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Helping You Take Care of Your Mental Health

Calming Your Emotions

During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Calming Your Emotions

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Facing a global pandemic certainly qualifies as a highly stressful situation, and so it is absolutely normal to experience a wide range of emotions.

From confusion, anxiety, fear, and worry to anger, frustration, and a sense of helplessness - all feelings are valid given the circumstances.

This doesn't mean that having these feelings is pleasant, however, and many of us are struggling to find ways to cope.

When it comes to experiencing emotions, how we react and respond to them determines if they ease and go away on their own or become more intense and persistent, making us feel even more stressed.

Some unhelpful ways of coping with strong feelings include:

- Trying to ignore, suppress, or avoid experiencing an emotion.
- Using alcohol, drugs, food, sex or other methods to try to numb the emotion.
- Trying to get rid of the emotion by worrying or seeking excessive reassurance.
- Judging or criticising yourself for feeling a certain way.
- Bottling up your emotions and pretending that you don't feel anything.
- Letting your emotions take a hold of you and acting out.

Experiencing emotions is part of being human, but using one of the above ways to cope is likely to cause your emotions to become more intense and last longer.

If you take your emotions out on those around you, especially during a lockdown, it can make life even harder for you and your loved ones.

Instead, you can try some of the strategies we describe below to calm your emotions in a healthy way, so that they don't cause you further distress.

Some important emotion management skills include:

- **Being aware** when you're experiencing an emotion.
- Being able to name or **label the emotion** that you're feeling.
- Being able to **identify the cause or trigger** of the emotion.
- Noticing how an emotion is making you **want to do something**.
- Being able to **pause instead of reacting** on impulse.
- Using your breath to **soothe the physical sensations** of a strong emotion.
- Consider **what would be helpful** to do in the situation, despite how you feel.
- Being able to **sit with difficult emotions** until they pass on their own.
- Being able to **describe how you're feeling** and express what you need to cope.

Let's have a look at a couple of practical strategies you can try to manage your feelings.

1. Being Mindful of How You Feel

The first step to being able to respond to an emotion is to **recognise that you're feeling it**. Distressing emotions, such as fear, anxiety, panic or anger are often accompanied by unpleasant physical sensations, such as:

- Nausea
- Sweating
- Feeling tingly
- Dizziness
- Shaking
- Feeling hot
- Muscle tension
- Feeling short of breath

Although these sensations are uncomfortable and can make us feel overwhelmed, they are not dangerous and often can be calmed quickly through specific breathing and relaxation exercises. These exercises can help us to feel more grounded and in control.

Being mindful and aware of your emotions involves:

- **Noticing** when you experience a shift in your mood.
- **Observing** the physical sensations that come on.
- Allowing yourself to **experience this emotion** (and the physical sensations), without judgement.
- **Using your breath** to help you calm the way you feel.
- Asking yourself - 'what's brought this on?' and **checking in with your thoughts**.

Describing Your Feelings

It can be hard to process our emotions, when we don't really know what we are feeling.

Sometimes, being able to pin point the emotion you are feeling can also help you understand what it is about the situation you are in that you find especially challenging.

This is why a useful strategy for managing emotions is to be able to identify and name them.

We included some emotion words below to help you be as specific as possible in labelling the emotion you're experiencing.

Anger

Angry	Hateful	Seething	Exasperated
Contempt	Furious	Grouchy	Frustrated
Enraged	Spiteful	Irate	Aggressive
Resentful	Agitated	Vengeful	Disgusted
Irritated	Hostile	Insulted	Annoyed
Aggravated	Jealous	Bitter	Outraged

Sadness

Sad	Longing	Miserable	Deflated
Depressed	Lonely	Woeful	Empty
Grief	Hopeless	Weary	Despairing
Gloomy	Hurt	Insecure	Sorrowful
Dejected	Disappointed	Rejected	Distraught

Fear

Afraid	Frightened	Shocked	Unsure
Panicked	Terrified	Insecure	Dread
Uneasy	Bewildered	Worried	Nervous
Scared	Anxious	Concerned	Uncertain
Horrorified	Fearful	Wary	Frozen

Shame

Shamed	Regretful	Contrite	Mortified
Humiliated	Embarrassed	Guilty	Humbled
	Remorseful	Insulted	

Love

Loving	Adoring	Tender	Safe
Desire	Passionate	Enamoured	Fond
Infatuated	Enchanted	Sentimental	Affectionate
Exhilarated	Attracted	Aroused	Patient
Warm	Lustful	Compassionate	Secure

Joy

Happy	Motivated	Excited	Elated
Joyful	Satisfied	Amused	Relieved
Jovial	Optimistic	Glad	Eager
Jubilant	Delighted	Energised	Proud
Hopeful	Exhilarated	Cheerful	Confident

Being Kind and Gentle with Yourself

Being mindful of your feelings also involves being kind to yourself, not judging the way you feel, and reminding yourself that there is no right or wrong way to feel about what's going on. This is an important step to calming and soothing strong emotions.

Acknowledging that it's OK to feel the way you're feeling, instead of judging or criticising yourself is called '**self-validation**'. Self-validation is an important part of coping with difficult situations.

We all have emotions for a reason. Sometimes, people put pressure on themselves to 'be strong' or 'stay positive'. While having a positive attitude can help some people, **it's also okay to feel worried, afraid, angry or frustrated.**

In fact, it makes sense to feel this way when facing change and uncertainty. And, if you put pressure on yourself to feel differently, you might just end up feeling worse.

Some helpful things you can tell yourself when experiencing strong emotions:

- "It's been a tough few days, I'm allowed to feel upset."
- "I feel scared and overwhelmed, this doesn't mean I'm not coping."
- "It makes sense to feel angry and frustrated, my plans were important to me."
- "It's been full on. It's OK if I don't know how to feel about all of this."
- "What I'm feeling in this moment is OK."
- "Everyone is allowed to feel differently about this situation."
- "Even though I feel powerless, this doesn't mean that I am."
- "I can feel scared and hopeful at the same time."
- "I can feel angry with others and recognise that they could be struggling too."
- "It doesn't matter how others would feel in my shoes, my feelings are valid."
- "Just because awful things are happening to others, doesn't mean I can't feel upset about what's happening to me."
- "Whatever I'm feeling is OK."
- "I can let myself feel X without getting lost in it."
- "I'm feeling X, and that's OK."
- "I'm allowed to feel X."

2. Using Your Breath to Calm Yourself

Once you notice that you're experiencing a strong emotion, instead of ignoring it or 'pushing through', you can pause in the moment and soothe any physical sensations you're feeling using a technique called **Controlled Breathing**.

How does Controlled Breathing work?

When we feel anxious or stressed, we often start to take **quicker and shallower breaths**.

At the extreme end, this is called hyperventilation. Often, the change in our breathing is so subtle that we might not even notice. Shallow breathing can send messages back to the brain telling us to be anxious, which keeps anxiety going, making our breathing even quicker and shallower – **resulting in a vicious cycle**.

A simple strategy for breaking this cycle and easing strong emotions is **to notice and steady your breathing** when you're feeling yourself tense up.

To do this, you need to learn to notice and be aware of your breath.

Then, you can use the controlled breathing technique **to slow your breathing back down and give it a calm rhythm**, which can help you feel less wound up and more at ease.

How to do Controlled Breathing

- **Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable**, although you can do it standing too.
- **Breathe in and out gently** through your nose.
- Rest your hands on your stomach to **check that you are using your diaphragm** to drive your breathing rather than your upper chest (your stomach should rise and fall as you breathe, rather than your chest).
- **Breathe in for 3 seconds and out for 3 seconds**. As you breathe out, relax your body. Do this for at least 3 minutes, or until you feel calmer and more relaxed.

3. Seeing Things Clearly

When we are under a lot of stress and experience a range of difficult emotions, it can sometimes become hard to think and to see things clearly.

We may inadvertently get stuck in worrying and looking at the situation we are in a certain (often unhelpful) way.

The way we think has a big impact on how we feel, so it's important to check in with your thoughts and **ask yourself if the way you're thinking about the situation is making you feel worse than you need to.**

An important aspect of calming your emotions is noticing when negative or unhelpful thoughts are triggered, then challenging, shifting, or reframing these thoughts to help you feel better.

Here are the steps of checking-in with your thoughts:

- Step 1** Identify (the situation, thoughts and feelings).
- Step 2** Take a step back (look at what unhelpful thinking styles you are getting into).
- Step 3** Put your thinking to the test (challenge your thoughts by asking yourself some helpful questions).
- Step 4** Reconsider (how you can develop new, more helpful ways of looking at the thought/situation).
- Step 5** Move forward (what do you need to do now?).

To help you try out this strategy, you can download a guided worksheet by clicking the button below.

[Download the 'Seeing Things Clearly' Worksheet](#)



4. Resisting the Urge to React

When we experience distressing emotions, sometimes we also feel an urge to act on these emotions – often in unhelpful ways.

For example, when we feel angry, we might feel an urge to snap at someone; when we feel sad, we might feel an urge to indulge in an excessive amount of food.

Although acting on these urges might give some short-term relief, it often makes us feel worse in the long-term. While it is OK to feel an emotion, it is not OK to take it out on others around you, as this can make things more challenging for everyone involved.

Fortunately, an emotion itself cannot 'make you' do something and these urges to react are temporary. In fact, the way we feel often comes and goes in waves, so if we learn to 'surf' or 'ride out' these emotional waves instead of going under, we'll be much better off in the long run.

How to 'Surf' the Urge to React

- **Notice** when you are feeling an urge to act on a distressing emotion.
- Before acting on the urge, **pause for a few moments**. Begin to breathe in and out slowly through your nose.
- Take a curious, **non-judgemental approach** to observing your urge (e.g. finish the sentence, "It's interesting that this urge wants me to...").
- **Observe how this urge impacts your body**. Has it triggered any physical sensations (e.g. heat or a tingly sensation)?
- Continue to **breathe in and out slowly** through your nose and notice any changes in your thoughts and physical sensations.
- After a few minutes, **reflect on the strength and quality of your urge**. Has anything changed?

You can also download our resource called '**Knowing What to Say**' for tips on how to express your needs and emotions instead of reacting to them.

[Download the 'Knowing What to Say' Resource](#)



5. Learning to Tolerate Unpleasant Feelings

Sometimes, coping with emotions involves **simply allowing them to be there** without doing anything about them.

Many emotions, such as fear, anger, boredom, frustration or hurt feel unpleasant and uncomfortable, and our natural urge is to try to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Most people tend to do something when feeling a certain way, which is totally normal. Some of these things can be helpful (such as talking to a friend, keeping busy with a hobby), while others are unhelpful (such as drinking alcohol to numb how you feel).

However, sometimes, when we are not used to feeling a certain way, we may be **too quick to react** and do things that can **make these emotions more challenging** in the long run.

For example, if you never allow yourself to feel bored and your main way of coping with boredom is to hang out with your mates, you might find it especially challenging to cope with boredom during self-isolation.

On the other hand, if you build-up tolerance to feeling bored and you are OK with feeling bored every now and then without needing to instantly fill your time or busy your mind with something, chances are you'll feel much better when you can't engage in your usual activities.

If you're not used to tolerating uncertainty and being OK with feeling somewhat anxious, you might be tempted to constantly seek reassurance by binge watching the news or bringing the situation up in every conversation, or engage in certain behaviours (e.g., panic-buying) to try to get rid of anxiety.

You can use a similar analogy with many other emotions.

One of the strategies for calming your emotions is to learn how to **build your tolerance for the uncomfortable emotions**. This is much like resisting an urge to scratching an itch. You can do this by learning to 'sit with' unpleasant feelings.

How to sit with unpleasant feelings without reacting to them:

- **Notice any sensations in your body.** Do you feel tension or heaviness anywhere? Do you feel nauseous or tired? Does your mouth feel dry? Are you in any physical pain? How quickly is your heart beating?
- **Identify the emotion(s) that you're feeling.** Try to be as accurate as possible (for example, you might be feeling dread rather than anxiety, or you might be feeling a combination of emotions).
- **Notice the intensity of this emotion.** Is it strong, intense, weak, moderate?
- Complete the sentence, "I'm noticing that I'm feeling _____".
- Continue to **observe your emotions** for at least a few minutes. **Notice any changes** in the quality or intensity of the emotions you're experiencing.
- Allow yourself to **experience the unpleasant emotion, rather than avoid it.** If you feel an urge to cry, let the tears fall and let the emotion 'wash over' you.
- Use your breath to **'breathe' through areas of tension or pain** and try to soften your muscles around these areas (e.g., you can let tears fall while softening the muscle of your face).

This skill can be challenging at first, so be kind and gentle with yourself as you learn to let yourself feel your emotions without reacting. Over time, it will get easier.

Summary of Tips for Calming Your Emotions

Remind yourself of the following:

- All humans experience unpleasant emotions, especially during tough times.
- You can practise helpful ways of calming or soothing how you feel.
- You can also learn to sit with your emotions without reacting to them.
- It's okay to feel any emotion.
- All emotions will pass with time.



To access additional tools for coping with stress and anxiety during the corona virus outbreak, please visit our website.

www.thiswayup.org.au/coronavirus



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