



Some Ideas for Staff Working With Health Anxiety **(with reference to COVID -19)**

The following describes some strategies for dealing with health anxieties in relation to COVID -19. They are aimed at instances when anxiety becomes out of control and very clearly disproportionate to the situation. It is normal for everyone to be anxious about what is going on and often reassurance that such anxiety is normal and some practical infection control advice is all that is needed. When the anxiety gets excessive, some of the following ideas may be helpful:

1. Take the person's fear seriously

Many health anxieties later turn out to have realistic physiological underpinning. For COVID -19 we know the danger is real and, if people feel that their concern is not being taken seriously, or they feel 'fobbed off', their anxiety is likely to increase.

2. Listen to and acknowledge fears

For most people, this will be all they want or need. Mostly people do not expect solutions, but want their feelings to be acknowledged.

3. Be realistic and genuine

We might fear that talking about real risk increases anxiety but, if we genuinely acknowledge the reality of the situation, the person is more likely to believe us when we focus on the component of unhelpful worry.

4. Focus on realistic problem solving

There is a certain amount of thinking, planning and acting that can realistically reduce risk. This might include hand hygiene, social distancing etc. and, as well as realistically reducing risk, they allow some sense of control. If we feel we have done what we can to think about and address the worry, then the process of managing the anxiety is likely to be easier. The person may even allocate daily time to think about the issue to ensure they have engaged in sufficient problem solving.



5. Address the anxiety

Beyond the realistic and helpful fear that drives us towards problem solving and taking appropriate action, there is often a degree of anxiety that becomes unhelpful to us. This may involve repeated cycles of anxiety that go round and round causing distress without any helpful outcome (anxious rumination). Strategies for managing this might include:

- Focussing on **calming thoughts** more than thoughts that escalate our emotions. These have to be realistic and believable to the person. They are best generated by themselves as what works will vary between individuals. We can make suggestions, but it may be best to avoid *telling them how to think*. Examples could be 'we are all in this together', 'we will get through this', 'I have done everything I can', 'most people recover fine' etc. These should replace their own identified thoughts that are likely to escalate emotions (eg. 'we are all going to die', 'I must wash my hands every 3 minutes', 'I have to keep monitoring for signs of illness', 'unless I get help now, I might die' etc.)
- **Breathing exercises** to encourage the body towards a calmer rather than high alert mode (eg. Breathe in for about 4 seconds, hold for 1 or 2 seconds and then focus on relaxing the body/letting muscles flop while breathing out for 4 seconds and repeating this for 2-4 minutes).
- **Distracting away from the topic** and occupying your mind with something else (eg. look around you, notice the colours in your environment, look for particular shapes, notice the objects that you would not normally focus on; other options are listening to music, doing some knitting, calling a friend for a chat etc.).
- **Keep occupied** as much as possible to avoid excessive time to sit and think.
- **Grounding** in the here and now by using all your senses to connect you to the current environment (eg. name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste)
- **Physical exercise** can change the chemicals in the body and consequently change mood. It will also encourage distraction.



- Encourage the person to make use of any **relaxation methods that have worked for them before** (eg. mindfulness, yoga etc.).

6. Limit repeated reassurance

Reassurance usually feels positive and is mostly helpful. If your anxiety feels out of control, this can be rewarding. It, however, does not really address your fear, which is likely to return after a short time. When it returns, it can be tempting to do the same that made you feel better last time. In some instances this leads to repeated reassurance seeking that is stuck in an unhelpful cycle where it is being reinforced each time, leading to an escalating pattern. In such circumstances it is likely to be important to focus on encouraging the individual to use emotional coping strategies, rather than getting into the content of the fear.

7. If worry is excessive, focus on emotional management more than the content of the fear

It can be difficult to avoid getting in to reassurance, but if someone is stuck in a cycle of feeling they need this, repeated encouragement to use emotional coping strategies is more likely to break the cycle than going along with reassurance. This can at times feel a little harsh and the degree of harshness used is likely to depend on the level of stuckness in the process. A harsh or dismissive response is likely to increase anxiety and compassion/understanding should be maintained at all times.

8. A broken record approach

This describes the idea of keeping on repeating the same message to encourage emotional management rather than being drawn in to the content of the fear. The fear is likely to be powerful and the compulsion to want reassurance strong. We should expect this and not be frustrated if they struggle to hear our advice. Compassionately, but plainly repeating the message is likely to be effective eventually.



9. Limiting self checking

If excessive, encourage limiting checking for symptoms to reasonable levels.

10. Encouraging the limitation of research

If the preoccupation has become unhelpful, discourage excessive researching about the COVID -19, while still paying attention to appropriate public information.

The following leaflet is more generally about health anxiety, but may be helpful:

<https://web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Health%20Anxiety%20A4%202016%20FINAL.pdf>

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