Covid-19: How to Stop Catastrophising and Start Living

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BeyondEAP

Specialist employee support for life's toughest challenges

Never before have
we encountered such
a huge amount of
questions that currently
have only vague
answers at best.

Questions like:
- When can I go back to work?
- When will our schools re-open?
- When can we take a family holiday?
- How long will it be before a coronavirus vaccine is available?
- How many more people will die?
- How long will lockdown last?
- When will we go back to 'normal'?

Once, we were able to feel a sense of control over our daily lives.

We could go shopping, plan a holiday, have a party, or visit our loved ones whenever we wanted to. We could have gossip-fuelled lunches and coffee breaks with groups of work colleagues, chatting excitedly about our plans for the weekend.

Now, we spend our time waiting anxiously for the government to update and explain the new rules for socialising and working. It seems as though nobody really knows quite what the future is going to hold.

All this unpredictability and uncertainty brings forward a negative thought process called worry.

And did you know that worry has a best friend?

It goes by the name of fear.

When I talk to friends and family, or to the employees I work with every day, it's easy to see that many of them are finding this new emotional state of ours extremely difficult, frustrating, and uncomfortable.
You may have found yourself drifting in and out of the following phases:

- anxiety
- needing reassurance
- constant searching for new coronavirus information
- being hypervigilant.

What exactly is 'worry'?

Worrying involves our minds rehearsing negative outcomes and scenarios that have not happened yet, so we can 'prepare' for their taking place in real life.

Our neural pathways light up whenever a thought occurs. Constant repetition of the same thought deepens these pathways, reinforcing them with even more neurons.

The result is that our initial 'worry stage' becomes stored permanently as a negative habit. Worrying thoughts become easier and easier to access, which can in turn create a downward spiral of catastrophising; playing all the worst possible outcomes out in our minds.

(For obvious reasons, I call this process 'Stinkin' Thinkin''.)

But with new Covid-19-related deaths and infections reported every day, is it any wonder that people are worrying more than they ever have before?

Ironically, all that worrying then affects our energy levels and quality of sleep, making our mental state even worse.

Mix in some unhelpful self-medication, such as over-eating, under-exercising, or an overload of caffeine and alcohol, and you have the perfect recipe for exhaustion, overwhelm, and a procession of traumatising 'down days'.

Breaking the Catastrophic Cycle

During my one-to-one sessions, I discuss the neuroscience behind catastrophising. This not only helps people to understand what's really going on, it also gives them some useful tools and techniques to help stop that initial signal in its tracks, preventing the 'worry' habit from forming.

Just like any muscle in the body, training your brain can protect it from these emotional 'hits' and their devastating effects.

Here are just a few ways you can help retrain your brain during Covid-19:

1. Reduce your 'corona-news' intake

Yes, that does include limiting all those searches for the latest information and stories!

It's so tempting to arm ourselves with the latest updates. However, each time you take in a new piece of coronavirus-related information (a 'hit'), your neural pathways are strengthened, which helps release that anxiety-inducing mixture of cortisol and adrenaline into your body.

To counter these effects, limit yourself to reading the headlines just once a day, ideally before 9pm, so they have less chance of affecting your sleep.

(Read my eBook on the importance of sleep here.)

2. Control what you can

Create order in your life by following some simple tasks, such as organising folders on your computer, making your bed in the morning, or focusing on those areas of work that you are able to control.

3. Set a daily schedule

Daily routines are your secret weapon against anxiety! Creating a schedule will help to anchor your mind in the present moment, reducing distractions that have the potential to cause worry (for example, have you ever popped online to read just one article, then look up to find an hour has whizzed by in a flash?)

4. Live in the present moment

We don't know how this unusual situation is going to pan out, so we have to live in the only moment we know.

Now.
Whenever I catch myself starting to worry, I know that I'm not living in the present. Instead, I'm thinking into the future, imagining a horrible event that hasn't even happened.
If you find this happening to you, breathing is the quickest way to get back in the moment. Take long breaths in through the nose, filling the belly, and then slowly exhale.

5. Create new goals

Have you found that the personal goals you set earlier this year have become meaningless?
If so, then it's time to make new ones, in small, easily do-able tasks.

The neurotransmitter serotonin (the 'happy hormone') is produced when we set goals for ourselves, so it's likely that you'll feel motivated and in control as you tick each task off your list.

6. Reward yourself regularly

Now more than ever, it's important for us to find joy in the small things, and enjoy all those little moments of pleasure.

The feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine is released in anticipation of a reward, not just when we receive one.

It's the perfect excuse to give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back, or a favourite treat.

7. Get moving!

To get out of your mind and into your body, schedule some time for daily exercise.
Moving your body reminds your brain that you're not helpless — you can still act independently, and make positive choices.
(For more information, read my eBook about fitness and working from home.)

8. Support others wherever you can

If you're feeling lonely, one of the best cures is to help someone else.

There are lots of ways for you to reach out to others, such as telephone calls, video calling platforms like Zoom or FaceTime, and messaging apps like WhatsApp.

Remember that social distancing is about being physically apart, not emotionally distant, or socially isolated. The neurotransmitter oxytocin is released when we're kind to others, and also to ourselves... so get that 'love hormone' activated.

You can also read my ebook, 'How to look after yourself and cure loneliness during Covid-19'.

9. If you're struggling, it's OK to ask for support

If you find yourself in 'catastrophising' mode on a regular basis, you should contact your manager or HR team for some extra support.
I work with HR experts and company owners, to create bespoke individual support plans that provide a 'toolkit' of techniques, along with understanding and judgement-free compassion that will help to get through these strange times.

Help is always available, so if nothing else, I urge you not to suffer in silence!
I also urge you to please take care and look after yourself,

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