

Introduction

In this unprecedented period of global uncertainty, we felt it was necessary to put together this workbook to provide our community with much needed support.

The first thing to note right now is that it's completely normal to be experiencing a wide range of emotions. Accepting your feelings is an important first step to building resilience. The simple act of naming your emotions has been found to benefit wellbeing. So, take a moment now to tune into your body and notice how you're feeling. Circle the emotions that you identify with:

- Anxious
- Stressed
- Worried
- Fearful
- Low
- Lonely
- Overwhelmed
- Helpless
- Frustrated
- Guilty
- Angry

Remember: It's okay to feel discomfort. Accepting distress is often the quickest way to feel immediately calmer.

What Is Stress and Anxiety?

The terms stress and anxiety are often used interchangeably. To develop a deeper understanding of mental wellbeing, it's helpful to understand how they differ.

Stress

Kelly McGonigal, an expert in the new science of stress, offers us this definition: "Stress is what arises when something we care about is at stake". Many of us are now in positions where things that matter to us feel more uncertain, which understandably gives rise to our stress response.

Stress is best understood as manifesting in the body. It's the racing heart, sweaty palms and funny tummy we're all familiar with. Central to the experience of stress is the amygdala, the area of your brain responsible for generating your body's stress response.

Experts agree that a core component of stress is the perception of threat and danger. You've probably heard of the 'fight-or-flight' stress response as a reaction to perceived danger. In fact, we have various stress responses. For example, there is one response which encourages us to reach out for social support, named the 'tend and befriend' response.

Dr John Arden, author of several books integrating neuroscience and psychotherapy, recently put forward the term *autostress* for describing what happens when our body's stress response goes on for a long time. He explains:

"Like autoimmune disorders that hijack the immune system, attacking the body instead of protecting it, autostress [transforms] the stress response system into something that attacks the self rather than protecting it."



If your body is in autostress mode, you'll experience a wide range of physical stress symptoms on an ongoing basis, regardless of your situation. That's why people often reporting feeling anxious for no apparent reason. If you're suffering from high levels of distress triggered by the pandemic, you might continue to feel this way after the virus has passed.

Signs of autostress include:

- Chest tightness and feeling like you can't breathe
- Muscle tension, aches and pains
- Headaches
- Difficulty sleeping
- Restlessness and an inability to relax
- Heart palpitations
- Digestive issues

Anxiety

Anxiety is commonly described as having both mental and physical symptoms. The distinction between mental and physical anxiety is important because different tools are required for addressing physical symptoms (what we label autostress) and mental symptoms (what we label anxiety).

Anxiety is best described as the unhelpful thinking patterns we experience when our mind fixates on threat, uncertainty and negativity.

Anxiety can occur on its own, as a response to stress, or it can trigger stress. When it occurs as a response to stress, it can intensify the stress, and, in worst cases, lead to panic attacks.

It's important to understand that you cannot control anxiety from occurring – this is your brain's automatic survival mechanism. What matters is learning how to respond to anxiety helpfully, so that you don't get carried away by it.

Here are five examples of what to look out for:

<p>Threat Scanning</p>	<p>When your mind searches the environment for what you fear (consciously or subconsciously). Threat scanning is often associated with your mind assigning meaning to harmless events.</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Frequently checking your body for coronavirus symptoms.</i> • <i>Obsessively checking the news for coronavirus updates.</i>
<p>Catastrophising</p>	<p>When your mind jumps to worst case scenarios, i.e., 'making a mountain out of a molehill'.</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You feel chest tightness and your mind tells you that you have coronavirus and that your life is in danger.</i> • <i>Your mind gives you the mental image of losing all the people you love.</i>



<p>Hypothetical Worry</p>	<p>It's important to note that worry is completely normal. It only becomes unhelpful when you focus excessively on <i>hypothetical worries</i> instead of <i>practical worries</i>.</p> <p>Hypothetical worries include 'what if' thoughts and are typically about things you don't have much control over.</p> <p>Practical worries concern things you do have control over, and they can help you be more proactive.</p> <p>If you're very uncomfortable with uncertainty, you're likely prone to hypothetical worry and spend a lot of time focused on the future instead of the present.</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I know I'm following all the guidelines, but what if I spread the virus?" • "What if someone gets too close to me at the supermarket and I catch it?"
<p>Emotional Reasoning</p>	<p>When your mind tells you that your emotions reflect reality. While emotions can act as helpful messengers, they often aren't reliable.</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I feel scared, so I must be in danger." • "I feel guilty, so I must've done something wrong."
<p>Fortune Telling</p>	<p>When your mind interprets predictions as facts.</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm going to be stuck inside for months on end." • "My mental health will keep deteriorating and I'll have to go back on meds."

My Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

Learning how to recognise and reduce anxiety is an extremely helpful life skill.

In Part One of this workbook, we'll introduce you to several tools for dealing with anxiety.

In Part Two, you'll create your *Stress Resilience Action Plan* for preventing and reducing autostress.

