**COPING WITH WORRY AND ANXIETY ABOUT COVID-19**

COVID-19 and the impact on New Zealand is unknown territory for all of us. It is perfectly normal and okay to feel anxiety when in a global pandemic. This can result in strong feelings, reactions and changes in behaviour. There are a number of steps you can take to help yourself, family and children.

Having a chronic illness you may feel especially concerned, and this is understandable because of the potential effect on your immune system. It is important to follow the advised public health precautions to prevent potential infection and to follow your health care management plan.

**Psychological impact of COVID-19**

Everybody responds differently to events that are stressful. How you react and respond will depend on your personal situation and background including your understanding about COVID-19, previous experiences with illness, and your community.

Common experiences for people faced with stress include:

* Worrying about your health and the health of your loved ones
* Sleep or eating pattern changes
* Concentration and attention difficulties
* Increased use of alcohol, nicotine or other drugs

**Top ways to look after your mental wellbeing**

* **Staying connected with others** is so important for our wellbeing and helps to make us feel safer, less stressed and less anxious. We can support each other to get through this. While we are limiting social contact to contain the spread of COVID-19, there are still lots of ways we can connect.
* **Acknowledge your feelings and reach out for support**. It is completely normal to feel overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, worried or scared in the current situation. Allow yourself time to notice and express what you are feeling. This could be by writing them down in a journal, talking to others, doing something creative, or practising meditation or mindfulness. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.
* **Be calm and kind to yourself**. Don’t be hard on yourself if you are feeling more unsettled or worried than you usually do. Give yourself credit for coping in a difficult situation.
* **Try to keep as many routines in place as possible**. Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time, eat at regular times, shower, change your clothes, have regular e-meetings with colleagues or virtual coffee dates with friends, do your chores. Meditating and exercising can help you to relax and have a positive impact on your thoughts. Try not to increase unhealthy habits such as comfort eating, drinking or smoking.
* **Assisting other people who might need help** and reaching out to those who may be feeling alone or concerned can benefit both you and the person receiving support.
* **Seek accurate information from legitimate sources and limit the amount of information you access.** COVID-19 is on every mainstream and social media platform. The information presented may not always be accurate which can increase anxiety and worry due to mixed messages or constantly hearing the risks associated with COVID-19. Therefore, it is important to control how much access you have to the media. When something is constantly talked about we focus on it more and then think and worry about it more, which increases our belief that we are more at risk, which is likely not to match the actual risk.

It is important to make sure that the information you access is coming from official sources including the Ministry of Health or your local DHB and hospital.

Try and limit access to the news. Turn off alerts on your phone so you are in control of the information you receive. Turn off the radio at the time of news bulletins. Be comfortable and confident in asking your friends, family, or colleagues not to discuss the constant news around you or your loved ones. This will help you worry less and will also help others.

* **Take action.** This can create a sense of control and help if you are experiencing a sense of helplessness. Make sure you have an updated sick day management plan and have the appropriate medical and healthcare supplies on hand. Programme into your phone the emergency numbers of people or health care services you can contact if you are unwell; don’t hesitate to use them if concerned.
* **If you are currently getting help/support with your mental health, continue with this if possible** and notice if your symptoms are getting worse. Talk with your GP, counsellor, case worker or mental health team about how they can continue supporting you. Can your appointments take place over the phone, via email, text or video chat? What tips do they have to help you get through? Who can you call if you need help urgently? Write this down so you have it handy when you need it.
* **Seek further professional support if you need it**. For support with anxiety, stress, or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 to talk with a trained counsellor for free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Other useful websites include:

 [www.health.govt.nz](http://www.health.govt.nz)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.WHO.int](http://www.WHO.int)

[www.1737.co.nz](http://www.1737.co.nz)

[www.justathought.co.nz](http://www.justathought.co.nz)

[www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

*From the Gastroenterology Team, Waikato Hospital March 2020*

*Adapted from the MOH website and information prepared by Dr McClintock, Clinical Psychologist*