

Help is at Hand

This guide has been written to help you manage the anxiety which you might be feeling due to COVID-19 social distancing. It offers practical guidance on how to manage the unwanted emotions, thoughts and physical reactions that you might be experiencing. The self-regulating and self-soothing techniques in this guide are complemented by explanations about the way the brain responds to threat. It is hoped that this will give you a better understanding of why these techniques and tips can be helpful.

We are all Psychologically Vulnerable at this Time

Before we come to the self-help tips, it is helpful for you to understand some of the reasons why social distancing and self-isolation might be leaving you feeling more anxious than usual. During the pandemic COVID-19, we are all psychologically vulnerable because:

1. **Things are less predictable**- who will become ill (and how severely), the duration of the pandemic, the impact on the economy and employment, are some of the uncertainties which currently concern us all.
2. **Our mobility is restricted** - you are likely to be spending more time in smaller spaces, and your choices about where you can go may have become limited.
3. **We have less connection with other people** - with everyone spending more time at home, our planned and impromptu meetings with friends, family, colleagues and casual acquaintances occur less often.
4. **We can become reliant on numbing strategies** - although it is natural for us to switch off our emotions and thoughts when there is a continual sense of danger, we might be choosing unhelpful ways of numbing ourselves. Perhaps your negative numbing strategies are sleeping longer, drinking more alcohol and/or using recreational drugs.
5. **It is easy to lose our sense of time** - our days and weeks may no longer be broken up by our regular activities. When it feels like the days and weeks are running into each other, we can lose a sense of time. With the predicted length of social distancing measures being extended, you might be feeling that this may never end.

Let's just want to take a moment to recognise that identifying with some, or all of the things listed above, may have caused you distress. You might be experiencing a rising sense of anger or hopelessness. You may wish to avoid thinking about the causes of your distress. Or perhaps you are experiencing a disconnect from your thoughts. Let me assure you that these are perfectly normal responses to danger.

How we Respond to Danger

This document gives you techniques and practical steps that you can take to lessen uncomfortable thoughts, emotions and physical responses. Before you use them, it is helpful for you to understand how the brain responds to perceived danger. Perceived danger, refers to a threat which is either imagined, overestimated, or a real, present and imminent danger.

Perceived Danger

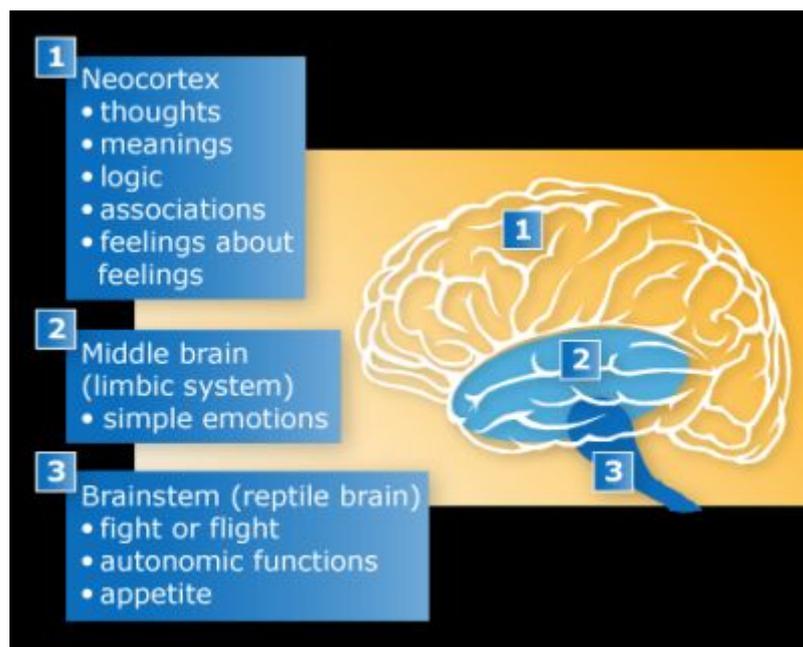
Imagined

Overestimated

Present and

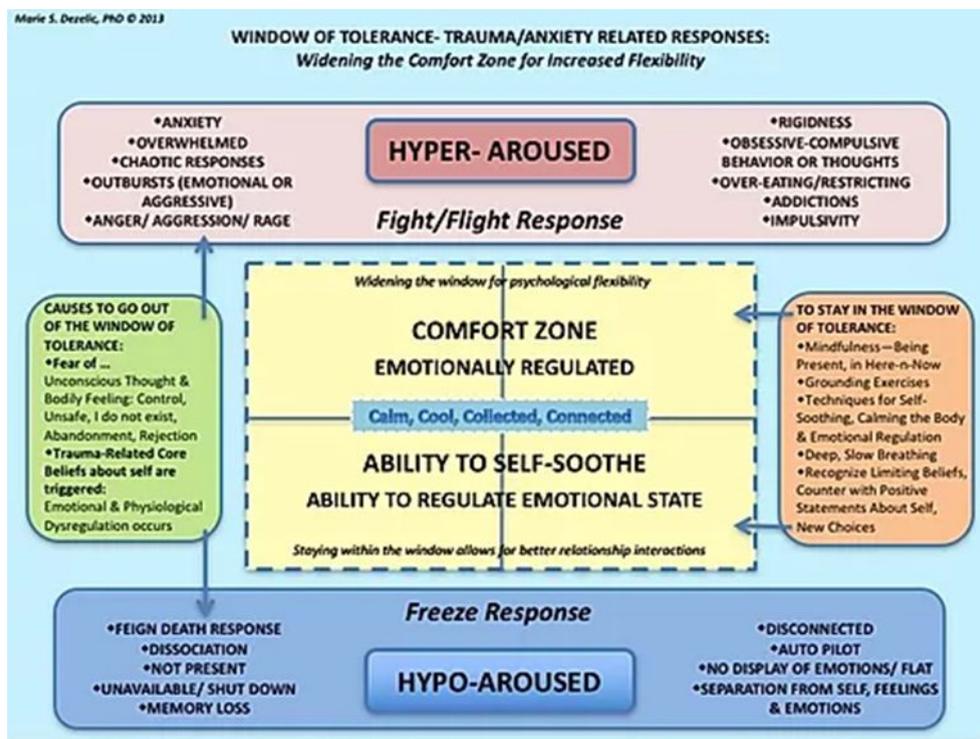
Imminent

When we believe that we are in the presence of real and imminent danger, we need to react quickly. The subcortical areas of the brain (see areas 2 & 3 in diagram beneath) kicks into action and the neocortex area goes off-line. Our ability to think clearly and rationally is put on hold whilst the more immediate need for survival is dealt with. Our instinctive reaction to threat is either to fight it (fight response), flee from it (flight response), or play dead (freeze response).



Window of Tolerance

When we feel comfortable and confident, we are operating from within our 'window of tolerance'. Some of us will have a wide window of tolerance, and for others it will be narrow. Those who can comfortably endure greater amounts of danger, have a wide window of tolerance. When we are particularly vigilant, or have a tendency to overestimate the threat of danger, we are likely to find that we are often outside our window of tolerance. When we leave our window of tolerance, we either go into hyper-arousal (a fight or flight response) or hypo-arousal (the freeze response). The diagram below describes some of the ways we can recognise the hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal states.



You might have noticed that you swing between hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal, with little or no time spent in the comfort of your window of tolerance. Though there are a variety of reasons why each of us can tolerate different amounts of perceived danger, we can all learn techniques for returning to the comfort zone.

Self-Soothing and Self-Regulating Techniques

Self-soothing and self-regulating techniques can help return you to your zone of comfort. They get your body to tell your brain that you are not in imminent danger by reengaging the Neocortex. Your window of tolerance will widen as you gain confidence in your ability to soothe your anxiety and regulate your emotions. In addition to using these techniques when you are anxious or about to self-harm, practice them regularly. Using self-soothing and self-regulating techniques when you are calm and relaxed will help you to remember them when you are distressed. When we are stressed and the neocortical area of the brain has gone off-line, our ability to store and retrieve memories is impaired.

Breathing Technique 1

- Breathe in for a count of 4
- Hold the breath in for a count of 4
- Breathe out for a count of 4
- Hold the breath out for a count of 4
- Repeat this exercise 3 more times
- Return to breathing naturally

Breathing Technique 2.

- Breathe in for a count of 1. Breathe out for a count of 2
- Breathe in for a count of 1. Breathe out for a count of 3
- Breathe in for a count of 1. Breathe out for a count of 4
- Breathe in for a count of 1. Breathe out for a count of 5
- Repeat this exercise 4 more times
- Return to breathing naturally

If you have a condition affecting your breathing or are concerned about your lungs, consult your doctor before doing any breathing exercises.

Raise Awareness: within self

1. Sit in a comfortable position, away from distractions, with your feet placed firmly on the floor. You might find it helpful to close your eyes.
2. Start by noticing your breath entering and leaving your body. Do not try to change it, just notice. Notice your chest and stomach rising and falling as you breathe.
3. Bring your attention to your feet. Become aware of how they feel and notice their connection with the floor beneath them.
4. Move your attention up your legs to your calves. Notice how it feels.
5. Move your attention up to your knees and then your thighs. Notice your legs and bottom being supported by the chair.
7. Notice how your back makes contact with the chair.
8. Think about what you can feel across your shoulders. Are you aware of any tension here?
9. Take your focus slowly down your arms, into your hands and then your fingers.
10. Bring your attention back up your arms and into your neck.
11. Become aware of the back of your head and then move your attention over the top of your head into your face. Notice how the forehead, eyes and jaw feel.
12. To finish, return your focus to the breath coming in and out of your nose. When you are ready, open your eyes and begin to notice the environment around you.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Repeat steps 1 and 2 above.
- As you move through steps 2-11, tighten, hold for a few seconds, and then relax the muscles of each body part in turn
- End by repeating step 12.

Raise Awareness: outside yourself

Paying attention to one thing at a time:

- Notice **5** things that you can **see** - in your mind, describe how they **look**
- Find **4** things that you can **touch** - in your mind, describe their **texture**
- Listen to **3** three things that you can **hear** - in your mind, describe their **sound**
- Acknowledge **2** things that you can **smell** - in your mind, describe their **scent**
- Have **1** one thing that you can **taste** - in your mind, describe its **flavour and texture**

Try to be as descriptive as possible

Widen your Prereferral Vision

Whilst looking at what is straight ahead

begin to notice what is visible

at the edges of your vision

to your left and to your right.

Well-Being Tips

1. **Connect with yourself** - Minimise distractions. Try breathing exercises. Meditate. Notice what it feels like to be inside your body. Journal your thoughts and emotions.
2. **Connect with people** - Take time to speak with others, seeing their faces when possible. Share real or virtual coffee breaks and meals. Play interactive games and make music with others. Show kindness.
3. **Keep active** - Keep mobile and flexible by taking regular exercise and stretching.
4. **Observe** - Engage your senses. Notice changes in the natural world. Focus on one activity at a time (avoid multitasking).
5. **Schedule Daily and Weekly Activities**
 - Include time with yourself, with others, and for exercise.
 - Try to be consistent with your waking, sleeping and eating times.
 - Plan time to be creative, play and learn new things.
 - Aim to have a balance between things which give you a sense of connection, pleasure, and achievement
 - Where possible, synchronise your schedule with the people around you.
 - Make agreements with others about when and where you will spend time alone.
 - Keep your schedule to hand and use it.

The self-help techniques and strategies above are not a substitute for the professional support of counsellors and psychological services.

Know when to Get Help

Although the practical suggestions and techniques above can help to ease anxiety, they will not get rid of your problems. When there is real and imminent threat to your physical safety, you need to call for help.

- If you are experiencing symptoms of COVID 19 (a new, continuous cough and/or a high temperature) call 111 for advice.
- If someone that you live with has been abusing you, or is threatening to abuse you, either physically, emotionally or sexually, seek advice from the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, 24 hours a day on 0808 2000247. Alternatively, in an emergency situation call 999.
- Thoughts of suicide are a direct threat on your life. The brain responds to this internal threat in the same way that it would if there was an external threat to life. Seek help by contacting:
Nai's House – 07437 497697 or Facebook messenger - @NaishouseBICESTER
Papyrus Hopeline – 0800 088 4141
CALM (5pm-Midnight) – 0800 585858
24/7 Mental Health Helpline during Covid-19 (Bucks and Oxon) – 01865 904998
Samaritans (18+) – 116 123
Shout (Youngminds) Crisis Text – 85258
On Twitter - @MHcrisisangels

This guide has been written for free distribution by Nai's House, to support their work with 13 to 30-year-olds with suicidal thoughts and self-harm coping mechanisms. It draws on information from Dr. Bassel van der Kolk, Carolyn Spring and Emma McAdam, and uses illustrations from Dr. Dan Siegel, Dr. Marie Dezlic and Geoffrey Roberts. Nai's House would like to thank them for the resources they have made freely available.