



# **Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Coronavirus Outbreak – Resources for Leaders**

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*This guide aims to provide some resources to help support mental health and wellbeing, complementing guidelines around promoting physical health. This is not comprehensive and should not replace advice by your GP and other health officials.*

## **Introduction**

We are living through times of uncertainty as Covid-19 continues to spread throughout the world. Many reputable organisations, including the World Health Organisation, the Conversation, our government leaders, and other organisations are providing useful information for understanding the developing situation and providing strategies for keeping us and others safe, including good hygiene, physical distancing, avoiding congregating in groups, and self-isolation if you may have been in contact with others with the disease. It's important that we all do our part to follow the advice that we are given, reducing risk to us and those that we care about.

Beyond the physical concerns of the illness, there are also many psychological and social implications of the coronavirus outbreak. Disruption of normal life, including the cancellation of classes, meetings, and sport events, unavailability of goods at the supermarket, lack of human interaction, and articles that illustrate the spread and impact of the disease can cause fear, anxiety, loneliness, and many other negative feelings.

There are two approaches we might take to mental health in ourselves and others: (1) a reactive approach, which identifies mental health challenges and takes actions to support the person, and (2) a proactive approach, which aims to boost our capabilities and psychological resources so we can stay mentally fit. The sections below address these two approaches. In supporting mental health and wellbeing, both are important strategies that we can draw on at different times for different people.

**[Identifying and Addressing Struggle and Dysfunction](#)**

**[Proactively Supporting Positive Mental Health](#)**

## Identifying and Addressing Struggle and Dysfunction

While the immediate focus right now is on physical health and trying to contain the virus, mental health is just as much a concern, and most likely will become a bigger issue as life is further disrupted. It's important to recognise when a person might be struggling and connect them with resources and help. Some people will experience mental illness for the first time, whereas for those with existing mental illness conditions, the current situation might aggravate and retrigger latent illness.

As part of this, there is a need to distinguish between responses that are *normal* and expected based on the circumstances, versus responses that are *escalated, abnormal, or place the person at risk of hurting themselves or others*. We are living in a period of a lot of uncertainty, and so it's natural to feel anxious and worried. There will be times of deep sadness and feelings of loss, as people grieve losing people and parts of life that they care about. These are normal responses to uncertainty, loss, and change. We need to be careful to not label natural responses as mental illness.

A good start is to ask others if they are ok. Often, people just need someone to talk to, with someone really listening to them, validating them, and validating how they feel. Our tendency is to try and identify the problem the person is dealing with and fix it. Rather than trying to fix things, it's often more helpful to simply listen and be with the person (whether in person or virtually).

**If you believe a person is in danger of hurting themselves or others, it's important to take steps to make sure they are safe.** If you do become concerned about someone, contact your pastor, a mental health professional, the police, or emergency services, who can help decide best pathways forward.

### **Signs that a person might benefit from referral to a mental health professional:**

- The person is having difficulty maintain basic functions of life (such as getting out of bed, eating food, self-care).
- The person has experienced marked weight loss or gain.
- The person's ability to cope with things appears to be on a clear downward spiral.
- The person is becoming increasingly dependent on you or others.
- The person becomes extremely withdrawn from activities and from contact with others. (This will be challenging to identify, as people are increasingly forced to withdraw from usual activity, and those at greatest risk can easily fall through the cracks. Consider keeping track of who attends each session, and follow up directly with those who repeatedly miss sessions.)
- The person is involved in or appears to have experienced any kind of abusive situation (physical, emotional, sexual).
- The person behaves explosively or threatens violence.
- The person seems disoriented or out of touch with reality.
- The person mentions suicidal thoughts, wishes to die, or behaves in self-destructive ways.
- There is evidence of increased conflict with one's significant other, family, or friends.
- The person abusing alcohol, drugs, or other substances.

### **Signs that a person might be suicidal:**

- Talking about suicide directly or indirectly.
- Expresses statements about feeling hopeless, helpless, and/or worthless.
- Becomes preoccupied with death.
- Talks about being a burden to others.
- Talks about feeling trapped or having unbearable pain.
- Putting affairs in order (though this will happen much more at this time, as the threat of death becomes apparent to many).
- Giving away prized possessions (again, might function differently now, as people look to help others. The key here is the motive behind the actions).
- Sudden calmness (indicating they've resolved to end the struggle by ending their life).
- Self-harm or self-injury.

### *Determining immediate risk of suicide:*

- Is the person thinking of committing suicide?
- Does the person have a plan? If so, how specific is the plan?
- How available are his or her means of committing suicide?
- Has the person already taken any suicide-oriented actions?
- How lethal and fast acting are the means the person plans to use?
- Has the person rehearsed the suicide?
- What are your gut feelings?

### *Levels of risk for suicide:*

- Low risk: the person may be thinking about suicide, but you are sure as you can be that he or she has no plan to kill him or herself at this time
- Moderate risk: the person plans to attempt suicide, but you are as sure as you can be that he or she does not plan to attempt suicide right away
- High risk: The person has a specific and lethal suicide plan and the means to do it readily at hand.

### *Steps to take if you believe someone may be suicidal:*

- Take suicide statements seriously.
- Ask, "are you considering suicide or hurting yourself?"
- If so, ask about a plan.
- Convey assurance and hope
- Assess the level of risk.
- Act, based on your assessment:
  - *If risk is low*, get the person to commit to talking to you, a suicide hotline, or mental health professional if he or she does decide to kill him or herself. Don't leave or hang up until he or she agrees. Contact your pastor or mental health professionals immediately to consult. Check back with the person frequently over the next few days.

- *If risk is moderate*, help the person commit to getting professional help, connecting them directly if possible. Do not leave or hang up until they committed and have a clear plan for obtaining care. Contact your pastor or a mental health professional as soon as possible.
- *If risk is high*, do not leave the person or allow them to hang up until professional help has arrived. Call emergency services (triple zero – 000) and indicate you need help getting the person to a safe place. Contact your pastor or mental health professional.

### **Mental Health Online Resources:**

There are some really helpful online resources, and mental health professionals are increasingly available online for care.

- **BeyondBlue** is one of the leading organisations providing mental health information and resources especially around anxiety and depression: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>.
- **Youth BeyondBlue** provides information, online, and phone counselling for your people (12-25 years) with trained mental health professionals 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1300 224 636; [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)
- **RuOK?** Provides a number of resources for asking the simple question RuOK? with a series of helpful resources all year long: <https://www.ruok.org.au/>
- **Mental Health First Aid Australia** has developed a series of guidelines related to different mental health conditions: <https://mhfa.com.au/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines#mhfaesc>
- **KidsHelpline** provides email and phone counselling for young people with a website tailored for kids (5-12) and teens (13-25). Online 'chat' counselling open 7 days a week: 1800 55 1800 (24/7), [www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)
- **Lifeline Online Crisis Support** allows a person to chat with a trained crisis support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 13 11 14, [www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help](http://www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help)
- **eheadspace** provides online chat, email and phone counselling with a qualified youth mental health professional for young people aged 12-25 as well as parents/carers concerned about a young person: 1800 650 890, [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)
- **Suicide Call Back Service** provides free nationwide professional telephone and online counselling for anyone affected by suicide, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1300 659 467, [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)
- **Gambling Helpline** provides gamblers (past and current) with their own, or someone else with a gambling problem, and can be the lifeline they need. 1800 858 858 <https://www.gamblinghelponline.org.au/>

## Proactively Supporting Positive Mental Health

While it's important to deal with and treat symptoms of mental illness, it's better if we can help people not reach severe mental illness in the first place. It's easy to focus on all that is going wrong, which can quickly become a pretty hopeless and dark place. Just like people are taking steps like washing hands and physical distancing to protect from catching or spreading the virus, it's important to take steps to protect our mental health.

### Tips from [Beyond Blue](#):

- Remind yourself that this is a temporary period of isolation to slow the spread of the virus.
- Remember that your effort is helping others in the community avoid contracting the virus.
- Stay connected with friends, family and colleagues via email, social media, video conferencing or telephone.
- Engage in healthy activities that you enjoy and find relaxing.
- Keep regular sleep routines and eat healthy foods.
- Try to maintain physical activity.
- Establish routines as best possible and try to view this period as a new experience that can bring health benefits.
- For those working from home, try to maintain a healthy balance by allocating specific work hours, taking regular breaks and, if possible, establishing a dedicated work space.
- Avoid news and social media if you find it distressing.
- Seek support when you need it.

### Some General Tips:

- Things are rapidly changing, with considerable disruption. Setting up **regular routines** and sticking to them, whether you feel like it or not, can help ease anxiety and uncertainty. Routines are especially important for young people, providing stability when things feel somewhat chaotic. Plan out a general schedule that includes waking up at a regular time, physical activity, eating healthy, limiting screen time, doing some productive activities (e.g., study, work, spending time in prayer), and doing some enjoyable activities (e.g., read a good book, work on a hobby). Include activities that boost your mental health (see some ideas below). If you have children, let them be part of the planning.
- If you lead a group, **consider creating pairs or triplets of accountability partners**, so that group members can be checking in with each other, sharing the responsibility to care for one another and reducing the burden on you as a leader, and allowing more time and energy to focus those who might be more disconnected.
- **Limit consumption of news and social media.** While it's important to be aware of any changes that affect your life and actions, additional information provides little value. Have a few trusted news sources to check once or twice a day, and otherwise limit reading and watching about the pandemic. If you have to spend a lot of time online for meetings, make sure and balance that with non-screen time.
- **Staying active, healthy eating, and good sleep** are key. Studies show that even simple movement - going for a walk (if you are able to go outside), yoga or Pilates (there are many classes and videos now available online), dancing, and other ways to move improves

physical, mental, and cognitive functioning. Sleep is vital to restoring us, and healthy eating helps sustain us.

- **Prioritise connecting with people.** We have a basic need to relate and connect with others. Current physical constraints are making fulfilling that need more challenging. It becomes important to keep finding ways to connect. Connecting virtually, smiling at others as you walk by them (at a safe distance), and kind acts are simple ways to show our humanity. Discuss ways with your group to keep connecting, identifying ways that sit well with the group to help them feel connected with one another.
- **Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.** Gratitude involves noticing and appreciating good things, people, etc. It's very easy to notice and focus on all the bad things happening, which can add to feelings of sadness and worry. Purposely looking for things that are good and right helps shift our perspective. Each day may not be good, but goodness can be found in each day.

## Wellbeing Exercises

Below are some simple strategies and activities that might help that can help people feel and function better despite the challenges going on, adapted from [Your wellbeing blueprint: Feeling good and doing well at work](#). These were developed to support people at work, but many can be adjusted to do as at home or as a family. Think of these as daily positive habits that we can do to help stay mentally well. Different things will work for different people – the key is to find what works for you.

- **Jolts of Joy:** Write down a list of jolts of joy – small actions that bring a smile to your face and help you feel good. It might be a nice cup of tea or coffee, going for a short walk, listening to a favourite song or watching a funny YouTube clip, or other simple activities. When you start to feel down, select something from the list that you can do to give yourself a little pick-me-up.
- **Identify Healthy Distractions:** Divide a page into two columns. In the first column, write the heading “Healthy Distractions” and list as many easily-done, highly-engaging activities you can think of. You might include playing an instrument, doing some gardening, watching a new TED talk, playing with your child, or practicing meditative breathing. In the second column, write the heading “Unhealthy Distractions” and list all the things you typically do to take your mind off things that might not be serving you well—for example, reaching for a piece of chocolate, buying things you don't need, or gossiping about other people. Make sure you have at least one healthy alternative distraction for each unhealthy distraction you identify. You can add to the list over time as you notice the activities you switch to when stress or overthinking kicks in. Keep your list handy so you're prepared to distract yourself with a healthy activity whenever rumination starts.
- **Disrupt Negative Thoughts:** Grab a set of index cards and write down your negative thoughts, such as: “I'm such an idiot. I'm always messing things up.” Try to write down exactly what you say to yourself. Do this for a few days; you'll probably be shocked at just how frequently negative self-talk occurs. Then, shuffle the cards and pick one at random. Read it out loud. Then—as fast and as thoroughly as you can—dispute it! Do it out loud and with conviction. Is this belief really true? Are you one hundred percent sure? In what

ways is it not true? Could there be any other plausible explanation? Which explanation will serve you best in this situation? When you're satisfied that your rapid-fire facts have shot down your menacing negativity, tear up the card, and throw it away. Keep adding to your cards whenever you find negativity lurking in your mind. You can also take a playful approach by singing or reading your card aloud in an exaggerated accent or a silly voice (try Mickey Mouse or Arnold Schwarzenegger). This technique will often change a painful criticism into something hilariously absurd and lessen its power over you.

- **Limit Media Time:** Unfortunately, most of the media coverage you watch, listen to, or read contains more bad news than good news, which can overload you with negative emotions. Be mindful of how the media you're consuming is making you feel. If it's creating unnecessary negativity, find more positive ways to stay attuned to what's happening in the world. If you want to mix in more positivity, visit sites such as the [Good News Network](#) and [Upworthy](#).
- **Gratitude Scraps:** Take a bowl and create scraps of paper. During the day, look for things that you can be grateful for. Add to the bowl. At the end of day, read through and appreciate the positive things that you experienced during the day. This can be good to do as a family, hunting for good things during the day, then spending part of dinner sharing these together.
- **Slow Down your Responses:** When you experience a strong emotion such as anger, slow down your response so you can respectfully and appropriately respond in ways that will be most helpful for the situation. Take a few deep breaths. Then visualize your anger as a car speedometer. If you think your anger is too high in response to the situation, then take a few moments to breathe deeply to put the brakes on and slow down your reaction. Continue to check your emotional reaction speed during the interaction.
- **Get to Know your Strengths:** Use one of the online strengths assessment tools such as the free, ten-minute VIA Survey ([viacharacter.org](#)) to identify what your strengths are. This tool gives you an easy way to start exploring and applying your strengths – what are you good at that energises you? The website also provides a lot of information about the strengths, including details on what they are and strategies for applying them in your day-to-day life.
- **Host an Online Social Hour:** Invite friends or colleagues to a coffee date, wine online, etc. Schedule a time and use Zoom (or another platform) for people to dial in. Have each person grab their own drinks and foods, and spend time catching up and having fun together. Consider adding a silly game or trivia component.
- **Be a Journalist:** Look at the events you are experiencing as if you were a journalist, searching for the good things that might be happening. How would a journalist describe the situation? What would they identify as turning points in your life, a moment when you found meaning and stronger purpose? What would they find if they followed you for a week? What examples of your strengths and resilience would they see? What photos would a photojournalist take to demonstrate your growth, values, and strengths? Take time to write your own story.
- **Audit Your Time:** At the end of each day, spend ten minutes writing down an overview of how you spent your time during the day. Ask yourself: "How can I spend more time on the

things that matter most to me? Am I watching too much TV or spending too much time on the Internet? Am I saying yes to things that I should be saying no to?" Identify ways to reduce the time spent in activities that may be preventing you from achieving your goals, and spend more time focused on the goals you care about.

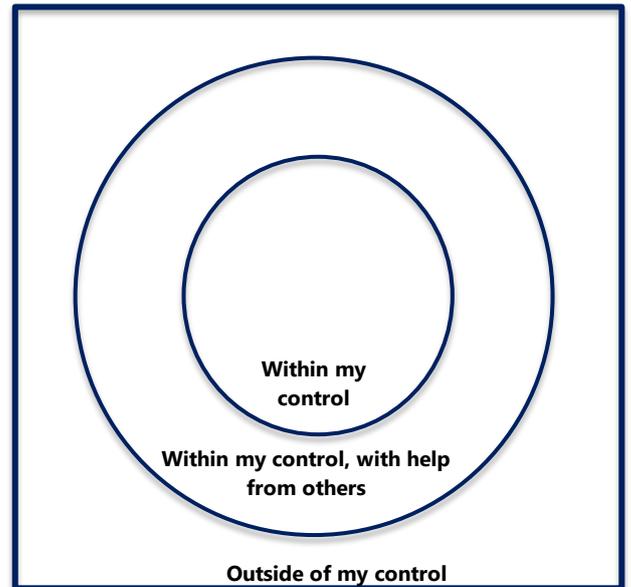
- **Create a Hope Map:** Take a sheet of paper horizontally and fold it into thirds. In the right column, write the heading "Goals" and write down a "want-to" goal you're genuinely excited to achieve over a time period that feels right for you. In the left column, write the heading "Pathways" and list at least three actions that could help you to reach your goal. In the middle, write the heading "Obstacles" and for each pathway you listed, note obstacles or challenges you might encounter. Then, around the edges, or at the bottom of the page, add the things you can do to maintain your motivation and wellbeing, track your progress, and celebrate your efforts and achievements along the way.

Pathways	Obstacles	Goal
	Supports	

- **Start a Passion Project:** Feeling excited and inspired about the future can help you get through the grind of everyday life. A passion project is something that excites you—it taps into your personal sense of meaning. It's not about the results, but the freedom of creative action and the experience of positive emotions. Identify a passion project that lights you up and spend at least ten minutes a day moving this "want-to" goal forward. It doesn't need a purpose; it just needs to be something that piques your curiosity and spurs your energy. Spend some time mapping out your ideas. Set some specific goals and identify what is needed to start the project.
- **Hang Out with Hopeful Friends:** Hope is contagious, so find other people who are high in hope and connect with them. Get inspired by their "want-to" goals. Learn from their stories to inspire you on how to maintain your hope in the face of obstacles and setbacks. Ignite your sense of willpower and excitement about what is yet to come.
- **Challenge Your Thoughts:** Write down a belief or story that's causing you anguish, then follow it with evidence or examples where the belief is false. For example: "I've completely embarrassed myself; I'll never be able to face these people again," could be countered with, "But chances are, they'll completely forget about it by tomorrow." As you allow yourself to sit with the fear and unease this story may hold, gently challenge the facts. Is this story true? Is it absolutely accurate? Have you over-personalized what happened or imagined it as more pervasive and permanent than it really might be? Is there another equally believable story that would be better to invest your energy and attention in until you know more?
- **Lean into The Suck:** The experience of adversity is generally painful and unpleasant. Rather than adding more anxiety to these moments by trying to rid yourself of these feelings, lean into the "suck" and accept that what you're experiencing hurts and is upsetting. Don't be surprised or dismayed by these feelings. Know that they are part of your brain and body's natural protection and healing systems and instead of fighting them,

denying them, or trying to rid yourself of them, let yourself experience the emotions and you will find they pass more quickly.

- **Circles of Control:** There are some things that we have control over, like what we choose to focus our attention on, how we respond to others, and activities that we choose to engage in. Other things are within our control, but we need help from others. And still other things are completely outside of our control, like how others respond to us and policies being implemented in our region. It can be helpful to take responsibility for and act upon the things that are within our control, ask for help from others for things that we can control with the help of others, and let go of things that are outside of our control (even better - pray and give everything that is outside of our control to God). Take a sheet of paper and draw a large circle, with a smaller circle inside (see Figure). Brainstorm things that you can control within the inner circle. Think about things that you can control with the help of others and note those in the middle circle. Then think about things that are outside of your control (that perhaps you are worried or stressing about), and place those on the outside outside of the circle. Then, think about the things that are within your control. What can you do to make those happen? Make a specific plan. For things within your control with the help of others, how can you ask for help and work together? For the things outside of your control, spend some time praying and giving to God the things outside of your control.



- **Forgo Sleep Ins:** Try to maintain a consistent schedule of sleeping and waking, even on the weekend. Resist the urge to sleep in until noon. Instead, treat yourself to a one hour or less afternoon nap. At night, set an alarm to tell you it's time to get ready for bed. Keep in mind that your body has a tendency to push later and later if given the chance, so you need to get to bed before you hit your second wind.
- **Create Bedtime Routines:** Give yourself at least forty-five minutes to wind down before bed with clear night time cues to help your body relax. Dim the lights. Lower the temperature by two to four degrees. Turn off electronics (smartphones, iPads, computers, and TVs, or anything with blue LED light as it impacts your sleep hormones). Write down what's on your mind—especially unfinished to-dos or issues. Try some restorative yoga or meditate. Get to bed at a decent time.
- **Plan Your Meals:** Make your eating decisions before you get hungry. Studies show that you'll do a lot better at resisting salt, calories, and unhealthy fats in the future than in the present moment. Think about the meals and snacks you will have access to and be able to control this week. What can you have on hand to make good eating choices easier? Try to set your sights on foods that are good for your short-term energy and long-term health.
- **Move at Home:** A study of more than 6,000 people who had successfully kept weight off revealed that the most effective and sustainable changes start in the home. Ninety-two

percent of the participants in this study found a way to exercise at home. Whether you use a treadmill, a set of handheld weights, online aerobic programs, exercise in your neighbourhood, or being active with your children, your home is a great place to build an active lifestyle.

### Some additional articles/ blogs with activities and ideas:

- Tips from Professor Lea Waters at the University of Melbourne for staying [positive during the coronavirus](#)
- [Everyday self-care during self-isolation](#)
- Strategies for [building social relationships during social isolation](#) from the University of Michigan
- For those working from home, [strategies for adjusting to the remote environment](#) from the University of Michigan
- Finally, a coping calendar provided by [Action for Happiness](#):

30 actions to look after ourselves and each other as we face this global crisis together. Please use & share 🙌

1 Make a plan to help you keep calm and stay in contact	2 Enjoy washing your hands. Remember all they do for you!	3 Write down ten things you feel grateful for in life and why	4 Stay hydrated, eat healthy food and boost your immune system	5 Get active. Even if you're stuck indoors, move & stretch	6 Contact a neighbour or friend and offer to help them	7 Share what you are feeling and be willing to ask for help
8 Take five minutes to sit still and breathe. Repeat regularly	9 Call a loved one to catch up and really listen to them	10 Get good sleep. No screens before bed or when waking up	11 Notice five things that are beautiful in the world around you	12 Immerse yourself in a new book, TV show or podcast	13 Respond positively to everyone you interact with	14 Play a game that you enjoyed when you were younger
15 Make some progress on a project that matters to you	16 Rediscover your favourite music that really lifts your spirits	17 Learn something new or do something creative	18 Find a fun way to do an extra 15 minutes of physical activity	19 Do three acts of kindness to help others, however small	20 Make time for self-care. Do something kind for yourself	21 Send a letter or message to someone you can't be with
22 Find positive stories in the news and share these with others	23 Have a tech-free day. Stop scrolling and turn off the news	24 Put your worries into perspective and try to let them go	25 Look for the good in others and notice their strengths	26 Take a small step towards an important goal	27 Thank three people you're grateful to and tell them why	28 Make a plan to meet up with others again later in the year
29 Connect with nature. Breathe and notice life continuing	30 Remember that all feelings and situations pass in time					

“Everything can be taken from us but one thing: the freedom to choose our attitude in any given set of circumstances” ~ Viktor Frankl

**ACTION FOR HAPPINESS**

[www.actionforhappiness.org](http://www.actionforhappiness.org)