



Ally@UNSW: Looking after your wellbeing during COVID-19



On 24 March 2020, Andrew Addie, a gay guy from the Faculty of Science UNSW had a chat with Associate Professor Jill Newby who is a Clinical Psychologist from the Black Dog Institute and UNSW and does fascinating research in technology-based interventions for depression and anxiety, along with cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness-based interventions.

Andrew and Jill spoke about some things we can do to stay healthy as we work and study remotely.

Question from Andrew:

I am a bit stressed about things at the moment, how should we be looking after our wellbeing?

Answer from Jill:

Many people are experiencing raised levels of anxiety during this period. Some anxiety can be helpful. Research shows that when people worry, they will engage in activities that are more likely to keep the virus at bay such as frequent handwashing.

You should try to channel your anxiety into action. Get informed, plan and prepare. We can feel anxious when events feel out of our control, and when we think we don't have the capacity, skills or ability to cope. Anxiety tricks us into thinking about the worst-case scenarios in vivid and frightening detail. Instead of worrying, try your best to focus on what's under your control. Equip yourself with the facts about COVID-19 from trusted sources. Follow government advice and plan about what you and your family will do if you need to be in isolation, or quarantine.

Limit or avoid unhelpful media and misinformation. Being exposed to constant, alarming, anxiety-inducing stories convinces us that there is something to panic about, and further perpetuates myths, rumours, misinformation, uncertainty and anxiety. The more we read and hear about it, the more frightening it becomes, and the less chance we have to distract ourselves and do things that can take our minds off it. Although it might be tempting to keep informed, or difficult to escape, limiting your exposure to media, news, and social media about coronavirus will help quell the panic.

Cut down or stop the behaviours that are fuelling your anxiety. There are certain actions, when performed frequently, that can fuel anxiety about health, and germ-phobia. Focusing too much on bodily symptoms, and relying on "Dr Google", can consume one with anxious thoughts and panic. Being aware of these behaviours, understanding how they're making you feel, and replacing them with more helpful coping strategies can alleviate disproportionate feelings of anxiety.

Use coping strategies that have helped you in the past when you've felt stressed or anxious. Here are some sensible measures, that can help alleviate anxiety.

Stay focused on the here and now, taking each day step by step.

- Be aware of negative thoughts and don't give them too much power. Thoughts are thoughts, not necessarily facts.
- Look after your body: get enough sleep, exercise, eat well, avoid smoking, excessive alcohol and drugs. These will help protect your mental health and immune system.
- Stay connected with others, so you're not socially isolated or lonely. It can make a huge difference when we share our worries with others and connect with other people who are supportive.

Help other people, be kind, and compassionate: when we help others, it helps us feel better.

If you're feeling like you're not coping, get professional advice, it's ok to ask for help. If you're feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, seek professional support. Psychological therapies can be done online, or remotely via phone or videoconferencing, and are an excellent option if you're in self-isolation, or worried about going to a clinic.

Question from Andrew:

I'm finding myself 'double screening' often: watching the news on TV and scrolling through the news on my phone. How do I cope with all this information coming through constantly?

Answer from Jill:

It is important to stay connected with the advice giving from trusted sources so we know what to do during the COVID-19 situation. But staying connected 24-7 can increase anxiety levels. It is important to plan things that are not in any way connected to COVID-19 such as physical activity or taking a bath, having a chat with friends or family or watching a lighthearted movie. It is time to get creative!

Question from Andrew:

I'm an extrovert and already craving face to face interaction. What tips do you have for staying connected when working or studying in isolation?

Answer from Jill:

People should stay connected electronically and I mentioned - by getting creative. There are many online platforms to do this.

Andrew and Jill suggested the following:

- Online physical exercise apps and videos
- Hold a daily meeting with your colleagues or study buddies where you don't talk about the *you know what*
- Have a group chat for hilarious memes that you come across
- Chat over the fence (if you have one) to your neighbour while observing physical distance

Question from Andrew:

What should I do if I start getting annoyed at being stuck inside?

Answer from Jill:

It is important to plan now things that you can do if you think you might become agitated from being inside. Self-care plans are a useful tool that you can prepare now and come back to in the future. This could include a mix of activities ranging from physical activities to colouring in books to meditation.

Question from Andrew:

What should people do if they were already experiencing anxiety and/or depression?

Answer from Jill:

If people were already experiencing anxiety or depression it is important to continue care plans. Most general practitioner and psychological services have transitioned to being delivered online. People should contact their relevant services for how their services now work or will work.

Question from the audience:

What advice do you have for looking after children's mental health?

Answer from Jill:

It is important to communicate with children about what's happening in an age appropriate way.

Dr Aliza Werner-Seidler, Senior Research Fellow and Clinical Psychologist at Black Dog Institute shares some helpful tips and strategies to reduce COVID-19 related anxiety in children and explains how to support their wellbeing during this time. Read here: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/news/news-detail/2020/03/22/coronavirus-reassuring-your-child-about-the-unknown>

UNSW researcher Dr Ariana Krynen has put together a short video that explains ways to talk to children about COVID-19: <https://www.facebook.com/UNSWScience/videos/526025058333550/>

In short:

1. Model Calmness
2. Provide age Appropriate Education
3. Validate their feelings
4. Limit their exposure to news & social media
5. Teach them every day practical actions
6. And most importantly, be positive and be kind

Question from the audience:

How do we keep ourselves motivated when we are feeling overwhelmed? Especially with the things like checking in on people, redesigning our way of working and studying and the overall change in routine?

Answer from Jill and Andrew:

Acknowledging that you are feeling overwhelmed is important. Now that most of us are in our living and working in one place tasks can pile up into one big list.

A great way to reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed is to break down things into small bit sized pieces. An example of this is to do tasks that are quick to complete first i.e. if it takes less than 2 minutes to complete then try doing it straight away.

Question from the audience:

Do you have a list of mental health services available online?

Answer from Jill:

There are several excellent websites which provide a range of helpful tools, resources and information sheets about how to manage anxiety, stress and low mood. These include:

- **The Black Dog Institute** provides free online mental health programs (myCompass: <https://www.mycompass.org.au/>) and screening tools (<https://onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au/>) to direct you to helpful resources (<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/>)
- **The Centre for Clinical Interventions** provides self-help resources for a range of problems ranging from worry to procrastination (cci.health.wa.gov.au)
- **This Way Up** provides free and low-cost online cognitive behavioural therapy programs for anxiety and depression, and stress management (www.thiswayup.org.au)
- **Beyond Blue** provides free information and resources related to mental health (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>)
- **Lifeline** provides anonymous telephone counselling services and crisis support (13 11 14)
- The THIS WAY UP Boosting Motivation guide is here: <https://thiswayup.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/This-Way-Up-Boosting-motivation-guide.pdf>
- We have an Employee Assistance service at UNSW for staff: <https://www.wellbeing.unsw.edu.au/eap-benestar>
- For some info about the new Medicare items I mentioned for telehealth: https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/covid-19-national-health-plan-primary-care-bulk-billed-mbs-telehealth-services_2.pdf

Question from the audience:

I am worried about being attacked when I wear a facial mask on the street. How do I manage this?

Answer from Jill and Andrew:

It is critical to stay safe. If you do not feel safe entering public (being physically distant) then it could be useful to do so with a friend or family member. Any instances of violence should be reported to the police immediately by calling 000.

There are online resources to help reduce anxiety around going into public.

Question from the audience:

When would you recommend seeking psychological help versus using online resources, what are the signs and symptoms that should alert me that I should seek help?

Answer from Jill:

If you think that you need to access medical or psychological services, then you should. What works for people varies which you can explore by talking to a General Practitioner or using a scientifically backed online service such as Beyond Blue <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support>.

Question from the audience:

Going to the supermarket is very stressful especially because some people are not observing physical distancing principles. How do I manage the increasing anxiety of people in my personal space when I'm running errands or getting out for physical activity?

Answer from Andrew and Jill:

It is suggested to avoid going to crowded public spaces during busy times when possible, but for some people this may not be possible for a range of reasons. It is important to follow the advice from health organisations. <https://preview.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/social-distancing#simple-steps-for-social-distancing-can-make-a-big-difference>. Be clear with your communication both verbal and non-verbal to people that are not practicing physical distancing. It is okay to ask someone to wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

Question from the audience:

With so many young people losing their casual employment at alarming rates which can cause further social isolation which triggers depression and anxiety. This can be particularly an issue for young people spending more time with families, who may not be supportive of their LGBTQIA+ identity. How should people deal with this?

Answer from Jill and Andrew:

These are important questions. People that lose employment will most likely experience anxiety. The current situation is that many people are in the same boat and support for people affected is being prepared by the government. There are a lot of unknowns at the moment so keep an eye out for relief packages that are being regularly announced.

Answer from Andrew regarding isolating with people that may not be supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community:

We know that prior to physical isolations people with a diverse gender, sex or sexuality are more likely to be facing hardships which could be exacerbated. I recognise that people may be isolated in places where they are not able to be their true selves. This is not ideal but people in this situation should make safety their priority.

Research shows that when we (LGBTQIA+) are 'out' we are less likely to experience anxiety and depression. However, especially in extraordinary times it is quite simply not possible for some LGBTQIA+ people to be 'out'. So, to protect ourselves we stay in the closet.

From my experience despite being openly gay and very active in advocacy I still find myself from every now and then not revealing who I am to people. I surprise myself how far I can carry a conversation about NRL. I used to get really frustrated when I would do it but as I get older, I realise that sometimes it is a wise thing to do. My safety is the most important thing, and I extend a warm invisible hug to whoever must hide their diverse gender, sex and sexuality to get through periods of isolation.

I'd suggest accessing online resources discretely to help you out. A few that have helped me and people I know in the past include:

- QLife provides Australia-wide anonymous, LGBTI peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about a range of issues including sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.
- Twenty10 works with people across Sydney and New South Wales who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, non-binary, intersex, questioning, queer, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) people and others of diverse genders and sexualities, their families and communities.
<https://www.twenty10.org.au/get-support/>
- The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices.
<https://gendercentre.org.au/about-us>