
Maintaining Your Mental Health While (Still) Working from Home

By Helen Bartimote



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The following guidance was written primarily for use by Container Solutions employees globally, but it is being shared externally to help all employees as they grapple with remote work. At this writing, COVID-19 is still preventing millions from returning to their offices, with post-crisis plans uncertain.

Understanding Anxiety in a Crisis Situation

- Remind yourself that emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, and frustration are all perfectly **normal reactions** to the current situation and you are absolutely not alone in having these feelings.
- **Do not try to minimise or deny your emotions.** Give time to them, although this may feel painful. Accept that you will experience these emotions during this difficult period. It can help to write these feelings down and to share them with others.
- **Accept your feelings.** It's a sign that your body's natural defence mechanisms are activated. You are also more likely to engage in health-seeking behaviours if you accept these feelings.
- **Most importantly, focus on what you can control** in this situation—i.e., social distancing, choosing to turn off the news, what you eat, your sleep routine, how frequently you check in to social media, etc. Make a list of what you know you can control and what you feel you cannot. You are much more likely in this type of extreme event to feel out of control than with other stressors, but if you try to focus on what you can control, this will help. This hopefully will then lead you to spend less time focusing on what you can't control.

- **Play the long game.** Take time to process what is happening. Give yourself time to adjust. If you carry on as if nothing is changing, you will burn out before this ends.
- **Know that your feelings of worry** are being triggered due to this situation being unpredictable, novel and ambiguous— all the ingredients that can lead to worrying thoughts and ultimately anxiety. This is perfectly normal.

Empathetic Responding

In times of crisis and threat, research shows that people will tend to respond in one of three ways; with [some being more helpful than others](#):

- 'I wish this would all just stop' ... 'this will blow over soon'. = **Wishing thinking**, and means you will be less likely to engage in health-related behaviours.
- 'I need help from *you* as I cannot cope with this myself' = **Support seeking**, or excessively relying on others for emotional support. It is important to reach out to others in times of crisis, while at the same time being mindful of the impact this may have on the people around us.
- "I would like to help you', 'what can i do to support you?', 'I wonder what I can do to help my community with this?', 'I wonder how this situation is making X feel?' "How could I help'? = **Empathetic Responding**, which is generally considered to be the most effective for communities and also *for an*

individual's own psychological well being. _Communicate in safe ways with people in your communities who are vulnerable and be a sympathetic ear for those suffering the most. Maintain your relationships.

Daily Life

- **Reach out** to family and friends as well as colleagues. Consider talking over Slack, text, and email as much as possible. Try to create new routines to allow for this time. Remember some of us are experiencing long periods alone and are uncertain how long this may continue.
- **Control what you can in your home environment.** Ensure you have *sensible* supplies of what you need for now. Establish a coordinated family plan if you are now isolating with partners and children. Look at ways to ensure you stay healthy and maintain fitness where you can. If you live alone, reach out and create regular online (or socially distanced) hangouts in the evenings with family and friends. Build a new routine and schedule when you feel you have adjusted to this change.
- **Take care in the morning.** For many people, anxiety can often be worse in the mornings. Just take it a step at a time. Reach out if you would like to have regular hangouts every morning with colleagues
- **Be mindful of your media consumption,** and how this could also be affecting other people who you may be living with. Consider the sources of

the information you are absorbing. Catastrophic thinking does not care about facts and accurate information, so feeding this with 'doomsday' type articles and Twitter feeds is unhelpful. Reduce the number of news alerts you are receiving daily on your phone if you feel they are increasing your anxiety.

- **Maintain healthy daily routines.** Keep to a rhythm if you can: good sleep patterns, healthy diet, frequent hydration, create work/home boundaries if possible, consider practicing meditation ([Headspace](#) is a helpful meditation app, but there are others). Use one of the exercise apps, which offer daily routines that can be done at home. Work in 50- minute bursts and get up to move for 10 minutes. Try to have time offline each day and turn your phone off.
- **Avoid the excessive use** of unhealthy coping strategies, such as drugs and alcohol.
- **Many children have returned to school and some are still being taught virtually.** This is a huge change for them also, and things may feel very different; at home they may still want to be around you more often than before the pandemic; ask them how they would like to spend time with you. Remember that human beings, even when faced with the most challenging and extreme of circumstances are mostly resilient and this can also be applied to children. Although there will always be a small group who struggle to find the resilience to cope, there is also a small group who will, after a period of time, grow and develop positively from extreme difficulty. Our children will adjust and adapt and they will find their resilience from many places around them.

- If you are still at home with children, create some boundaries for you to be able to work. Everyone understands that there is now a 'new normal', and if you are having a meeting with a child by your side, this is OK. **We all need to adapt to the changing aspects of how to work.**
- Older children may adapt more easily to this new situation in terms of academic learning, but will still need to understand what these boundaries are and how you are now going to interact as a family. Don't feel under pressure to create an educational timetable straight away. Home educating takes time to plan and prepare for. You are not a 'home educator', you are a parent/caregiver and, for now, this is the most important thing. Know they want to be close and feel safe. Focus on what they enjoy doing for the time being and know this is OK.
- **If you are now spending more time with your partner** and have not worked from home together in this way before, spend time talking about what you both need. If you are sharing a small space together, **talk about how to create the boundaries** that you both need.
- **Share any positive stories** you hear about, including about people who have **recovered from COVID-19**. Life will return to normal eventually. We will be able to go back to meeting up with friends and family, going to the gym, eating in restaurants. But for now, try to focus on now what you can control, and the slower pace you have never had to experience before. Books you have not had the chance to read, films you have not yet watched, music you have not yet discovered, recipes you have not experimented with, conversations you have not had time to have. Open the window, sit on the balcony, walk in the garden.

- Slower activities are challenging for many in the fast-paced world we live in, but maybe this is our time to do this. Think about the amazing health workers we have in all of our countries who are working tirelessly to be there for us in this crisis. Share positive images of this.
- **Refrain** from using terms such as ‘the Chinese virus’. This is a global virus, it is not attached to any continent or country. Think about the impact of such labels on people in the community. If someone you know has had the virus, then do not refer to them as ‘victims’ or ‘cases’ but instead ‘people with COVID-19’. This maintains a separation between the person and the illness and allows us to humanise them.

Dealing with Change and Loss

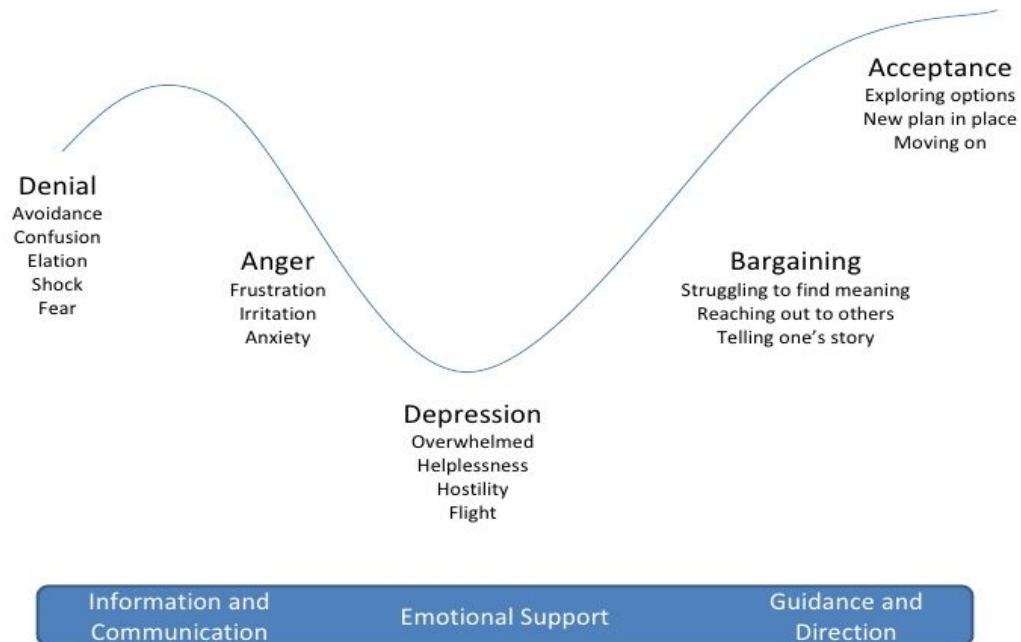
Alongside the unprecedented changes we are facing, it is likely that we are all going to be experiencing **some form of loss** as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, not necessarily in terms of bereavement but the loss of normality, freedom of movement, social connection, hobbies, and new experiences. This will lead us to enter into the stages associated with grief.

It is more important than ever to be aware of the emotions associated with each of these stages. We talk a lot at Container Solutions about emotional self-awareness, emotional expression, empathy, and interpersonal relationships so as to support practices of [psychological safety](#).

We will go through a number of stages as we progress through this crisis situation, as postulated by Swiss-American psychiatrist Kubler-Ross in the model below. She concluded these are the stages that individuals go through when they are experiencing illness and dying. However, it is a helpful model to think about in a crisis situation when individuals are experiencing sudden and significant unexpected changes. **It is helpful as it shows us how we will eventually reach a point of acceptance and a time when we will make plans for a new future.**

There will be **shock and denial** at first and this will move on to feelings of **anger**. We may move on quite quickly to feeling **helpless, overwhelmed** and wanting to **escape this situation**; but it is a cycle and we will move to **accepting** what has happened and develop new plans and options. We will adapt. This is how we experience very difficult and sudden changes in our lives.

Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle



External Support

Don't hold back from asking for help. Reach out to others. If you are feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. If you cannot gain access to help within your organisation, then please consider the following online resources with direction on how to get psychological support:

Mind.org:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help/?ctald=/need-urgent-help/using-this-tool/slices/using-this-tool/>

Samaritans.org:

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/talk-us-phone/>

Dutch government health agency:

<https://www.government.nl/topics/mental-health-services/question-and-answer/help-for-mental-health-problems>

TogetherWeAre-Strong:

<https://togetherweare-strong.tumblr.com/helpline>

Want to Read More?

Check out other Container Solutions offerings:

[The Resilient Company: Cloud Native Patterns to Help Navigate a Crisis](#)

By Pini Reznik

[A Pattern Language for Strategy](#)

By Jamie Dobson and Pini Reznik

[Resiliency: A Guide to Surviving Uncertain Times](#)