



Looking after your wellbeing during COVID-19: Advice For Older People

This advice is for those who are self-isolating at home and is written with older people in mind

Acknowledgements

This resource was written by the NHS Lothian Older People's Psychology Service. The ideas in this resource have been adapted from a number of useful guidance documents including:

- Division of Clinical Psychology Faculty of Psychology of Older People Guidance Paper: 'Supporting older people and people living with dementia during self isolation' (British Psychological Society, 2020)
- Coronavirus Isolation Psychological Advice: 'Tips on how to cope if you are worried about Coronavirus and in Isolation' (NHS Scotland, 2020)

Contents

KEEPING WELL DURING SELF-ISOLATION.....	3
Routine and activity.....	4
Notice how you feel.....	5
Connect with others.....	7
Learn.....	8
Give.....	8
TIPS TO SUPPORT YOUR EMOTIONAL WELLBEING.....	9
REDUCE THE CHANCES OF CATCHING OR SPREADING CORONAVIRUS.....	10
PRACTICAL SUPPORT.....	11
MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES.....	12

SUPPORT DURING COVID-19

These are unprecedented times and it is true that as humans we have never encountered this new coronavirus (Covid-19). However, as individuals we have experienced challenges and adversity before. As a species we have evolved to be able to deal with all sorts of threats. So we have the skills within us that we need to get through.

The tricky part is that when we are faced with overwhelming threat, our natural response can be fear, anger or feeling too overwhelmed to do anything. These can be really helpful in dealing with short term problems, but if we live with those kinds of feelings a lot of the time for a long time, they have an effect on our mental health and even our immune system.

We are sociable creatures so being in isolation is very challenging. It is common to feel more on edge than usual. If you have had difficulties with your mental health then it is worth being aware that you may feel worse for a period of time. Isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, frustration. It can throw up practical difficulties (e.g. with food shopping and necessary errands). To come through this well, we need to have the courage to turn our attention to the challenges and difficulties we are facing, and then do something about them. The key thing to remember is that most of us can adapt quickly to situations and negative feelings pass. There are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better and more in control of what happens.

This booklet is designed to help you look after your mental and physical health as well as possible during this time.

KEEPING WELL DURING SELF-ISOLATION

The Government has responded to concerns over the spread of coronavirus. They have asked all of us to strictly observe social distancing measures to limit virus transmission. Those aged 70 or older are considered more vulnerable to severe illness from coronavirus. People with an underlying health conditions have been asked to self-isolate for 12 weeks.

Self-isolation can result in increased distress. You may be dealing with separation from loved ones, major changes in routines, and worries about your own health or the health of your family. Confusion, anger, depression and anxiety are common feelings in those who have had to endure quarantine for a number of weeks or months. The effects of self-isolation can be worsened by longer duration, frustration, boredom, stigma, and inadequate supplies or information. If you are struggling with these feelings, then you are not alone. These reactions are normal for anyone facing this abnormal situation. The ideas that follow can help you live as well as possible during self-isolation

ROUTINE AND ACTIVITY

When you are at home more you may find that you fall out of your usual routine. If you have noticed changes in your sleep pattern, eating habits and day-to-day activities, this is quite normal. For most of us, our routines have changed significantly in recent weeks and it takes time to adjust to this new way of living.

Routines and structure offer predictability, and a sense of normality. This is important when other things in life feel uncertain. Over time, it is important to try and develop a new routine or maintain as much of your previous routine as you can. This will have a positive effect on both your physical and mental wellbeing. **The following tips can be helpful:**

- ❖ **Aim to go to bed and get up at the same time each day**
- ❖ **Eat regularly and healthily**
- ❖ **Make physical activity a regular part of your day**
- ❖ **Make a 'to do' list each day with some achievable tasks or goals to keep you going. If struggling to get started in the morning, write it the night before. Some find putting a time down to do each thing can help.**
- ❖ **Build in regular periods of rest or 'down time' each day to relax and unwind**
- ❖ **Take time to do things that you enjoy (e.g. speaking on the phone to friends or family, reading, gardening, or trying something new)**
- ❖ **Schedule a specific time to watch, listen or catch up on news but limit this to once per day if it leaves you feeling overwhelmed or frightened**

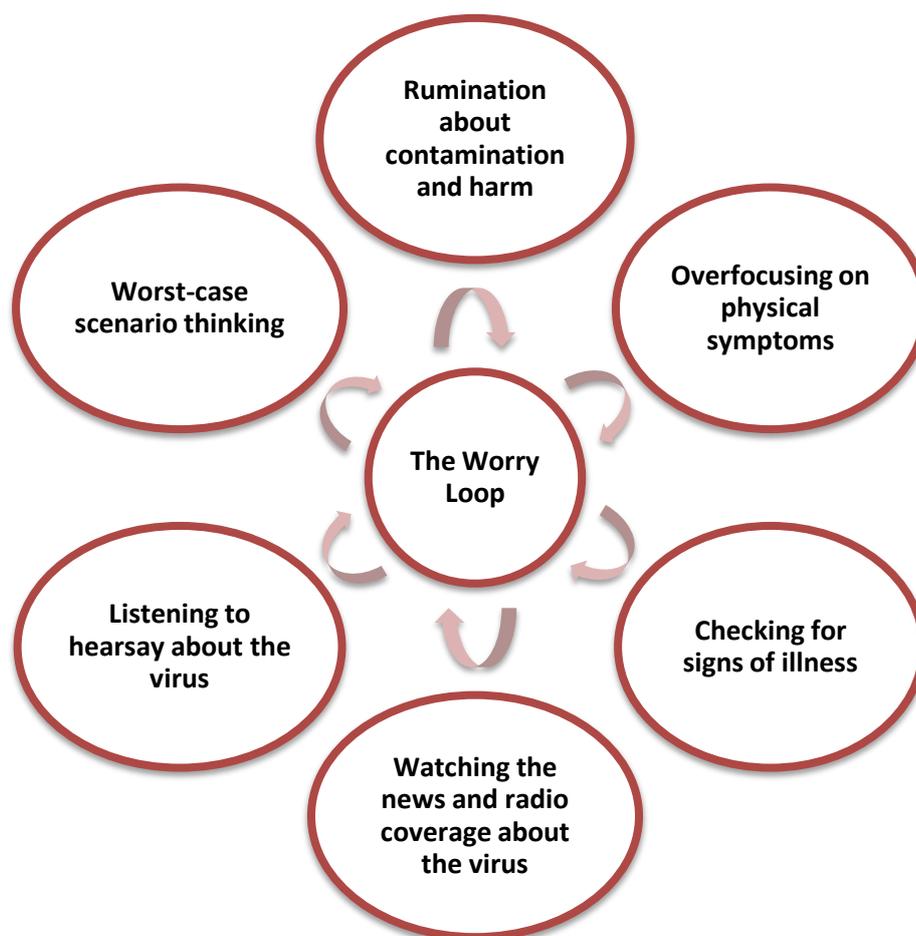
You may find during self-isolation that your confidence to try new things is reduced. You might believe that the way you feel is inevitable given your age and that there is very little you can do to change this. However, making conscious choices about our behaviour can boost our mood. As little as 10 minutes of exercise a day can make us feel better, both physically and emotionally. **You may want to try the following:**

- ❖ **Exercise:** There are lots of free exercise programmes/sessions available on the internet or on apps on your smartphone. You may want to ask for assistance to access these. You could try yoga, tai chi or other martial art practice, or increase your movements from your armchair. Other activities with mood-boosting effects include housework, gardening, using the stairs if it's safe to do so, dancing round the house and safely going for a walk.
- ❖ There are lots of ways you can **stimulate your mind** during self-isolation. Jigsaws, puzzle books or games, reading, colouring books for adults, painting or drawing, singing along to your favourite song, playing a musical instrument, sorting out your finances, cooking or baking and craft activities.

NOTICE HOW YOU FEEL

Humans have a unique ability to think about events that have not yet happened. This 'thinking ahead' can be useful in helping us to plan, problem-solve, and look forward to future events. However, 'thinking ahead' can also mean we spend lots of time thinking about situations that may never happen, are not in our control, or have us imagine worst-case scenarios. This sort of 'thinking ahead' usually causes anxiety or fear and we would call it 'worrying.' **This can be seen in 'The Worry Loop' diagram below.**

The Worry Loop



A good way to combat worry is to:

- ✓ notice your thoughts and feelings - 'I seem to be thinking a lot about X'...
- ✓ identify things that **'feed'** your worry - get them out in the open
- ✓ Identify things that **'fuel'** your coping – then think about what could help right now
- ✓ Focus on 'savouring the moment'. This is called 'mindfulness' and has been found to enhance wellbeing. **You might find the following helpful:**

Ideas for being mindful - in the moment:

- ❖ **Breathing or meditation exercises:** You can find lots of free exercises on the internet or through apps on your smart phone e.g. apps like 'Calm' and 'Headspace.' Ask someone to help you if you have difficulties accessing the internet. It might give them ideas too!
- ❖ **Self-care** is important during self-isolation: Shower or bathe frequently and take time to notice the sounds, smells and sensation of the water on your skin; do your hair and nails; use hand cream or body lotion to maintain suppleness and notice how it feels.
- ❖ **Mindful eating:** Lay the table or tray for your meal and focus on the sight, smell and taste of your food.
- ❖ **Reflect** using music, prayer, the outdoors, silence; take a few moments to be thankful, notice and appreciate beautiful things around you.
- ❖ **Lowering tension and stress in your body** is also key to tackling worry because you cannot feel relaxed and worried at the same time! You can find tips on relaxation in the next section.

Other ideas for managing negative feelings can be seen in 'The Wellbeing Loop' diagram below.

The Wellbeing Loop



CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Feeling lonely can be a difficult experience during self-isolation. This can be true if you live with others as well as on your own. Humans are designed to connect with others. Being physically separated from our friends, families, neighbours and the wider world can lead to a real sense of disconnect, loneliness and low mood.

Being 'connected' is linked to better wellbeing. It gives us a sense of belonging and self worth and is a source of emotional support. Connecting with others in the same physical space is difficult during self-isolation. You may have supported your family up to now by looking after grandchildren and find that you can no longer do this. You may feel that your self-isolation is causing your family more worry. You might be wondering what all the fuss is about and have had some disagreements with your loved ones about this.

If you live with a partner or family members, spending a lot of time together can highlight tensions and challenges in relationships. It is important to consider how to manage stress that can come from this. Talk to others about how you are feeling. Be open and honest. Others are probably feeling the way you are too.

Technology provides us with some solutions but it is not a substitute for actual contact. You may also take time to connect more with yourself, nature, nations, pets and/or spiritual needs. **The following can be helpful:**

- ❖ **Switch on the television!** Watching a favoured television programme and reading a good novel have been found to reduce feelings of loneliness;
- ❖ **Maintain social contacts** over the telephone
- ❖ **Video conference:** FaceTime, Skype and Zoom are platforms for seeing and speaking to loved ones at the same time. Although telephone is great, seeing facial expressions can help people feel less lonely. You may need some help from a loved one to put this in place
- ❖ **'Create warmth'!** The same parts of the brain are activated by heat, and by warmth from interpersonal contact. Creating opportunities for heat e.g. a hot drink and warm bath can mimic the effects of touch and increase our sense of connectedness
- ❖ Spend time in **nature**
- ❖ **Revisit old photos/family films and share memories:** Nostalgia has been found to enhance feelings of security and reduce loneliness
- ❖ **Email** a different friend each day and make time to respond
- ❖ **Write** a card or letter to a friend and ask a neighbour to post it for you
- ❖ **Discuss your worries** with a friend or with your therapist/psychologist

LEARN

Learning new skills can help lift your mood, boost your self-esteem and give a sense of purpose. Setting yourself goals can help you see even greater benefits. It is also helpful to have good information about the reason for your social isolation:

- ❖ Get advice from NHS and read public health guidance to gain facts and dispel fear
- ❖ Research online something that you have always wanted to know more about
- ❖ Learn new words/look up definitions in the dictionary
- ❖ Create a book club with friends/loved ones and discuss books over the phone or video conferencing
- ❖ Challenge yourself to complete new puzzles, crosswords etc
- ❖ Learn to play a musical instrument
- ❖ Learn a new language

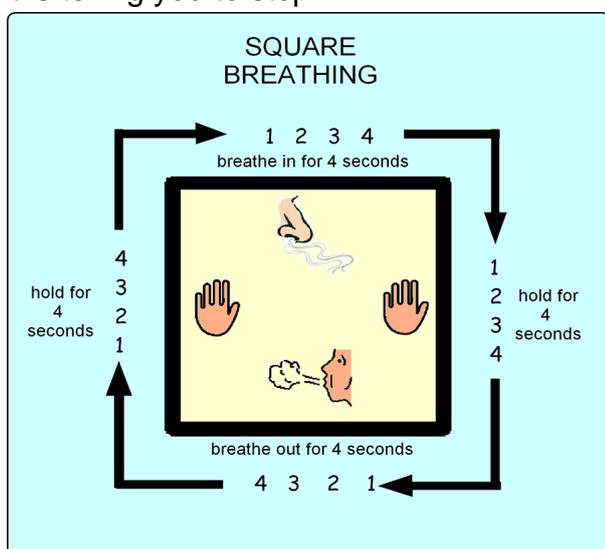
GIVE

Giving gives people a sense of reward, purpose and self-worth. Those who give to others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. You might feel it is hard to give to others during self-isolation. However even giving a smile, encouragement, a bit of your time, a wish/prayer, thanks, and other 'random acts of kindness' has the power to boost your mood. Reading and learning about ways that others are giving can also boost our sense of wellbeing.

TIPS TO SUPPORT YOUR EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

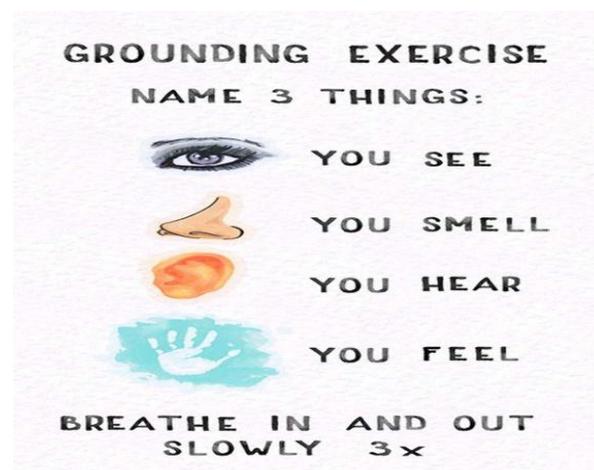
Breathing Exercises

Below is a quick and easy breathing exercise to use if you begin to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or anxious. It works to slow your heart rate and control your breathing to manage the physical effects of stress and anxiety. Just be cautious if you have any lung or respiratory conditions. Be sure to listen to your body if it is telling you to stop.



Grounding Exercises

When things seem uncertain, it is common to find ourselves looking to the future, imagining worst case scenarios, remembering difficult memories or having obsessive thoughts. While this is normal, it is not particularly helpful and can lead us to feel more anxious and worried. Try to notice when you might be doing this, and then practise the exercises below to see if you can connect to the present moment instead.



Quick Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Find a quiet place free from distractions. Lie on the bed or recline in a chair. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Take a few slow even breaths. Now, focus your attention on the following areas. Work through the following parts of the body one by one, squeeze the muscles, hold for 15 seconds, feel the muscles getting tighter and tenser, then slowly release the tension. Notice the difference in feeling and sensation between tension and relaxation.

(Avoid any areas where you have an injury or pre-existing pain)

- ❖ **Forehead** (raise your eyebrows as high as they can go)
- ❖ **Jaw** (grit your teeth or jut out/clench your jaw)
- ❖ **Neck and shoulders** (raise your shoulders as high as you can)
- ❖ **Arms and hands** (Pull your hands into fists then straighten your arms in front of you)

Take a steady breath in...hold...and then breath out. Imagine breathing out all of the tension.

REDUCE THE CHANCES OF CATCHING OR SPREADING CORONAVIRUS

- ❖ Wash your hands for 20 seconds but avoid washing excessively
- ❖ Stay at home and do not meet with anyone who is not part of your immediate household. When out, maintain a minimum distance of 2 metres (6ft) between you and others
- ❖ Only leave the house for:
 - shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible
 - one form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household
 - any medical need, including to donate blood, avoid or escape risk of injury or harm, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person
 - travelling for work purposes, but only where you cannot work from home

If you would like accurate information, stay informed using a reliable sources such as

NHS Inform (www.nhsinform.scot/) which provides the latest guidance about COVID-19, what to do if you develop symptoms and specific advice for those in higher risk groups.

The NHS 24 service (www.nhs24.scot/) can provide urgent medical advice (Tel: 111).

If you have been advised to shield, are in a higher risk group for severe illness from COVID-19 and need support with shielding, your Council has a **shielding support line/email**:

- ❖ **City of Edinburgh:** 0131 200 2388 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
shielding@edinburgh.gov.uk
- ❖ **East Lothian:** 01875 824 300 (Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm)
customerservices@eastlothian.gov.uk
- ❖ **Midlothian:** 0131 270 7500 (Mon-Fri, 8am–6pm)
shielding-covid19@midlothian.gov.uk
- ❖ **West Lothian:** 01506 281000 (Mon-Thur, 9am-4pm; Fri 9-3.30pm)

If you have general worries about coronavirus but are not unwell you can call: **0800 028 2816**. This is a free coronavirus helpline provided by NHS Inform.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

There are many people and services out there who want to help. Here are some free websites and organisations you can use if you need some reliable information on COVID-19, advice or practical support.

Information

Organisation	Telephone or Website
UK government guidelines on response to COVID-19 Pandemic:	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-the-public-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-aspects-of-coronavirus-covid-19
World Health Organisation guidelines for coronavirus (including specific guidance for older people):	https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf
Age UK specific information on coronavirus - including guides for shopping, connecting digitally, and funeral arrangement:	Age UK advice line: 0800 055 6112 (free to call, open 8am-7pm, 365 days per year) https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/coronavirus/
Information for those supporting someone with dementia:	Dementia UK: Tel 0800 888 6678 (free to call, Mon-Fri 9am-9pm, Sat-Sun 9am-5pm) https://www.dementiauk.org/get-support/coronavirus-covid-19/ Alzheimer's Scotland: Tel 0808 808 3000 https://www.alzscot.org/

Community Support

Organisation	Website
Scottish council for voluntary organisations directory for access to community-based services e.g. Transportation, grocery delivery, emotional support:	https://coronavirus.scvo.org/
Volunteer group providing resources and connecting people to their nearest local groups and voluntary support.	https://covidmutualaid.org/

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Here are some free websites and online resources to help you manage your feelings:

Organisation	Telephone or Website
The Silverline: a free confidential helpline providing information, friendship and advice for older people.	Phone: 0800 470 80 90 (free to call, open 24/7, 365 days per year) https://www.thesilverline.org.uk/
Breathing Space: free and confidential phone service if you are feeling low, anxious or depressed.	Phone: 0800 83 85 87 (free to call, Mon-Thur 6pm-2am; Friday-Mon 6pm-6am) https://breathingspace.scot/
The Samaritans: emotional support for anyone in emotional distress	Phone: 116 123 (free to call, open 24/7, 365 days per year) https://www.samaritans.org/
SAMH: offers support and information about mental health problems.	Phone: 0344 800 0550 https://www.samh.org.uk/
‘FACE COVID’: practical steps for effective response to Corona crisis	Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_gXW9bo3uQ Article: https://www.baps.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/03/FA-CE-COVID-by-Russ-Harris-pdf-pdf.pdf
Look after your mental health during coronavirus outbreak	https://mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak
Coronavirus anxiety: 4 ways to cope with fear	https://psychcentral.com/blog/coronavirus-anxiety-4-ways-to-cope-with-fear/
Managing loneliness	https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/loneliness-in-older-people/
Domestic abuse support	National Domestic Abuse helpline: 0808 200 246 (free to call, open 24/7) https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/ Scottish Woman’s Aid: Tel 0800 027 1234 https://womensaid.scot/ Abused Men In Scotland (AMIS): Tel 0808 800 0024 (free to call, open Mon-Fri 9am-4pm) https://amis.org.uk/

A FINAL NOTE

We have a small stock of the following publications / leaflets if you are not able to get them from the Internet. Please call our admin on [0131 537 6901](tel:01315376901) if you would like a copy of any of the leaflets or publications listed. Please note that the mail may take longer than usual to get to you.

