Looking after your mental health during challenging times

HSC Public Health Agency

Project supported by the PHA

AWARE

OVERCOMING DEPRESSION. CHANGING LIVES.

This resource has been produced by AWARE with the support of the Public Health Agency and complements AWARE's Mood Matters Programme, although it may used as a self-help resource. It can help your time during this period of uncertainty by giving you information on how to look after your mental health.

It will also help you recognise signs and symptoms of poor mental health and make you aware of sources of help.

What do we mean by mental health?

Mental Health is...

'How healthy our mind is and how well it works.
It's about our thoughts and our feelings and how we deal with the ups and downs of life'

World Health Organisation

'Good mental health is just as important as physical health. It means feeling positive about yourself, being able to cope with everyday pressures and being able to form and maintain relationships'

NI Department of Health

Sometimes we use the word 'resilience' when we describe the ability to be able to deal with life's problems and bounce back when we experience setbacks.

When life changes...

There is no doubt that changes in life circumstances, especially circumstances out of our control can create a stressful time which will affect us all to some extent and may lead to some experiencing mental health problems such as low mood or anxiety or even a mental illness such as depression.

How will you see this time of change ?

Anticipation?
Relief?
Contentment?
Learning?
Shock?
Anxiety?
Feeling overwhelmed?
Growth
Solitude
Giving

Mental Health at the moment

There are many situations and events that can impact on mental wellbeing during these uncertain times, these include:

Boredom, lack of motivation, being alone, isolation debt, financial difficulties.

Relationship difficulties, domestic violence, money worries, problems at work, health problems, bereavement, lack of support.

Poor sleep, adapting to new routine and responsibility, childcare issues, loss of contact with friends, worrying about return to work.

Stress and anxiety

What is stress?

'When we think the demands placed on us exceed our ability to cope'
Anxiety UK

It is no surprise that given all the challenges involved in managing change and difficult circumstances that even the best prepared and supported people will experience symptoms of stress and anxiety at some stage. These feelings are normal and some stress can actually be good for you as it can motivate you and help you focus on what you are doing. It can also increase your awareness of danger which helps protect you in times of need.

However in the longer term stress can be harmful and impact adversely on your mental wellbeing so it is important to know the signs and symptoms early and have ways of dealing with it.

Symptoms of stress & anxiety

THINKING:

- I won't be able to cope
- Is this ever going to end?
- Something will go wrong
- I can't do this
- It's all too much to handle

PHYSICAL

- Nausea
- Palpitations
- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Feeling shaky

FEELINGS:

- Worried
- Useless
- Afraid
- Overwhelmed
- Agitated

BEHAVIOUR:

- Avoiding people
- Not eating / comfort eating
- Trying to do too much
- Crying
- Arguing

Challenging and changing your thinking

Not everyone is affected in the same way by situations and events. What might cause one person to feel anxious and stressed may not affect another in the same way and vice versa.

It is not the situation or event but what you think about the situation or event that affects how you feel mentally and physically, and also impacts on your behaviour. If you tend to think about things in an unhelpful way it can lead to what we call a 'vicious circle' – where your thoughts, mental and physical feelings and behaviour all feed into each other making you feel worse and worse.

For example you may think: 'There's too much to do'. Thinking like this might make you feel anxious which in turn may lead to unhelpful behaviours such as not eating properly. Physical symptoms may include having a headache which makes you feel worse.

You might start to think 'I can't cope' which makes you feel overwhelmed. You may have difficulty sleeping which makes you feel exhausted. Before you know it you're caught in that 'vicious circle' which can be difficult to break. But the good news is that you can challenge and in many cases break the circle just by changing 'unhelpful thoughts' into 'more helpful' thoughts.

If you are feeling stressed about something personal to you, try putting things into perspective by asking yourself some basic questions such as: What's the worst that can happen? Will it matter in six months' time? Are my thoughts based on facts?
Am I making a mountain out of a molehill? Is there another way to think about my problem? What advice would I give to a friend in this situation?

Chances are things will not seem as bad as you first thought. Of course it won't work every time but at least you won't spend time worrying about small things and you can save your energy for dealing with the very difficult ones. Here's a few examples – try putting in a few of your own and every time you catch yourself

Situation/Event	Unhelpful Thinking	More helpful Thinking
Nothing to do	Today is going to be so long, ill never get through it	I will look up some craft/ cooking ideas or learn a new skill today
Losing contact with friends	I really miss contact with my friends	Maybe I'll learn how to connect online or I'll make a phone call
Arguing with others	Everything is going wrong - we're growing apart	We are spending so much time together at the minute, I'll step back for a little while and give us both space
Didn't sleep well	Typical me I'm going to become ill now through lack of sleep	Maybe I'll meditate, try mindfulness and just "Be" or I'll take rest in the garden?
Enter your own example here:		

Tips for dealing with stress:

- Get some fresh air and exercise – research shows that exercise is a great way to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety
- Don't let problems mount up - try breaking your problems into smaller chunks and deal with them one-by-one
- Try to get rest if and when you can
- Try some basic relaxation exercises
- Be kind to yourself – don't try to do too much and give yourself credit for what you achieve
- Be assertive – you can't please everyone all the time so sometimes it's ok to say 'no'
- Ask for help – it is not a sign of weakness and this is probably one time in your life when you really need it!

You will find lots of specific practical examples to manage your mood in the second half of this booklet. Managing day to day stresses helps you maintain good mental health and may also prevent mental ill-health.

For further information visit: www.mindingyourhead.info where you can download the booklet 'Steps to deal with Stress' produced by The Public Health Agency

Get a routine – Divide your day into three parts – morning, afternoon and evening and plan something for each part. Here are some examples to get you started. Try to get a good mix of things you find enjoyable, things that you have to do and things that bring you into contact with other people.

	SOMETHING I ENJOY	THINGS TO BE DONE	STAYING CONNECTED
Morning	Do a stretch or exercise routine	Preparing dinners	telephone/ check in a neighbour vulnerable person
Afternoon	Reading	Some housework, laundry or de-cluttering	texting or Zoom meeting with a friend/ new online group or colleague
Evening	Going for a walk	Be creative with outstanding DIY, a craft or painting	Talking to someone in your home or family

Its OK not to be OK

Acknowledging when you are stressed/ anxious or tired is the starting point to recieving the help and support you need. Talking to the right people e.g family, friends, health professionals, can often make a big difference.

Whether its practical, emotional or financial assistance you need, putting these supports into place at an early stage will help you manage your stress levels, form healthy connections and keep well.

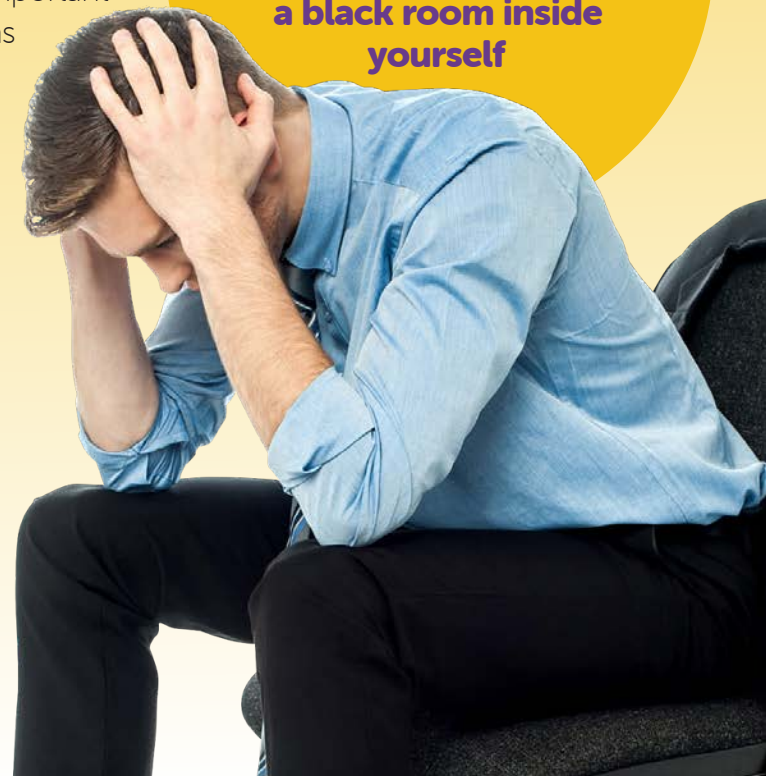
When we listen to our mind on a regular basis it helps us recognise the times when we might need some extra medical or professional support. The following pages will also help you identify signs and symptoms of mental ill- health and how you can support yourself or someone else at this time.

Mental illness signs and symptoms to look out for

It is possible that in these difficult times and at varying times in our lives, that 1 in 4 of us may develop mental ill health. It is important to be aware of the signs and symptoms so we can help as early as possible.

- **An unusually sad mood that does not go away**
- **Tiredness and lack of energy**
- **Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities**
- **Difficulty in concentrating and making decisions**
- **Difficulty in sleeping**
- **Weight gain or weight loss**
- **The feeling of guilt when not at fault**
- **Slow movement or agitation, and inability to settle**

Depression is a feeling of low mood that lasts for a long time and affects a person's everyday life. Depression can feel like you are locked in a black room inside yourself



Causes of Mental Ill Health

There is seldom one cause for someone experiencing Depression. It is usually a combination of factors. Let's look at some of the causes of Depression:

HEREDITARY

Being born to a parent or close relative who has had Depression may increase an individual's risk

PERSONALITY

An individual with a sensitive personality or the tendency to strive for perfection is more vulnerable to Depression

ENVIRONMENT

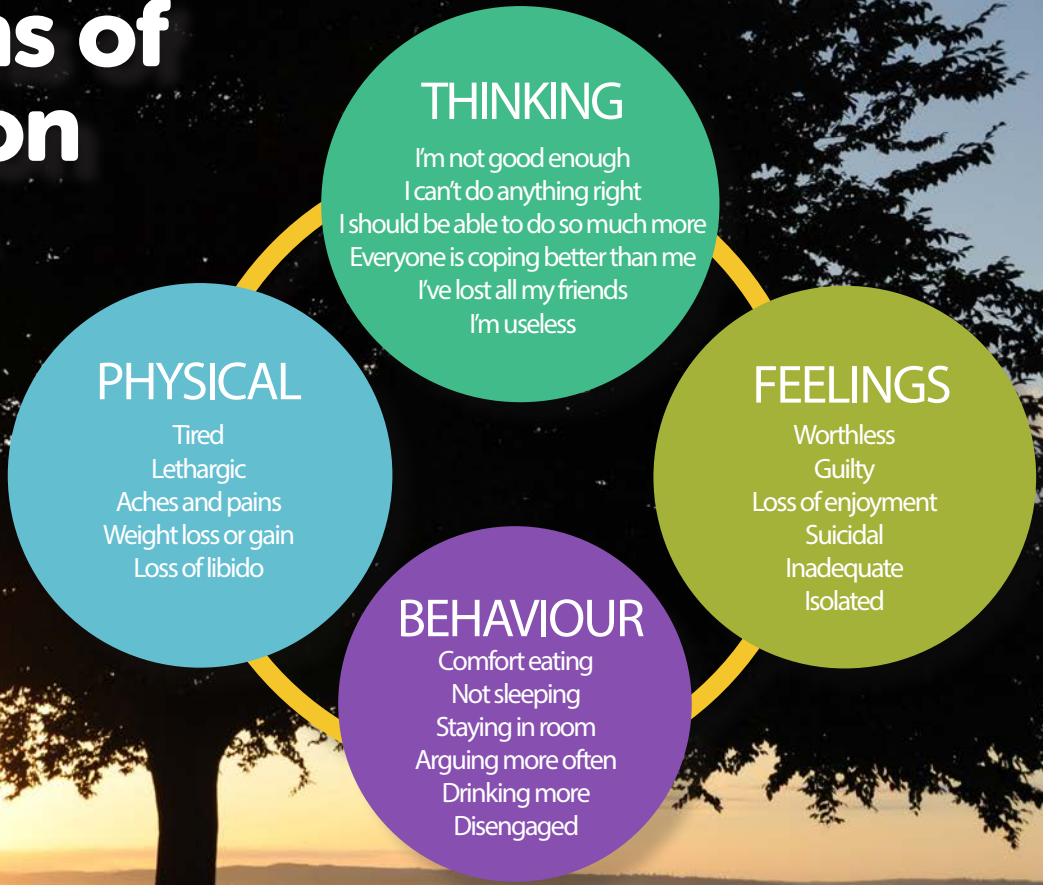
Current factors such as money worries, stress, physical illness, or loneliness can contribute to Depression

LIFE EVENTS

Depression can be caused due to past issues, such as bereavement, abuse, job loss, relationship break-ups and so on.

Symptoms of Depression

Like any physical illness, however, depression can affect anyone. Sometimes with no obvious reason.



Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders may be heightened during times of change. Therefore, it is important to continue to keep in contact with your GP and regular sources of support - online and telephone options may still be available.

GENERALISED

When a person has overwhelming feelings of anxiety or worries, more often than not for a period of six months or more. It can be categorised as generalised anxiety disorder. The worry is usually unfounded or exaggerated. Their worry is about things that may go wrong and not being able to cope when they do.

PANIC

When a person experiences a panic attack it can be categorised as panic disorder. These attacks are quick and the symptoms are acute, especially hyperventilation, rapid heartbeat, and/or chest pain. as the symptoms are similar to a heart attack, the person may fear they are dying. The attack usually eases within a

PHOBIC

A person with a phobic disorder may suffer from:
- Agoraphobia: Extreme or irrational fear of open or public places
A specific phobia: exaggerated or unfounded fear of certain things, such as spiders, flying, being closed in and social phobia. Fear of any situation that might involve public scrutiny. The person usually believes that others will think ill of them.

P.T.S.D.

A person may suffer from one of these disorders after experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about a distressing or disastrous event. Acute stress disorder gets better within months whereas PTSD lasts much longer

OCD

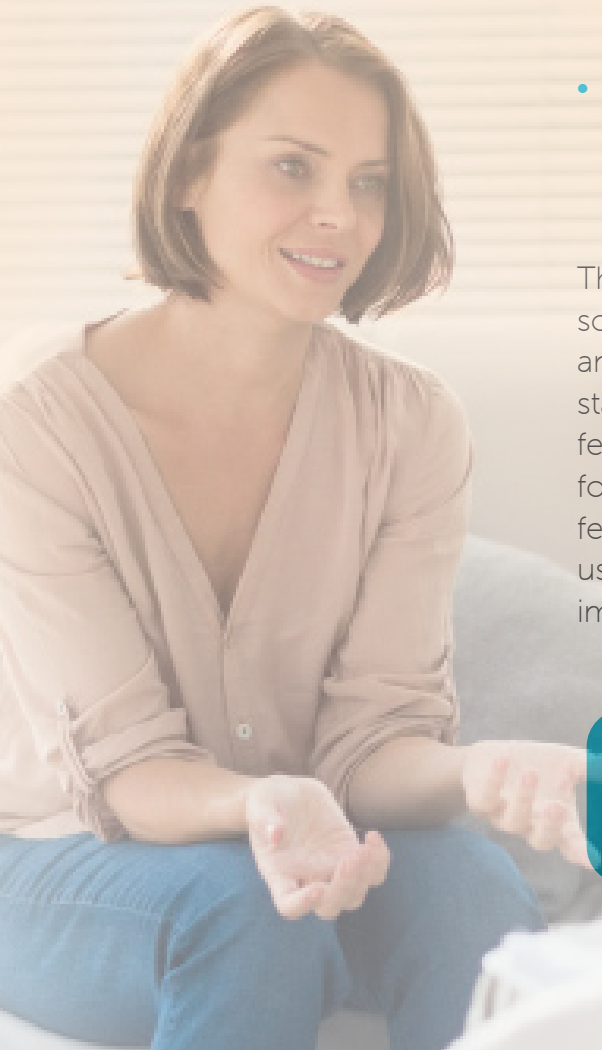
A person with OCD has obsessive thoughts (most of these are about fear or harm or contamination), and in an effort to reduce the anxiety caused by these thoughts, they carry out compulsive behaviours, such as excessive cleaning or handwashing.

It is important to note that many of the symptoms are common to all disorders and people who experience anxiety may not fit neatly into one particular type.

Help for depression and anxiety

Like all illnesses the sooner you get help the better. So if you feel that you are experiencing some of the symptoms of depression or anxiety you should talk to your GP in the first instance. They may recommend one or a combination of the following.

- **Talking therapies** such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which focuses on your changing your thinking and behaviour in order to make you feel better mentally and physically. We have used some CBT concepts in this booklet.
- **Counselling** may also be of use as it can enable you to address some of the issues which may be contributing to your illness.
- **Support Groups** brings you into contact with other people experiencing the illness so that you can share experiences and support each other.
- **Relaxation Therapies** such as Mindfulness, meditation or yoga.
- **Complementary Therapies** such as reflexology, Indian head massage, foot/hand massage or aromatherapy may also be helpful.
- **Self-Help** is vitally important whether you are trying to maintain your mental health or coping with the illness. Although you may feel tired and lacking in motivation, evidence shows that starting to do things can help make you feel better. Try to start with something you used to enjoy and take it slowly one step at a time.
- **Online options are available**
  www.aware-ni.org
- **Reach out :**
  Further sources of support are listed on pages 25 & 24



- **Medication** Depending on the number and severity of symptoms and your previous history, your doctor may prescribe antidepressant medication which can help ease the symptoms and help to make you to feel better.

They may take between two and six weeks to start working so it is very important to take the correct dosage as directed and to continue taking them for at least six months after you start to feel better. Modern antidepressants have relatively few side effects although you may experience some of the following - nausea, dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, feeling dizzy or shaky. These should pass as your body gets used to the medication but if they persist or there is no improvement in your mood you should talk to your GP.

You may find this website helpful:
www.choiceandmedication.org/hscni

Take5

for your emotional wellbeing

Worldwide research indicates that the following are the most evidence - based ways of looking after your mental health. They are sometimes referred to as the 'Five ways to Wellbeing' or 'Take 5'. Here are some suggestions on how to include 'Take 5' in your daily routine (For further information visit www.mindingyourhead.info).

CONNECT – make an effort to stay connected with people around you – family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, other parents and If you are housebound then stay connected via online video chat, text or phonecalls.

BE ACTIVE – build exercise into your everyday life. Try going for a brisk walk outside or do an online exercise class or DVD try to make it part of your routine.

TAKE NOTICE – try to focus on the present, savour every moment and enjoy time to reflect, take in your surroundings, be with your feelings, smell, taste, feel, touch, hear.

KEEP LEARNING – sometimes when our circumstances change it is an opportunity to learn a new skill, do something you always wanted to do, engage your brain in a different way. you may surprise yourself what you can do.

GIVE – giving to others makes us feel good, even a smile, a kind word, some encouragement or time to listen to others.
Giving ourselves time to adjust is important too.

You might also find these things helpful

- **EAT AS WELL AS YOU CAN –** Eating a balanced diet in is very important for the physical and mental well-being. So try to eat as healthily as you can and avoid sugary snacks or skipping meals. Try to plan ahead and if necessary pre-prepare your meals when you have time.
  For further information visit https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/

- **CUT DOWN ON CAFFIENE –**
  If you are feeling anxious, cutting down on the caffeine may also help. Try replacing some of your tea or coffee with water and avoid energy drinks.

- **GET ENOUGH SLEEP**
  Try to stick to your usual bedtime routine. Or adjust it slightly if circumstances have changed. Aviod taking a nap during the day as this may disrupt your sleep during the night.

  For further tips see:
  www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness

- **EASY ON THE ALCOHOL**
  Try to limit your alcohol intake or reduce it. If you feel up to it replace evening drinks with hot chocolate or herbal teas such as calmomile creating a new habit.

- **LOOK GOOD FEEL GOOD**
  Looking your best can actually make you feel good so don't be tempted to stay in your PJ's - make time or ask others to help and this will give you time for those important things like showering and dressing. Keeping a routine to wash, dress and if you want, do your hair and make up? This sets you up for the day ahead and helps you feel motivated. Helps you define the stages of your day too.

- **HAVE SOME PAMPER TIME**
  Take some time out for you. Create a "Me" time. Run a bath, light some candles, do a guided meditation, paint your nails, learn how to use household foods to make a facemask, You deserve it and it helps you feel refreshed.

- **THE POWER OF MUSIC**
  Music has the power to change your mood and give you an instant lift if you're feeling a bit down. So try putting on some of your favourite music and sing along if you can.

Useful websites and apps

- **AWARE**
  Support groups, fact sheets and wellbeing programmes www.aware-ni.org
- **Helplines Network NI**
  Provides a range of helplines for various issues www.helplinesnetworkni.com
- **Parenting NI**
  www.parentingni.org
- **Minding your head**
  www.minding your head.info
- **Support for children & young people**
  www.eani.org.uk/taxonomy/term/539
- **Rethink Mental illness**
  www.rethink.org
- **Reach Out**
  Includes practical support and advice on dealing with COVID-19
  www.about.au.reachout.com

Downloadable free apps for your phone:

- **Chill Panda**
  Uses the camera on your mobile to detect your heart rate and provides relaxation and calming exercises www.nhs.uk/apps-library/chill-panda
- **Stop, Breathe and Think**
  Guided meditations, breathing exercises and mindfulness www.stopbreathethink.com
- **NHS Moodzone**
  Tools to manage stress and links to Mental Health apps. www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression
- **The Free Mindfulness Project**
  Mindfulness-based stress reduction
  www.freemindfulness.org/download
- **Headspace**
- **Pacifica**
- **Here 2 Help app**
- **Calm**
  Strategies for sleep, meditation and relaxation
  www.calm.com

Organisations who can help

- **Directory of organisations to help improve mental health and emotional wellbeing in your area -** www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/directory-services-help-improve-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing
- **Family Support Hubs -** provides services for families who are experiencing difficulties – for further information visit online.hscni.net/hospitals/health-and-social-care-trusts
- **Surestart –** family health, early years care and education and improved well-being programmes aged 0-4. www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/sure-start-services
- **Action for Children -** support www.actionforchildren.org.uk
- **Lifeline –** provides services for those in distress or despair. Tel: 0808 808 8000
- **Samaritans** www.samaritans.org Tel: 116123
- **Mens' Action Network** www.man-ni.org connect on facebook Helpline for men over 50. Tel: 028 71137 7777
- **Anxiety UK** www.anxietyuk.org.uk
- **Rural Support's helpline** Older, vulnerable or farming needs. Tel: 0800 138 1678
- **MIND** Huge range of topics and support: www.mind.org.uk

Online Counselling Services :

- **New life counselling** Tel: 028 9039 1630
- **Inspire** www.inspirewellbeing.org, Tel: 0044 28903 28474
- **Kooth** www.kooth.com children & young people
- **Hope Counselling** E: hopecounselling1@hotmail.com Tel: 07902523883
- **Mind Your Mate And Yourself (MYMY)** www.mymy.org.uk Tel: 028 4372 7549

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For further information about our Mood Matters Programme and our other services visit www.aware-ni.org or email training@aware-ni.org

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