

# RECOVERY AFTER COVID-19

## Psychological Support

This booklet has been created to give you some guidance about common psychological experiences after having a severe illness, which you can use to support your recovery after COVID-19.

If you need further information or assistance, please contact the team that are visiting you at home.



## Common mental and emotional problems during and after illness

Life after bad illness can be hard and there can feel like lots of steps to feel “normal” again. This will take time, effort and energy for you and your family. Remember to give yourself time to adapt, recharge and support yourself or your loved ones through this process.

### Psychological (mental) problems

- **Anxiety (worry) and feeling low**

It is normal to feel like there is too much going on at times. You may have feelings of anxiety and feeling low.

- **Thinking and memory**

You might find that you forget things that you would have remembered before.

**As people start to get better from a bad illness like COVID-19, some may start to get feelings like the ones below. This can happen as they try to make sense of what has happened.**

- Feeling worried or uneasy a lot of the time
- Finding sleeping hard. This can make you feel tired.
- Racing thoughts. These could make you feel worried, panicked or sad.
- Focusing on things could be hard
- Being easily annoyed
- Being extra alert
- Feeling tense or not being able to relax
- Needing help from other people to keep calm and supported
- Feeling tearful

*If you find that you are having on-going problems with any of these please speak to your GP. Or think about making a self-referral to the Talking Change team.*

## Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease. This could be things like worry or fear, which can be mild or very bad. These can affect your body and your mind.

### How it makes your body feel

- Needing to go to the toilet more often
- Feelings of “Butterflies” in your stomach
- Feeling a strong or fast heartbeat
- Breathing faster
- Feeling sick
- Chest pain
- Headaches

### How it makes your mind feel

- Feeling worried
- Hard to sleep
- Poor focus
- Easily annoyed
- Being extra alert
- Racing / negative thoughts
- Needing reassurance
- Unable to relax
- Feeling tense
- Feeling tearful

When we become worried or stressed our body goes into ‘fight or flight’. This is our reaction to try to help us fight or get away from the reason for our anxiety. This used to help us run away from danger or stand up to it. It can kick in when we are feeling worried, like when we think about what we have been through or what causes us worry.

The ‘fight or flight’ response makes our bodies prepare to either run away or fight. It does this by;

- Making us breathe more. This helps get more oxygen to the muscles
- Making our heart beat faster to pump more blood to the muscles
- Tensing our muscles to allow us to react quicker
- Sending blood from other places (like our gut) to our muscles.
- Sending adrenaline (a chemical) around the body to “get ready for action” – this can cause trembling
- Less saliva - causing a dry mouth

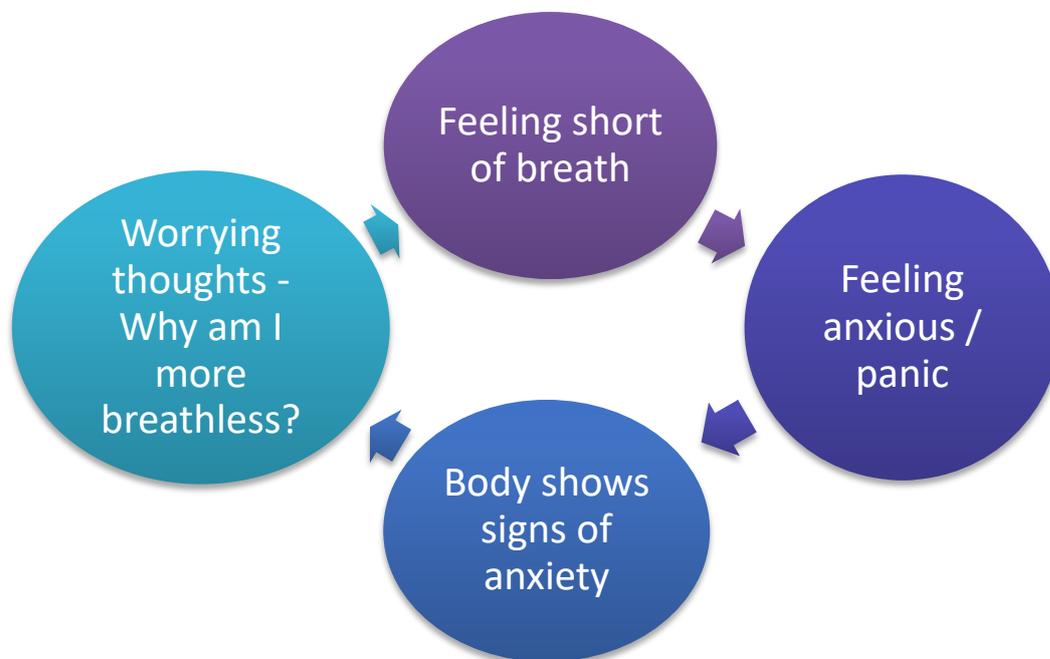
Your body sends signals when it feels stressed or worried. These signals are known as hormones. Adrenaline and cortisol are the stress hormones. These cause you to feel different when you are stressed or worried. They may not feel nice, but they cannot harm you.

## Shortness of breath and distress.

After having a bad illness like COVID-19 you may feel distressed due to shortness of breath. You may also feel worried because of your stay in hospital or being unwell at home. You may be unable to feel in control and are scared when you feel at your worst.

Feeling short of breath can make us feel anxious and panic. This is because we may not feel in control of it. But not feeling in control of it can make you feel more anxious. This can then make you more breathless, which may make you worry or panic.

This can make you get caught in a bad cycle of panic and shortness of breath, which can be difficult to break free from.



People sometimes breathe 'too much' (also known as hyperventilate) when they are very anxious. They then try to breathe *more* when this happens; often out of fear they are not getting enough breath. This will make them feel *worse*, not better.

Try to find a distraction or a calm state of mind to help this. This can take a bit of practice.

Please refer to the **Recovery from COVID-19. Physical Recovery - Breathing Control and Pacing** booklet to help you with breathing methods. These can be useful to control symptoms (how it makes you feel).

## How to take care of anxiety and worry

If we are feeling worried, anxious, lonely or low, we may stop doing things we usually enjoy. What we do can help with reducing feelings of anxiety and low mood. Try to focus on things that you enjoy, if you can do this safely with social distancing. If not, finding something new to learn at home might help.

Some ideas might include:

- Activities (e.g. crafting, puzzles, colouring books, reading and listening to music)
- Doing crosswords or other word games
- Learning a poem, singing a song or counting backwards from one hundred, are all useful distractions.

The important thing is that they can take your attention away from what is worrying you. It's okay to accept that some things are outside of our control.

It can help to think about what makes you feel anxious or worried. What thoughts go through your mind during these things? How does that make you feel or act? Could you do anything differently in the future? Is there a different way to respond?

Sometimes having an action plan written down can help. You can read this when you start to feel panicky. It can help to comfort you that your breathing will get better, as it has done on before. This is an example.

*I have had this feeling before*

*I know it will go away soon*

*I am going to lean forward*

*I am in control*

*Focus on gently breathing out*

*I can do this – I am doing it now*

*I don't need to be frightened – I am OK"*

## Low mood, stress and memory

After a scary event it can take time for our brain to make sense of what happened. This could be spending time in intensive care or being very unwell.

We can be affected by feelings of low mood and sadness on different levels. Milder levels of depression (sadness) can mean feeling in low spirits. It may not stop a someone leading their normal life, but it can make everything seem harder to do and feel less worthwhile

- Keep active – this can help your confidence, focus and take your mind off bad thoughts
- Eat well – there is a strong link between what we eat and how we feel
- Sleep – a good night's sleep is important for body and mind
- Think positive – be kind to yourself and notice all the progress you have made
- Enjoyment – make sure you do something for yourself at least once a day to look forward to

It can be normal to have lifelike and scary visions as well as nightmares. These should get better over days or weeks.

If you are finding it difficult to manage these, or you have them for a long time, speak to your GP for support.

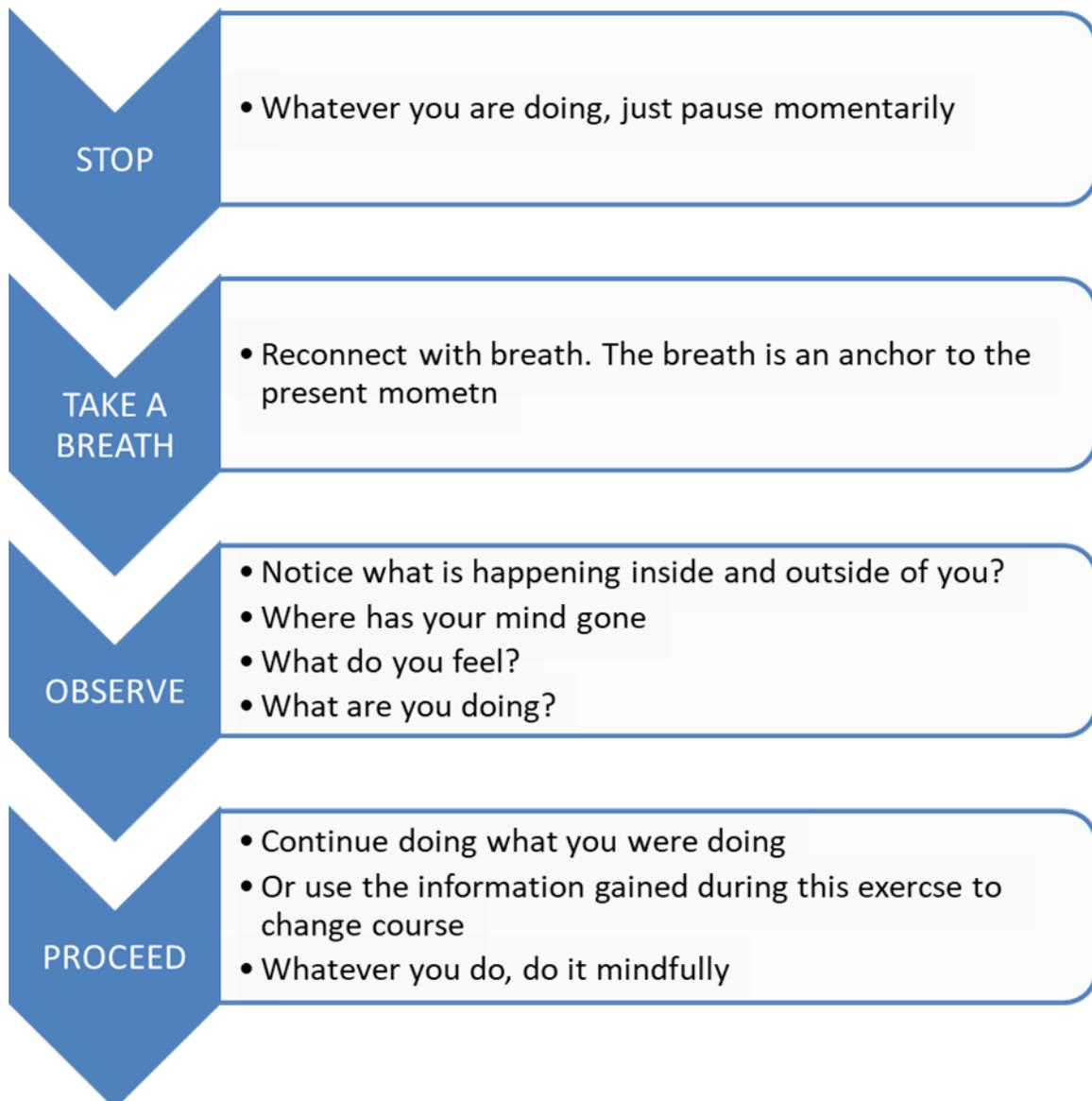
- Talk about how you feel – this helps us to understand better how we feel
- Progression diary – log the tasks you have completed, no matter how small
- Set small goals – remember you are still recovering, take it easy
- Relaxation exercises – try the exercises mentioned in this booklet

Some people may have some memory problems after their illness. This can make you feel annoyed at yourself. You may think that your brain isn't returning to 'normal'. Be kind to yourself – it may take time to get better.

- Have a regular routine and keep things in the same place
- Use calendars, diaries and reminders on electronic devices (mobile, tablet etc.) if useful
- Break jobs into small tasks. Focus one step at a time
- Try not to become too stressed or anxious. This can make thinking and memory worse

## Psychological Techniques

### STOP Technique



## 5 Senses

Focus on what is going on around you. It is harder to worry when you are really focused on things happening in that moment.

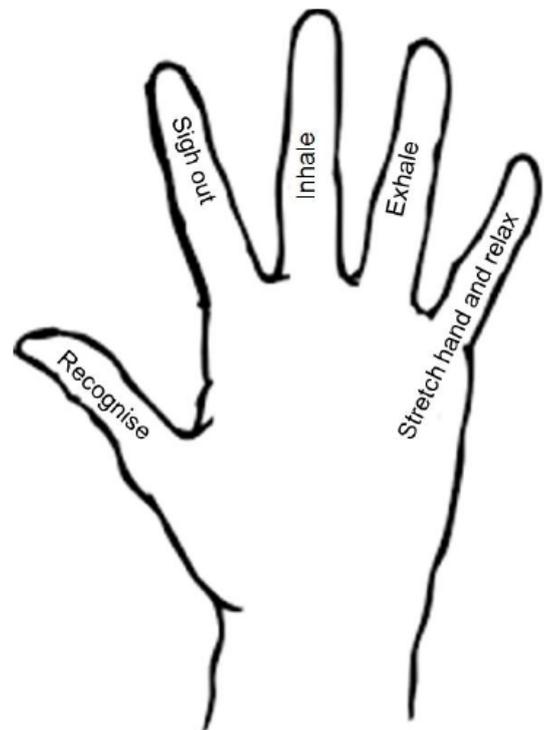
Using your **5 senses** think about;

- 5** Things you can see around you
- 4** Things you can hear
- 3** Things you can touch
- 2** Things you can smell
- 1** Thing you can taste

If you can't smell, touch or taste anything, it can be a good exercise to imagine smells or taste that you know.

### The 'Calming Hand'

1. **Recognise** the signs of shortness of breath/panic and that they are not hurtful. Hold your thumb firmly. Remind yourself what to do next. This will help to calm your breathing.
2. **Sigh out** - Relax your shoulders and breath out. Stop and drop your shoulders.
3. **Inhale** - Take in a slow and gentle breath, through your nose, followed by ...
4. **Exhale** - ... a gentle breath out. Try and exhale for longer than you inhale.
5. **Stretch your hand, relax and stop.**



If you find that you are having on-going problems with any topics in this booklet, please speak to your GP or consider a self-referral to the Talking Changes/Talking therapies service.

Talking therapies have been shown to help your thoughts and feelings get better. These are advised by the National Institute for Health & Care Excellence (NICE).

Talking Change offer therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Counselling. They will help you decide which therapy is advised first. They will usually offer support for your thoughts and feelings first. They may then offer one-to-one therapies.

Their talking therapies may help you if you have been having a hard time with your mood. They can also help if you have conditions (an illness) that can affect your pain and energy levels. Talking Change can also give help at work and help towards finding a job or training.

If you live in Hartlepool, Stockton, Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland;

[www.wecantalk.org](http://www.wecantalk.org)

If you live in Darlington:

[www.talkingchanges.org.uk](http://www.talkingchanges.org.uk)

### **Samaritans**

If you need to talk call 116 123. Whatever you're going through, a Samaritan will face it with you. It's free to call from any landline or mobile phone. It's free and open 24/7

### **Shout Crisis**

For crisis support by text message, text 85258. This will connect you with a trained volunteer to help you feel calm and safe again. It's free and open 24/7