

Some (hopefully helpful) tips to look after your mental health in a Covid – 19 environment.

Hi my name is Tony, I attend to 6 PM service and for my job I am a clinical psychologist.

We thought it might be helpful to offer up some psychological tips on how to manage anxiety and mental health in the face of Covid - 19.

In the past week I've noted a number of different responses for people to Covid -19. I was watching three teenagers doing laps in the pool, when the pools were still open and after social distance was required. They were huddled together in the same lane. They would do a lap and then stop, huddle together and have a chat and then on to the next lap, followed by huddling together again. Clearly, they were not anxious about maintaining social distance.

In the same week I noticed a staff member in tears concerned she would take home the virus to her children. I noticed another staff member distressed fearing she would take home the virus to her aged mother she was caring for. I also noted another staff member who decided to take indefinite leave so she could care for her young family, she was feeling guilty that she was letting her work team down. In my examples, this week I have noticed seemingly no anxiety, heightened anxiety, distress and guilt.

Some people will sail through Covid - 19 with minimal emotional response, others will have heightened emotional responses. That is to be expected because we are different people with different temperaments and different life experiences, living is a challenging time.

In my examples above the teenagers could likely benefit from a bit more anxiety, whereas the first staff member may benefit from a little less anxiety.

I would like to make some suggestions from my clinical experience that may help those who are feeling distressed and are finding their anxiety heightened in this Covid - 19 environment, as well as some general ideas on how to maintain good mental health.

I want to suggest that *how we think* and *how we behave* can have a big impact on how we manage our emotions.

How you think:

In my mind and from my experiences as a therapist, being well-informed and making rational, evidence-based decisions will help.

We are living in team Australia and our government and senior health advisers, together, are making decisions about how we should and should not behave. Listen to their advice.

If you want further information about Covid - 19 you will probably get your best information from the World Health Organisation website and from the New South Wales health website. If you are becoming overly anxious, I would suggest limit your access to these sights to once or twice a week at most.

Okay you have done the above and now you are informed with the best information you are likely to get. Next think about what you and your family are going to do, then do it. Turn it into a new set of family routines. Then stop thinking about it and just do it.

Yes, you will need to update your information every couple of days around government rules and regulations, then adjust your routines if you need to, then again stop thinking about it and just do it.

Overthinking, going into “what if this ... what if that...” scenarios constantly, talking about Covid – 19 all the time, listening constantly to radio and TV updates and exploring the latest news on the Internet will likely just raise your anxiety. It will not change the environment we live in and it will not help you stay safer. You have your plan in place and you are updating it every couple of days if necessary. Now just do it and stop thinking and stop talking about it all the time.

Some may say, “but I can’t do that...”. You would be surprised what you can do when you practice. An overly anxious thinking style is typically a habit and usually a self-defeating one. Like any unhelpful habit it can be reduced with practice. Read on because the rest of the ideas here will likely help you reduce the habit.

If you’re a person who is getting very anxious about the Covid - 19 environment, have a short debrief with friends or family and then stop talking about it. Talk about something else, anything else.

Here is a somewhat helpful rule of thumb: *‘what you think about, what you talk about... your emotions will tend to follow’.*

How you behave:

You may have noticed our behaviour and our thinking interact with each other. For example, it is suggested you *think* about the new routines you can put into place, then put your new routines in place (*a behaviour*) and stopping thinking about Covid-19. This combination of well-informed thinking and behaviour will likely take the edge off your anxiety.

Back to behaviours: *Doing things you enjoy*, and that you can still do within current limitations, will also likely assist your anxiety. For example: Read, watch movies, listen to music, cook, garden, sew, knit, do that DIY task, exercise daily if you can, all these types of things should help. Stay in contact with friends and other family members (do not keep talking to them about Covid-19).

Most people would agree that Covid-19 is a threat. It is also correct that threats provide the possibility of new opportunities. Business models would agree with this. (*did you notice how this change of thinking can affect you emotionally? First thought, ‘I’m under threat’... second thought, ‘There is likely some new opportunities here’.*)

Try to *think creatively about how you can use the current situation* with its social distancing and increasing isolation. There maybe things you have been putting off that now you can get done. You may have a dream about writing your memoir’s, well maybe now there is

time. Perhaps there has been some online learning that you want to do, is this current situation going to provide you the opportunity? Maybe you have some more time to meditated on God's word and pray. Start doing some of these things.

If you are a family isolating think about making a daily family time with the kids; play games, read, watch movies. Let the kids choose and join them. Entering your child's world through playing and praising your children lays the foundations for a positive sense of self in your kids, it also typically leads to less behavioural problems.

If your working from home do not let your work take over your life. Stop working when your hours are done. Do other things. For example, your isolation may be a great opportunity to spent time with your partner or your kids.

If you are home schooling your kids due to Covid 19 my clinical experience would suggest the following would likely be most helpful. As a parent or a full-time carer of the kids in your household you need to stay in charge. You need to be the 'boss' of the routines and the boundaries, not the kids. I would suggest it would be most helpful to get the kids doing their schoolwork in the mornings and the best you can be involved with them and encourage them. For most kids I would advise having them do their schoolwork in a communal place within the house, not alone in their bedroom, is likely to work best. Your involvement and 'when / then' strategies can be helpful to motivate the kids with their school work. For example, *when* the kids have done their schoolwork *then* they can do some of those other activities that they may like to do. Maybe that is the time to exercise together or for them to have free time to do something they would like.

I would strongly suggest maintain bed times and computer / TV use allowances. This is not a school holiday and it will likely go on for a long time. If home becomes too comfortable and relaxed there will be some kids who will find the gain of being at home much nicer than the routine of school. For this group going back to school maybe be particularly difficult. You know your kids best, but please consider these ideas when your planning your new routines.

Another important opportunity is to check in on someone from church, and not just those in your church network but those in your social networks. It will likely be good for their mental health and yours.

If your emotions are getting the better of you, try to talk to your local doctor or psychologist. Your local doctor can refer you to a psychologist if you do not have one and you think that may assist you.

Ring and chat to one of the staff at church, their numbers are on the KAC website.

NSW Health has a Mental Health Line Number 1800 011 511.

The Beyond Blue website may also be of assistance: - <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

In Matthew: 6:27 we find Jesus saying, "who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"