Anxiety is a normal response to a threat like a virus. While worry is generally a negative feeling, it does serve a purpose of warning us that something isn't right. It's one of the ways our brain tries to hep us be more alert, create a plan and respond quickly to a threat.

As the COVID19 Pandemic and its far-reaching implications continue to unfold globally in our community, it's normal for people to experience a wide range of thoughts, feelings and reactions including:

- Feeling stressed or overwhelmed
- Anxiety, worry, or fear
- Racing thoughts
- Sadness, tearfulness, loss of interest in usual enjoyable activities
- Physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, stomach upset, fatigue, or other uncomfortable sensations
- Frustration, irritability, or anger
- Restlessness or agitation
- Feeling helpless
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Apprehension about going to public spaces
- Trouble relaxing

It is totally understandable to be feeling these things in the face of such a significant challenge. There have been rapid changes to our way of life in the way of work, social gatherings, study and also disrupted travel plans and restrictions put in place due to social distancing measure in our efforts to stop the spread.

People are feeling naturally concerned for their own and their loved one's health and safety but reacting from a place of panic and fear is usually unhelpful, especially in the long-term. Looking after our wellbeing in times like this can help to reduce the anxiety and stress and is crucial to enabling us to still take calm and effective action in the midst of this global crisis.

Minimising Anxiety

Ways to minimise anxiety, stress and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- Limit exposure to media and implement breaks from watching, reading or exposing yourself to all of the news stories, including social media. Constantly hearing about the pandemic without giving your mind something else to concentrate on can be very upsetting.
- Self-care – take care of yourself, mind and body. Take deep breaths, have a stretch, do a meditation. Try your best to eat healthy, well-balanced meals and exercise regularly. Get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs
- Allow yourself time to unwind – try to do some other activities that you enjoy
- Keep connecting with others – talk with people over the phone or technology about your concerns and how you are feeling.

While our brain is signaling to our body that something is wrong it believes it is being attacked. To counteract this, we need to get up and move. Grounding yourself through your five senses can also kick-start your mind so that it can have a time of distraction from that topic and everything else that's going on.

Make sure that any information you are finding is from a credible source as stressing yourself out with rumours is not helpful. Understanding the actual risk of COVID-19 to yourself and people you care about can make the outbreak less stressful Australian Department of Health

There are steps you can take to help with your anxiety when you feel out of control or uncertain and that is to focus on the actions that are in our control.

Protect yourself and others from COVID-19

We have been recommended important actions from the Australian Department of Health to implement to protect us against infection and prevent the spread including practicing good hygiene, self-isolation and social (physical) distancing.

During an outbreak, proper hand-washing is your best defense against a virus. Follow the evidence-based advise to wash for 20 seconds or more using soap and water and use hand sanitisers. If addition forego hugging and hand-shakes and embrace 'low-touch' solutions such as the elbow bump.

Acknowledge your feelings

Whatever you are feeling right now is okay. Allow yourself time to notice and express what you are feeling. Try talking with others or journaling your feelings or channeling your emotions into something creative such as drawing, music, painting. Mindfulness or meditation exercises can help us stay grounded in such an emotional storm. You can let your thought and feelings come and go as they need in their own time without getting overwhelmed by them.

Maintain your day-to-day activities and a routine as much as possible

Having a healthy routine can have a positive impact on your thoughts and feelings during this time of distress. Go back to basics: eating healthy, doing some exercise, getting enough sleep and doing things you enjoy.

Prioritising good sleep is necessary as research has shown that well-rested people are better at fending off viruses. Exercising and eating well is always good advice but worth emphasising during times like this. Daily exercise can help promote feelings of well-being and boost your immunity. Physical activity also protects against symptoms of anxiety. What you eat also improves your outlook and a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean protein helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Even if you are in self-quarantine or working from home there are ways to look after yourself. Its natural during this time of change for our minds to focus on the usual activities we may not be able to do at the moment so make a conscious shift to focus on things you can do or those that we may have more opportunity to do now we are home more often. Some ideas could be to:

- Keep learning and maintaining your study
- Read a book
- Listen to a podcast
- Try out a new hobby or skill (e.g., cook a new recipe, play an instrument, learn a language, learn how to sew, gardening)

Planning your day is a good idea as the disruption to your normal routine can be stressful. Spend time writing down how you want to spend your day as creating and sticking to a new routine will give you a sense of order and normality.

Feel productive by making a list of all those things you always mean to get done but never get around to. It could be sorting your wardrobe, fixing things around your living space or clearing the yard. These types of tasks can make you feel productive and give you a sense of accomplishment. Cleaning up your living space can also make you feel calmer and more positive.

If you want to take time off to rest and not be productive that's also fine. Listen to your body.

Contribute

Showing care towards family, friends, colleagues or vulnerable people in our community is even more important during times like this. It can foster a sense of hope, purpose and meaning. Some ideas can be to:

- Send someone you care about a message of encouragement or affirmation
- Cook, pack and deliver a meal to someone in your neighbourhood
- Donate to a cause.

Stay connected

Remember that physical distancing does not need to mean social disconnection.

Phone calls are great to stay connected but seeing someone's face can make a huge difference and lift your mood and make you feel less lonely. Finding a positive online community where you can make friends, get inspired and chat about things you care about is a great idea. Remember to try and reach out. You are probably not the only person feeling worried, bored or frustrated. It's a good time for a catch up, so don't be afraid to make the first move and reach out to someone you haven't heard from in a while. Send them a message and let them know that you care.

Stay Calm

Mindfulness – there are a lot of great free apps you can use to guide you through breathing techniques and meditation that can help ease your anxiety and clear your mind of anxious thoughts. Do a google search and you will have a choice of what is on offer. Also trying yoga as a way to relax and also get some gentle exercise can boost your mood. There are lots of YouTube videos you can use to suit your ability and level of mobility.

Set limits around news and social media

Finding credible sources during this time is so important to avoid the fear and panic that can be caused by misinformation. Its understandable to want to keep informed and prepared but at the same time constantly reading, watching or listening to upsetting media coverage can unnecessarily intensity worry and agitation. When you feel like checking updates, try to pause, notice the urge and delay acting upon it and let it pass without judgement. Schedule a specific time to check in with the news instead. Its also okay to take breaks from conversations with others about COVID-19 and suggest talking about other topics in order to give your mind a break.

It is important to be in the know but we don't want you obsessing over the news. There is a point where information gathering could become problematic and have the effect of increasing your anxiety and fear. Mindfulness is very effective at reducing stress and anxiety.