

Managing your Anxiety through COVID-19

Staying Safe and Well Webinar Series



Education and Training



We all like predictability, at the moment there are many things that are still uncertain. For many of us, anxiety has become an unwelcome companion as we continue to navigate this difficult time. This tip sheet provides some guidance and tools to help you manage your anxiety and enhance your overall wellbeing during this time.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is something that we all experience from time to time. It's our body's natural response to a perceived threat. Anxiety has been an important defence mechanism for us, driving us to take action to protect our wellbeing in times of danger. Anxiety only becomes a problem when it sticks around too long, or when it shows up at unhelpful times.

"When your stop managing your anxiety, and it starts managing you, that's when you know it's time to take action."

How do I know when things are too much?

The warning signs for high anxiety are different for everyone, but here are some common ones:



Emotional

- Distressed, crying
- Signs of anxiety/panic
- Getting angry or irritable
- Defensiveness
- Moods may shift rapidly
- Negative attitude



Behavioural

- Frequent absences
- Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs
- Avoidance/withdrawal
- Presenteeism (on the job absenteeism)
- Less organised
- Challenges keeping to deadlines
- Decreased productivity

Cognitive

- Reduced motivation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Impaired decision making
- Forgetful or confused
- Making more mistakes

Physical

- Changes in physical appearance
- Decreased personal care
- Marked weight change
- Poor sleep patterns
- Headaches and increased tension
- Fatigue

Be alert to changes in your self and in others – they may be telling you that it's time to try a new approach.

Manage your response

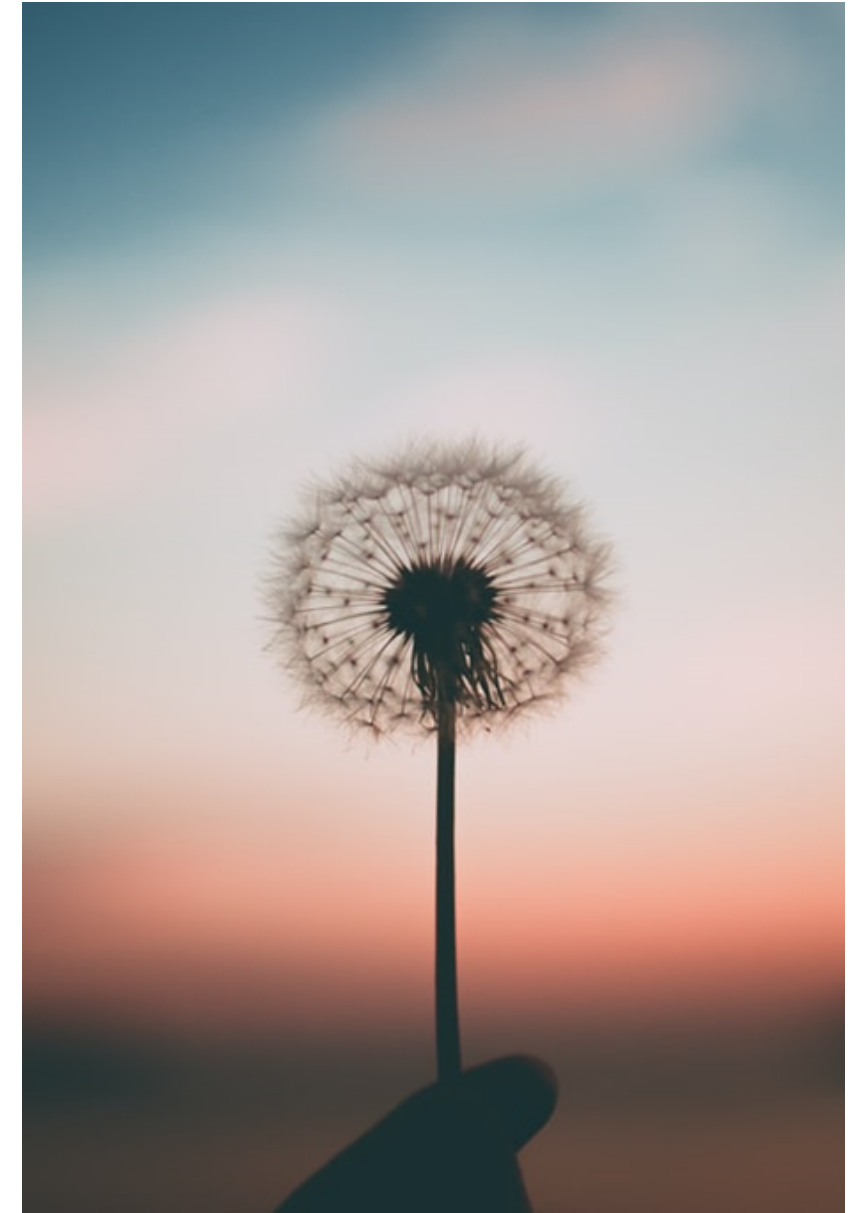
Here are two exercises to help you ground yourself in the moment.

Five Senses

Take a moment to settle yourself into stillness and take 3 deep, even breaths. Now shift your attention to what's happening around you. What are 5 things you can see? Four things you can hear? Three things you can feel? Two things you can smell? One thing you can taste?

Isometric Breathing

Breathe deeply and as you do so, create some extra muscle tension in one group of muscles. Take a deep breath and hold, maintaining the tension at the breath for 6 seconds. Now exhale completely for a count of 6 and release a third of the tension in your muscles. Take another breath and release another third of tension. Complete the process with a final breath, releasing all remaining tension. Deepen the relaxation you have achieved with 20 - 30 seconds of controlled breathing



Reframe your thinking


Anxiety is not caused by external events in environment (e.g. COVID-19), but rather by our interpretation of these events as threatening. While there are certainly real risks associated with the spread of the virus, it is also important to keep things in perspective.

Think of a situation that you are stressed about and write it in the Event column. Next complete the column marked Emotional response, writing down how you felt about this event (e.g. anxious, guilty angry). Now consider what you were saying to yourself at the time that led to those feelings and document these in the Interpretation (Thoughts that Trigger stress) column (e.g. I can't control what is happening, this is all my fault).

Now examine these thoughts:

- Is this stuff true to the best of my knowledge?
- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Does it help me to think this way?
- Could there be another way to see it?

Try to see things differently, turn it upside down, reverse it. Are you focused on things you cannot control? Can you let these things go and refocus on what you can control? These become your Thoughts that Reduce Stress. Now write down how you feel about the event in the light of these thoughts.

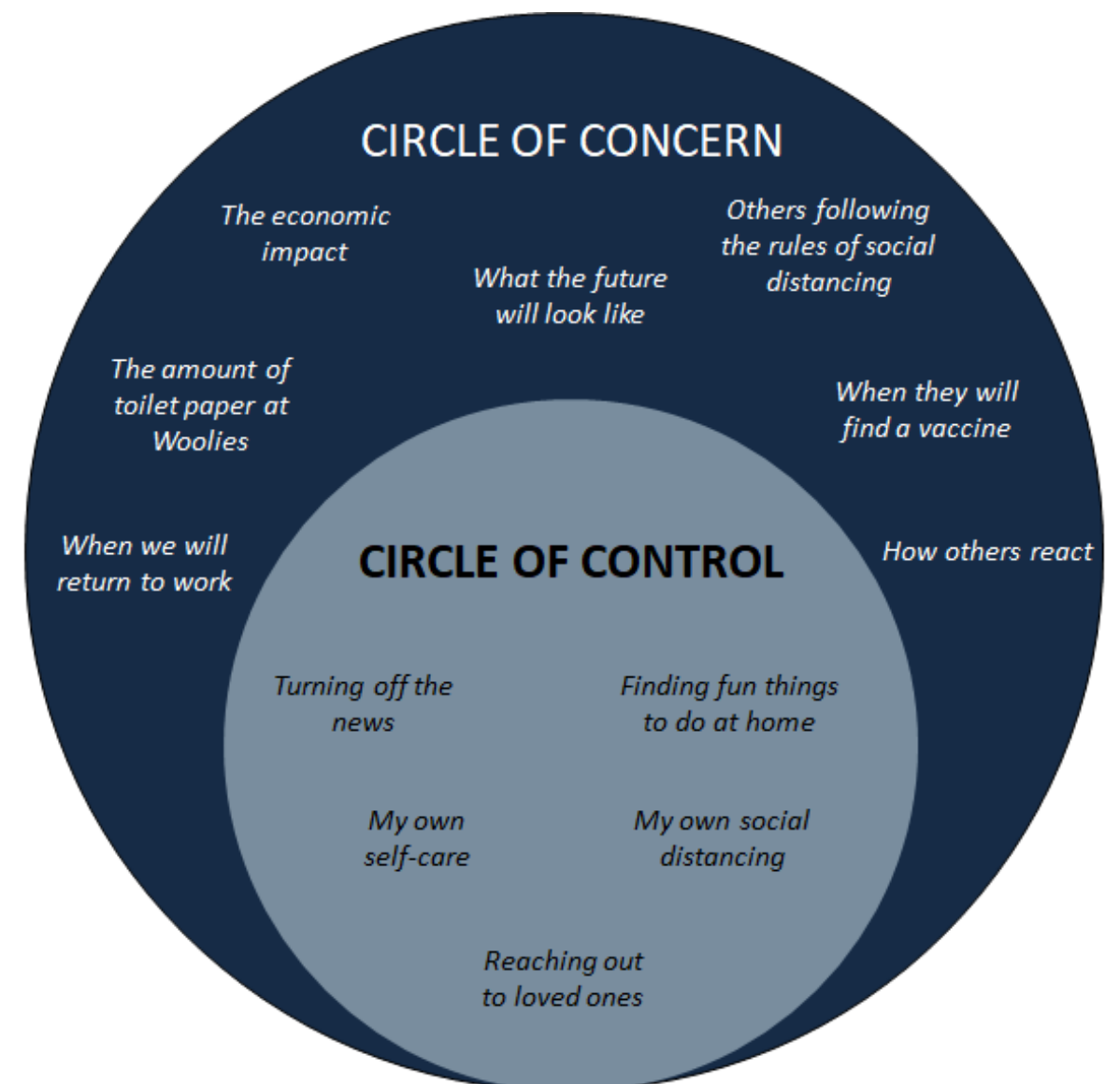
Event	Interpretation	Emotional response
	<p>Thoughts that Trigger Stress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every time I leave the house, I risk contracting the virus • Lockdown feels like it will never end <p>Thoughts that Reduce Stress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The risk is real, but there are ways I can manage my exposure • The lockdown laws are tough right now, but it won't be forever 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Frustration • Boredom • Anxiety • Calm • Concerned • Restless • Philosophical

Do you notice anything different?

Focus on what's in your control

We all have a circle of concern (things that we are concerned about) and a circle of control (things we can control). When there is little overlap between our circle of control and our circle of concern, we can find ourselves stressing about things we can do nothing about. This is a major source of anxiety, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Try to identify the things that are currently sitting in your Circle of Concern - are they things that are within your Circle of Control? If not, try to let them go, refocusing instead on things that you can influence.



Be kind to yourself

Regardless of whether or not you have been personally impacted by the virus, recognise that you are currently carrying a higher emotional load than usual. However you're feeling, it's okay. Remember to offset the negative you are exposed to with more positive.

- Think about what you're grateful for
- Make someone laugh
- Give back
- Get outside to nature
- Connect with someone you care about



Getting Support

If you or your family need additional support, personalised over-the-phone or video counselling is available 24/7 through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This service is available to all Department staff and their immediate families (aged 18 years and over).

Call **1300 361 008** to make a booking.