with 'worry time'.



Step three: Re-focusing your attention back to the present moment

- ✓ After writing down your worries, it is important that you refocus your attention back to the present moment
- ✓ **Mindfulness** can help to ground you back to the present
- ✓ You may even engage in any activity you enjoy such as reading
- ✓



Step four: Worry Time

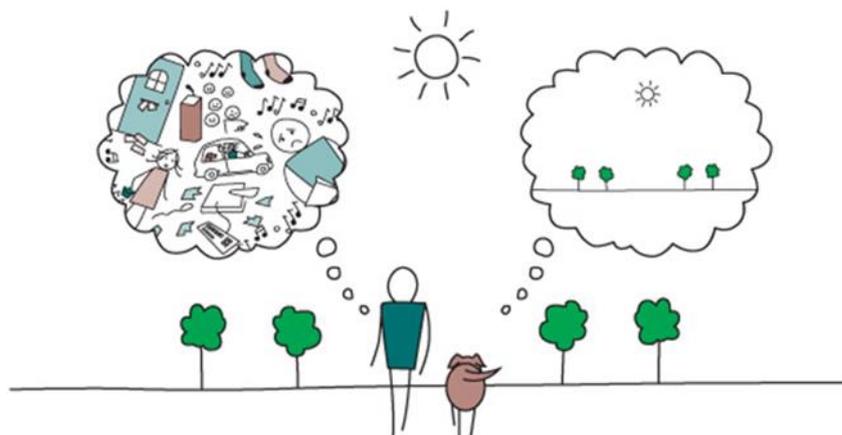
- ✓ Now is the time where you can **focus** on all the things you have been worrying about throughout the day. Below, are some questions that you can ask yourself which you may find helpful during 'worry time'.
 - ❖ ***How did I feel when I wrote the worry down? .How do I feel about it now that i've worried about it?***

- ❖ *If I continued to worry about this throughout the day, would it have made a difference?*
- ❖ *How did I cope, if something I have worried about did happen?*



After working your way through each worry, it is important to **stop** worrying. It may be useful to get rid of the piece of paper or however you have chosen to record the worries after worry time is over. Asking ourselves to stop worrying may feel tough at first, however the more we can practice engaging in worry time, the more we start to feel in **control** of the worries. This gives us more free time throughout the day for the things we want to do and enjoy.

- ❖ You may find the initial length of time you had set for 'worry time' becomes shorter and shorter. **Eventually, you might even find you don't need this at all!**
- ❖ You may start to realise a lot of the things you have been worrying about often **do not happen** or if they did happen you were able to **cope**
- ❖ You will start to recognise that you can **tolerate uncertainty** and are able to learn to **let the worries go** .
- ❖ **Mindfulness techniques can help to ground you back to the present moment again after worry time.**



Mind Full, or Mindful?

Problem solving practical worries

Achieving this would involve a careful consideration of what we realistically can do in the current circumstances, rather than what we might normally do. For example, maybe your partner wants to go out of the house for their daily run with you, but you have already been in the morning. Rather than going out again, a solution could be to plan a specific time where you're both free to do it together. The process can look like this:

- 1) What is the problem?
- 2) What are various different possible solutions?
- 3) Pick a solution.
- 4) What are the advantages of using this as a solution?
- 5) What are the disadvantages of using this as a solution?
- 6) Decide if it is an appropriate solution.
- 7) Do it.
- 8) Review the outcomes.

Some more helpful tips

1. Accept the anxiety, do not try to push it away

The symptoms of anxiety can often feel unpleasant and sometimes it is easier to **avoid** these feelings. It will be useful to **acknowledge** how you are feeling right now as this is **normal**, rather than pushing the feelings away. Take some time out in the day, even if it is for 5 minutes to **check in** on your mental wellbeing.



2. Remind yourself, that you can tolerate uncertainty

Uncertainty and **unpredictably** can often seem unbearable, but can you think of situations where you have been able to tolerate uncertainty or '**not knowing**' what might happen in a situation? This could be in your day to day life and situations which have occurred in the past. The **APPLE** acronym below can be useful in helping you to tolerate uncertainty.

- A**cknowledge Notice and acknowledge the thought or feeling
- P**ause Just pause and breathe
- P**ull back Don't believe everything you think, thoughts are not facts
- L**et go LET GO the thought or feeling
- E**xplore The present moment, your breath and the environment

Change your focus of attention

3. Be more compassionate towards yourself.

During this difficult time, it is normal to experience feelings of **anxiety** and **fear**. We can often make ourselves feel worse by saying harsh things to ourselves such as "I'm being silly" and "I should feel more in control". Instead, it will be helpful to **be kind** to yourself and to look at what you can do to help yourself right now.



References

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