



FIRST AID FOR HEALTH ANXIETY

Make sure your speakers are turned on.
You will probably also like to have a pen and notepad.

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Activity

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- Are you doing this lecture for yourself, others or both ?
- Have you experience what you think is anxiety? Hands up
- Have you experienced what you think is health anxiety? Hands up



Context

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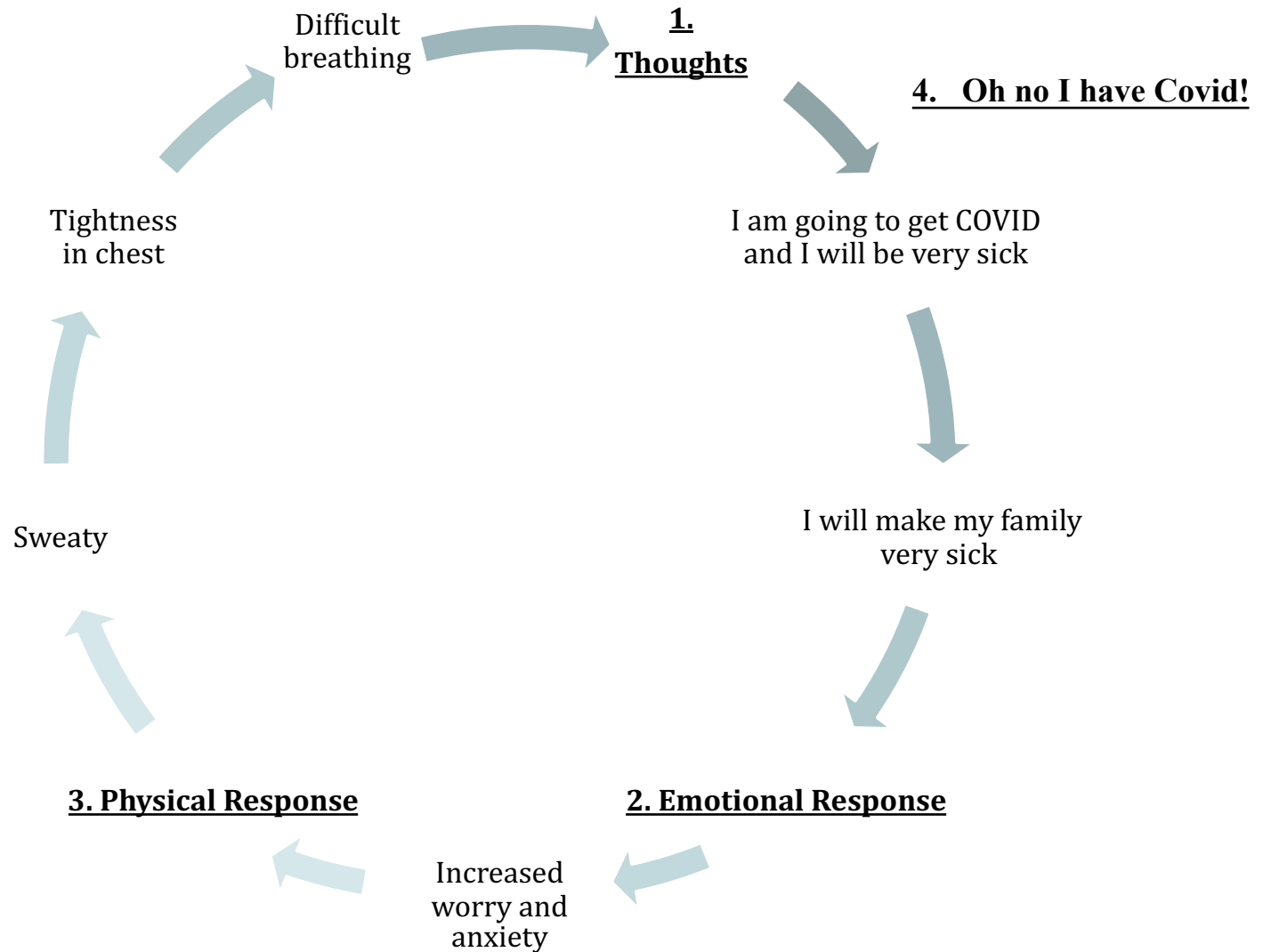
- Anxiety is a normal and necessary response to perceived or actual threat or danger.
- This is actually a survival instinct and can be particularly helpful for us in real life-threatening situations.
- Anxiety is absolutely justified, expected and even necessary.
- It is not cause for great concern if your anxious, but if your anxiety is too **intense**, too **frequent** and **impacting with you daily functioning** we may want to see how to reduce it as this may be more than everyday anxiety.

What is health anxiety?

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- Health anxiety refers to the experience of thinking that there may be a threat to your health, which consequently triggers your anxiety response.
- Health concerns can become a problem when they:
 - are **excessive**
 - are **out of proportion** to the realistic likelihood of having an actual and serious medical problem
 - are **persistent** despite negative test results and/or reassurance from your health practitioner
 - lead to **unhelpful behaviours** such as excessive checking, reassurance seeking (e.g., from doctors, family or friends), or avoidance (e.g., of check-ups, doctors, health related information), and
 - cause you significant **distress**, or **impair** your ability to go about your day-to-day life.
- This is when normal health concerns become **health anxiety**.

The vicious cycle of health anxiety



Potentially unhelpful behaviours

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- Overanalysing
- Constantly engaging with news
- Lack of predictability in life
- Loss of connection
- Numbing
- Inactivity

Any questions?

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Introducing: First Aid Toolbox for Health Anxiety

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- Contain symptom checking
- Managing excessive worry
- Dealing with uncertainty
- Predictability: Maintaining routine
- Mobility: Exercising
- Maximising sleep
- Healthy eating and monitoring mood altering substances
- Increase relaxation

Containing Symptom Checking

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- To check on or ask for reassurance about things we are worried about is a normal human behaviour and after checking we usually feel less anxious.
- People with health anxiety have reported engaging in frequent and repeated checking and reassurance seeking of health related symptoms, such as monitoring bodily processes.

What can help:

- Note how often you check your body, ask people for reassurance, or look at health information
- Try to gradually reduce how often you do these things over a week
- Use the C-19 symptom tracker - <https://covid.joinzoe.com/>

Managing excessive worrying

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- Worrying is perfectly justifiable right now, but too much worry can be exhausting and problematic.

What can help:

- Create a worry time and other thinking time
- Challenging your thinking
- Draw a table with two columns
- Write your health worries in the first column, then more balanced thoughts in the second
- For example, in the first column you may write, "I'm worried about these headaches" and in the second, "Headaches can often be a sign of stress"
- Limit the negative impact of media

Dealing with uncertainty, strategies from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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Focus on what's in your control

Acknowledge your thoughts, feeling and sensations

Come back into your body

Engage in what you're doing

Committed action: flexibly doing what matters

Open up: make space for what's showing up

Values: check in with what's important

Identify resources

Disinflect and distance

Adapted from Russ Harris (2020)

Poll on Russ Harris uncertainty

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Maintaining routine

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- We all need routine to help provide a sense of control and containment. We are not without routine right now, we need to rethink our routine.

What can help:

- Keeping busy with other activities
- Keep a structure to your day
- Create schedule
- What to look forward to in the future – eg: online “pub trivia” on Thursdays
- Create a calendar of connection and activities

Improving exercise and being creative with it.

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How much physical activity should you do?



This can also be achieved by 75 minutes of vigorous activity across the week or a mixture of moderate and vigorous.

All adults should undertake muscle strengthening activity, such as



exercising with weights



yoga



or carrying heavy shopping

at least 2 days a week

Minimise the amount of time spent sedentary (sitting) for extended periods



Maximising Sleep – sleep hygiene

Pre-bedtime activities	Bedroom environment
Avoid stimulants like coffee, black tea, smoking and alcohol at least 4 hours before you go to bed.	A room designated for sleep – the bedroom should be associated with sleep, with the exception of sex.
Only go to bed when you feel sleepy.	Little artificial light.
A light bedtime snack so that hunger does not disturb your sleep.	A pillow that keeps the head and neck in a neutral position.
Drink a warm drink, such as camomile tea.	A cool room, around 18 degrees.
Read a book before you go to bed.	A quiet room.
Avoid doing anything too stimulating, like working, exercising or playing computer games before bed.	A comfortable mattress that does not sag in the middle or at the edges.
Try not to work in your bedroom if possible so you do not associate your bed with work.	

Maximising sleep continued

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- Try sleeping for enough time that you will feel refreshed, but not for longer than that.
- Go to bed and wake up more or less at the same time each day.
- If you are sleeping more than 8-9 hours a day, gradually reduce the amount each day.
- If you can't fall asleep or get back to sleep then trying getting out of bed and relaxing by reading a book.

Healthy eating habits and managing mood altering substances

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Vitamin C	Vitamin A	Vitamin B12	Vitamin B6
<p>One orange a day would supply the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA).</p> <p>Blackcurrants are the most powerful source of Vitamin C.</p>	<p>Retinol sources: meat, fish, eggs and dairy products.</p> <p>Beta-carotene: brightly coloured fruits and vegetables.</p> <p>Aim for at least 1 carrot a day.</p>	<p>Not found in plants and should ring a bell for vegans.</p> <p>Fortified ingredients such as breakfast cereals.</p> <p>Mainly animal products.</p> <p>One egg per day should supply RDA.</p>	<p>Regular intake is required.</p> <p>Essential for mood.</p> <p>Wheatgerm, bananas, fish, chicken.</p> <p>A portion of chicken and sweet potato should supply the RDA.</p>

Relaxation

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- Make time for regular relaxation and mindfulness
- Listen to audios or join a practice:
 - Breathing
 - Body
 - Sensory
 - Emotions

Other forms of mindfulness

- Colouring in
- Puzzles

Any activity can be done mindfully so long as you doing on thing in the moment whole heartedly.

Summary: First Aid Toolbox for Health Anxiety

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- Contain symptom checking
- Managing excessive worry
- Dealing with uncertainty
- Predictability: Maintaining routine
- Mobility: Exercising
- Maximising sleep
- Healthy eating and monitoring mood altering substances
- Increase relaxation

Poll – what was the most useful toolbox skill?

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References

- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
- https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_Q3UcT9Q8VuSbiRm7x7-xjaxy5xkrba/view?usp=sharing