



Health, Wellbeing and EAP

Managing anxiety around COVID - 19

The Health and Wellbeing Department understand that staff may have concerns about current COVID-19 pandemic. As the situation relating to COVID-19 unfolds, including news reports, travel restrictions, and concerns for your own and your loved ones' health – people can experience concerns or anxiety.

In situations that are uncertain and evolving such as this, it's understandable to feel stressed, anxious, or upset, among other emotional reactions.

We remind all staff that there are a range of useful tools on the [Health and Wellbeing Hub](#) and our Employee Assistance Line remains available 24/7 on 1800 817 435 for staff who wish to speak to a counsellor in confidence.

We recommend that all staff be familiar with the latest advice and organisational updates via the COVID – 19 link on the Tusla Hub.



The following guide has been compiled by the HSE Psychology Service to give you some practical guidance on managing concerns around COVID – 19.

Covid 19 : What to do if we are concerned

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Main Facts to consider

- Not everyone will be infected by the virus.
- Many of those infected experience mild symptoms.
- Children are less likely to be affected
- Older people and those with existing health conditions such as Diabetes, Heart Problems and Respiratory problems are the most vulnerable.
- Estimates for the mortality rate vary a little, but it is mostly thought to be 2% or less.
- The means of transmission has to be fully identified: contact with an infected person seems necessary.
- If we have a specific concern check the HSE Website for information on www.HSE.ie (WWW.HSE.IE) or www.HPSC.ie where there are regular updates relating to COVID-19 in Ireland.
- If we have a concern that we might be infected it's best to **phone** our GP for advice

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Protecting ourselves from Covid- 19 - What we need to do:

- **Wash our hands properly and regularly**
- **Cover our mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve when we cough and sneeze.**
- **Put used tissues into a bin and wash our hands well**
- **Avoid people who are coughing and sneezing where possible**
- **Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces**
- **Follow the travel advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs**

How we might be affected emotionally

With Covid 19 we are all experiencing a new and challenging event. We may find ourselves worried to some extent, some more, some less. Not everybody will experience it in the same way. It is the uncertainty that generates fear and the absence of control.

Our response will be a normal reaction to something we are not used to. This response is likely to be a part in our lives for the next days/weeks.

In time, it will pass.

We may notice some of the following:

- Feeling on edge more than we are accustomed to
- Finding ourselves checking for symptoms, both in ourselves and others
- Becoming irritable more easily.
- We may feel insecure and it may even be a little difficult to settle ourselves
- Fearing that normal aches and pains might be the virus
- Have difficulties sleeping
- Find it difficult to stop ourselves thinking of the worst.

How to manage our worry

1. Social Media and Facts

We need to be aware that a lot of what is on social media is opinion, not fact.

In social media people may be talking about their worries and beliefs - we don't need to make them ours. Too much time on Social Media may only be increasing our worries- we could consider limiting our social media usage and just check the HSE websites (listed above) for information.

A lot of the information we are receiving is coming from a global perspective: it is best for us to refer to what is happening in our own country and locality.

When we are worried we can often focus on a worst case scenario: it is best to focus on facts. If we are concerned about something it is best to check it out to see if it is factual.

Fear can be as contagious as the Covid-19 virus -so the challenge is to get a balanced perspective.



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2. Managing what is within our control

Feeling worried is a normal reaction to something that feels threatening. We are human beings and when we feel under threat our survival instincts kick in so we might spend time thinking about the dangers. The key is to accept these thoughts as a normal response and let them pass.

We may find ourselves blaming others for the situation, while this may be natural, it is also unfair and could risk stigmatizing people.

Facing any risk and keeping it in perspective will be helpful. Each year we face the risks from influenza and other transmissible diseases. For most of us, we have got used to this and carry on as normal.

If it becomes necessary, making a plan to prepare for the needs of our families will help us to 'park' the worries and get back to what we are doing in the present moment.

If advised by the HSE, taking any necessary steps will help us to feel responsible and more in control. We will know that we are doing our best to look after ourselves, our families/friends and our community.

3. Take a Breath

Practicing a breathing exercise will help to soothe our body and become more settled. See the breathing exercises at the end of this article.

4. Staying in the present moment

What do you normally do for relaxation? If possible it would be good if we do things that help us relax e.g. walk, read a book.

If we have experience of Mindfulness, Yoga or Pilates we can also use it help to relax our body. Mindfulness simply means that we focus closely on the present moment.

5. Keeping our routines and good self-care

It's best if we maintain a normal routine and regular structure in our lives as far as possible and in line with HSE advice.

It's best to talk about our concerns to family and friends.

We would be best avoiding excess alcohol, recreational drugs, caffeine and nicotine.

We should try to balance activity with rest as best as we can. We will do better if we get enough sleep.

We should try to eat regular healthy meals.

If possible, it would be good if we find a way to engage in activities that are fun.



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Helping children and teenagers to understand:

Children and Teenagers will often take a lead from us in terms of how we respond to events, so it is important that we are not overly worried or anxious in their presence.

Every child is different and we know our children best so we need to trust our own judgment as to what will be best for any individual child.

Children will pick up on things differently at different ages, so as parents we need to tailor our approach.

Younger children do not need to be exposed to a lot of news/ concerning conversations. Think about protecting their time to play freely. We do, however need to take some time with children to find out what they already know from the news or from other children.

They may have questions about what they have heard which could be anything from 'it's a bug like a bad cold' to 'are we all going to die?' We need to really tune into what the child is feeling and show them that we understand them: 'I get the feeling that this is really scary for you?' Allowing our children to talk about their fears and letting them know we understand will make them feel much more connected and secure.

We can use a calm voice and let young children know that this virus is like a tummy bug or a 'flu and some people will catch it. We can reassure all children that lots of countries are working hard together to stop it spreading. In this way we are letting the child know that there is a new challenge out there but that everyone is working together to be sensible and help each other.

We can talk with children about good ways that they can help to stop the virus. With younger children we can make hand-washing a game: 'who can make the biggest bubbles?' or 'Wash hands while we sing Happy Birthday twice!' Encouraging use of tissues and 'sleeve sneezes' followed by hand washing will be an important habit for us to teach.

If some schools are closing, it helps children if we can frame this positively: 'There are lots of bugs going around so they are going to give the school a really good clean'. Try to help the child see how time at home could be fun and, if it looks likely to happen, we can prepare with about how we might use the time positively.

Teenagers are more likely to be accessing social media so negotiating less time focussed on Covid-19 on social media for a teenager who is overly worrying may be a useful way to help them get things in perspective. At the same time, they may be getting positive support from their friends and, if schools have closed, their access to some fun with friends through social media will be important.

Creating the space to really listen to them and understand how they are feeling will be extra important at this time. Having a frank discussion with them could help them sift fears from facts.

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Children and teenagers are likely to go through the same emotional reactions to their worries as adults although they may show this in different ways. They may be either more withdrawn or challenging than usual and much of this will be stemming from information that has worried them or turned into fears. Helping our children to develop some breathing exercises and relaxation techniques may also be helpful to help them to regulate themselves.

We need to let children know that they can come and talk with us at any time as their questions/worries may change as they hear about or think of different things. Listening to children and acknowledging their feelings will help them to feel connected and understood.

Your child may want to spend more time close to you when they are concerned or worried so try to be available to them, as this is a normal reaction.

As parents it is important to stay informed to help keep perspective and to be honest.

While it is normal to feel some concern at this time, settling ourselves and our families as best we can will help us to work together to look after each other.

Ways of Managing our Worry: Breathing Exercises

Try one of the following breathing exercises and see which one works best for you:

- 1) **Deep, slow breaths:** Inhale through the nose fully right down into the bottom of your lungs and exhale through the mouth (repeat 2-3 times and return to our normal breath)
- 2) **'Tension Down' exercise:**
 - a. Stand or sit with feet firmly on the floor.
 - b. Inhale through the nose and as you do notice any tension you have in your body. Imagine that you are 'picking up this tension' as you breathe in.
 - c. Exhale through your nose and slowly breathe out saying 'Tension Down'. Imagine the tension flowing down through your body, through your feet and out of the room and far away.
 - d. You can repeat the Tension Down exercise once or twice at a time. Then any time you notice yourself becoming tense repeat the sequence.
- 3) **Breathing out for longer**
 - a. Inhale through the nose to a count of 1,2,3,4
 - b. Exhale through the mouth for a count of 1,2,3,4,5 or 6
 - c. Repeat above steps for a minute or two, working at whatever pace is comfortable for you. When you are used to the practice you can stop the counting, so long as the out-breath is a little longer than the in-breath.
 - d. Return to your own natural breath

