



# MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT

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# Introduction

At ODI, we understand mental health to mean a person's psychological and emotional wellbeing, which can often influence your physical health as well. Maintaining good mental health is incredibly important, and never more so than now, during the Coronavirus pandemic. Times are difficult and it is natural that you may react differently to how you would in normal situations, and that you may become overwhelmed.

The Coronavirus pandemic has also had a major impact on the world of work, with many people who are seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce facing new barriers to entry, while many others have lost their jobs and are finding it difficult to source new employment. Struggling to find work is challenging enough, but when also coming to terms and dealing with a global health crisis, it can feel even more overwhelming.

Your work status can have a significant impact on your mental health, for many reasons. Work can give you a sense of routine and purpose, financial security, and a network of colleagues that provides socialisation on a daily basis.

This toolkit seeks to help those struggling with their mental health when searching for work during the pandemic, particularly those from marginalised groups, and those in work who need assistance.

It is equally as important that employers and managers mind their own wellbeing as well as that of employees. Worrying about your employees can be a huge pressure and often times, good employers and managers forget that their own wellbeing is just as important.

Make sure to check-in with work colleagues past or present. A friendly voice can make all the difference to someone feeling isolated.

Weekly calls with colleagues and staff to stay connected is vital when remote working and Managers should make time to check-in on each other's wellbeing.

**IF A FRIEND  
SEEMS  
DISTANT  
CATCH UP  
WITH THEM**



# COVID-19 and Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenging event. Some people might find it more worrying than others. Medical, scientific and public health experts are working hard to contain the virus. Try to remember this when you feel worried.

It has affected all our lives in some way. But in time, it will pass. You may notice some of the following:

- increased anxiety
- feeling stressed
- finding yourself excessively checking for symptoms, in yourself, or others
- becoming irritable more easily
- feeling insecure or unsettled
- fearing that normal aches and pains might be the virus
- having trouble sleeping
- feeling helpless or a lack of control
- having irrational thoughts

Mental health is as important as physical health, and should be treated as such, without shame or stigma. If you had a broken arm, you would seek help, see a doctor, get a cast, and follow a treatment plan. Your mental health should be no different, there should be no stigma or shame surrounding getting treatment and help for your mental health, and following a treatment plan.

It is natural in a crisis to feel overwhelmed, anxious, to feel your mental health slipping somewhat. This is a worrying, unprecedented time.

We have all heard the saying, a problem shared is a problem halved.

Studies have shown that worry is significantly reduced in people who share their problems.

Talk to a friend about what's bothering you, it can make all the difference.

They might have experienced the same problems or worries themselves.

**PROBLEMS  
FEEL  
SMALLER  
WHEN YOU  
SHARE  
THEM**



# Losing Work

Losing your job and having your income reduced can cause significant emotional (and financial) distress. It is important to recognise that businesses are closing or running at significantly decreased capacity due to circumstances way beyond their control. We recognise that this is heartbreaking for business owners who have to stand down staff, and equally distressing for employees who suddenly find themselves without employment.

It can take a serious toll on many aspects of people's lives – their health and wellbeing, relationships and families, as well as how they see their future. These feelings of distress can be heightened during periods of uncertainty, such as what we are seeing with the COVID-19 outbreak.

- Losing your job and/or financial security may trigger feelings similar to grief, including:
- disbelief
- shock and a feeling of numbness
- a sense of loss (of identity, or purpose)
- uncertainty about the future
- confusion about why this is happening
- anger (and jealousy over those who have not lost their jobs)

It is important to acknowledge during a difficult time like this, that these feelings are normal, and valid. In these circumstances, you may experience common reactions that can manifest themselves physically and mentally, such as:

- problems sleeping
- tiredness and fatigue
- a loss of appetite
- feeling overwhelmed, anxious or fearful
- mood swings or overreacting to minor things
- muscle tension or pain
- frustration
- feeling angry, irritable or intolerant

Some people will experience symptoms that may be a sign that they should seek support from their GP or a mental health professional. Signs to look out for include:

- severe emotional reactions that last longer than two-three weeks
- an inability to function and carry out day-to-day tasks
- using alcohol or other substances to 'self-medicate' or cope
- thoughts of self-harm or suicide

If you or someone close to you displays any of these signs, you should contact a GP or mental health professional immediately. Try to keep in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing many companies around the world to make difficult decisions. Remember that staffing decisions are related to the COVID-19 pandemic, not your worth.

It is also important to acknowledge what is inside and outside of your control.

How long the pandemic lasts, the job market, the economy, lockdown, these are things outside of your control. You can control your behaviour, your routine, staying in contact with friends and family, and asking for help when you need it.

### Tip

Sleep deprivation affects your psychological state and mental health. A good night's sleep can improve your mental wellbeing and help anxiety.

Take some time away from screens before bedtime to improve your sleep quality.

**8 HOURS  
SLEEP  
MAKE  
THE OTHER  
16 EASIER**



## Online Resources and Reading of Interest



Mayo Clinic | [Coping with unemployment](#)



American Psychological Association | [The toll of job loss](#)



Maynooth University | [Psychological impact of pandemic-related unemployment](#)



Beyond Blue | [Ways to promote a positive mindset if you've lost your job during the coronavirus pandemic](#)



Very Well Mind | [How to cope if you've lost your job amidst the coronavirus pandemic](#)

## Marginalised Groups

Marginalised groups become increasingly vulnerable during emergencies, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this. It is critical that their voices are present and heard as responses to the COVID-19 crisis are being planned and implemented. Inclusive and robust processes of consultation and engagement will strengthen the efficacy of responses and ultimately the resilience of these groups and communities in the immediate and long term.

At a time when the practices of social and physical distancing and isolation are crucial, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need that each of us has for connectedness, contact, a sense of belonging and inclusion. For those from marginalised groups who experience social exclusion and isolation throughout their lives, it is likely that this crisis will serve to compound this reality.

Building the resilience of communities to come through and recover from the COVID-19 crisis is critical and urgent. Failure to plan for the mitigation of long-term negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on marginalised communities will have far-reaching consequences.

Particularly evident among marginalised communities is the stigma attached to mental health issues, and this may prevent them from seeking help or treatment, from friends, family or professionals.

Please seek medical help if you need it.



These marginalised groups may also face additional barriers to entry in the world of work, due to legal and social barriers, social stigma, misaligned qualifications and education, and language barriers. When it is already incredibly difficult to find work, any sort of additional hurdle can have a huge effect on the applicant in question, and can affect their mental health in a big way.

It is important that the individuals in question are made aware of any and all resources available to them, and are also kept in mind by the government and other authorities when employment schemes and plans are put in place.

Many companies and government groups are seeking to increase the proportion of employees from more diverse and marginalised backgrounds to help combat these barriers. It is hoped that this will assist in addressing the major roadblocks people from marginalised groups face when seeking work, and make their entry route to employment more fair.

It is also imperative that people from these marginalised groups are aware that any obstacles placed in their way by external factors are not their fault.

### Tip

Take time to call a friend or colleague, staying connected can help stress and anxiety.

Do you have a neighbour or someone you know is more vulnerable or isolated?

Maybe they have lost work or are seeking work?

Try calling them during lunch or in the evening to check in, a friendly voice can make a huge difference.

ADD  
FRIENDS  
TO YOUR  
TEA



## Online Resources and Reading of Interest



Community Work Ireland | [Planning for Resilience in the COVID-19 Crisis](#)



Mental Health Reform | [Ethnic Minorities and Mental Health](#)



Pavee Point | [Evidence & Recommendations on Mental Health, Suicide and Travellers](#)



Irish Psychiatry | [The Unique Mental Health Needs of Refugees](#)



Deloitte | [Marginalized populations in the future workforces](#)

## Seeking Work

Research shows that when seeking work, particularly if that job search lasts longer than 10 to 12 weeks, your mental wellbeing can suffer considerably. On top of the financial stress that comes with being unemployed or underemployed, people seeking work can suffer from worse physical health and depression the longer they go without finding work.

When people imagine job-search related depression, they often attribute it to financial instability and the frequent rejection, but losing a sense of identity is also a major factor. Many people consider their job and career a major part of their identity and personality, and when they lose this, they can feel lost and unsure of who they are and what their purpose is.

It is important in this scenario to recognise that your personality is made up of a diverse range of experiences, interests and values — not just your employment status or job title — and that there are many other areas of your life that can bring you joy and where you excel.

Where possible, create a structure for yourself, both inside the job hunt and out. Setting strict office hours can help keep the search from bleeding into every area of your life, with deadlines pushing you to work more efficiently. Simple rules, like a “No LinkedIn after 6 p.m.” policy, or a mandatory lunch hour, will give you the space to focus on other interests and relationships, and also give you the time and space to mentally recharge.

The stress of a job search can also make people feel as if they don't deserve, or don't have the time to relax, but working overtime and pushing yourself to the point of burnout will only exacerbate feelings of isolation and negativity. This will have a negative effect on both your mental health and your job prospects.

### Tip

Healthy diet also impacts both physical and mental wellbeing.

A balanced diet improves energy levels and quality of sleep.

Make sure you are getting your 5 a day in and not leaving your body short of nutrients.

Take breaks during the day, to ensure you are preparing healthy meals.

**BOOST  
YOUR MOOD  
WITH  
HEALTHY  
FOOD**





## Small Steps to Take at Home

If you have lost your job, you are likely to feel more in control and less stressed if you take steps to help improve your situation.

There are many helpful things you can do to help you cope:

- Remind yourself that it is okay to feel unsure about the future.
- Be patient with yourself. Recovery from any significant setback takes time.
- Get support. Identify family members and friends you feel comfortable talking to, who will help you remain positive.
- Understand that you are not alone. Thousands of people have lost their jobs because of the extraordinary impacts of the coronavirus outbreak.
- Writing down your concerns and worries and working through them methodically may be useful.
- Limit your news consumption. Avoid getting swept up in negativity around the economy and the spread of the virus as much as possible.
- Draw on your strengths. Remind yourself of a tough time that you've managed to overcome in the past.
- Stay healthy. Try to maintain a balanced diet and exercise regularly.
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs.
- If you have a pre-existing medical condition that may be aggravated by stress, talk to your GP.

You may still be able to do some of the things you enjoy and find relaxing.

For example, you could try to:

- Exercise regularly, especially walking
- Maintain regular sleep routines
- Practice breathing exercises
- Read a book

With this extra time you now have, it may be worth while trying something new you have never tried before.

For example, you can avail of free online resources on topics you enjoy. Apps, podcasts, YouTube tutorials offer many ways to keep learning.

You could also sign up for short online courses, learning to cook or bake, picking up knitting or sewing, or take up sudoku. You can use this time to find new activities that you will enjoy and will also keep you occupied.

**THE MORE  
YOU MOVE  
THE BETTER  
YOUR  
MOOD**



# Working Environments Once Employed

As difficult as it is to find employment right now, there will be light at the end of the tunnel.

When you do find work, it is important to realise that the working world may be forever changed as a result of the pandemic. Work from home and remote working will continue for some time, and in some cases may become the norm.

It is important in these cases to continue to prioritise your mental health, as your work and home lives collide.

Giving your day a solid structured routine can be a good way to avoid conflict that can arise from this. Here are some tips on how to achieve this:

- ▶ Designate a place to work from that is as free of distractions as possible.
- ▶ Set a routine for working at home - it's important to get up and start the day at a normal time, to take regular breaks including a lunch break, and to finish working and turn off at an appropriate time.
- ▶ Try to avoid working in your pyjamas all day, no matter how tempting and comfy it may be.
- ▶ Have a proper lunch break. Stop your task at hand, make something nice to eat, and move away from your workspace or desk. Try and get outside and get some natural light if you can do so safely, and try some exercise, again within guidelines on social contact - it's easy to get dragged in to work out of hours.
- ▶ Use your online scheduling tools to clearly show colleagues when you are working and when you are available to speak, and when you are not.
- ▶ When you are done for the day, finish promptly, packing away your work things or leaving your work space at a specific time.
- ▶ If you are looking after children while working from home, have a conversation with work about those realities. Try and set up a routine whereby you have distinct times for working and for childcare time. Dividing your attention may leave both things suffering and being there for children offering undivided attention at these uncertain times is very important.
- ▶ Ensure that structured and unstructured relationships with bosses and colleagues ensure while people are working remotely or flexibly.

# Anxiety

Anxiety is a physical reaction often to a perceived threatening situation which activates the release of stress hormones (adrenalin and noradrenalin) providing an energy burst that fuels an automatic fight - flight response.

The stress response does not distinguish between actual “real” threat and perceived threat, different people will experience different levels of anxiety in response to the same, as well as a variety of different, life situations/events. For example, most of us will experience a normal level of anticipatory or performance anxiety in advance of an exam or job interview motivating us to prepare, lessening our anxiety and improving performance. If the fight-flight response is activated and sustained we can become overwhelmed by fear, unable to focus or concentrate on the task at hand or simply avoid preparing, increasing anxiety levels which in turn increases our fear which can become debilitating.

If the perceived threat is outside of our immediate awareness the physical response and associated anxiety can appear confusing or irrational. For example, losing your job may elicit an understandable fear and anxiety from feeling you will be unable to provide for yourself or your family. However, you may be less aware of the fear and anxiety evoked by the perceived threat of a loss of status and the anxiety may, therefore, become more generalised.

## **When should I seek help and support?**

Whether the anxiety is acute as in panic – a phobic response to a particular situation/thing, or generalised, the physical and psychological symptoms are broadly similar.

As already noted at some point in time all of us will inevitably experience some level of anxiety in response to the ordinary ebbs and flows of life. Indeed, in the short-term anxiety can be useful, help direct our focus, improve performance, and motivate us to successfully get the job, or get the job done.

In contrast, if anxiety levels persist and overwhelm your capacity to concentrate, this will have a negative impact on your performance and your life. It is important, therefore, that you learn to monitor the level and intensity of anxiety by noting and attending to the physical and psychological signs and symptoms.

# Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety

It is this automatic, “normal” response to perceived threat which accounts for many of the physical as well as the emotional and psychological symptoms of anxiety, which includes:

## Physical Symptoms

- Sweating profusely – clammy hands
- Gastrointestinal – upset (upset stomach, dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, loose motions, etc.)
- Central Nervous System [CNS] (ringing in the ears, blurred vision, dizziness)
- Difficulty breathing in, over-breathing, tight chest, light-headed
- Increased heart rate (palpitations, heart pain, missed or irregular beats).
- Panic (sudden episodes of extreme anxiety or dread)
- Genitourinary (passing more urine than usual, lack of sex drive and impotence)
- Muscular tension (tension headache, tremor, shakiness)

## Psychological symptoms

- Fear
- Irritability- restlessness
- Poor concentration
- Fatigue
- Sensitivity to noise – easily startled
- Disturbed sleep – difficulty getting or staying asleep (lying awake worrying, waking irregularly and unpleasant dreams, but not usually early morning waking)
- Poor memory (because of poor concentration)

Remember prevention is better so here are some simple life-style changes which you can put in place to help control and reduce anxiety. If it persists, please seek professional help from your GP or a therapist.

- Moderate or avoid caffeine and other stimulants as well as alcohol as they can intensify anxiety levels.
- Take regular exercise.
- Ensure you take time out to relax – wind down, establish a regular sleep pattern.
- If you notice an increase in anxiety talk to someone you trust – it can help you regain perspective.
- Try to identify and find words for what it is you are experiencing or are feeling threatened by – often the worst-case scenario is the least likely outcome.
- Avoid “if only” thinking. You can learn from the past but you can’t change it.
- Avoid “what if” thinking – you can’t predict the future.

If your anxiety persists or intensifies consult your GP as soon as possible. This is important as anxiety can be part of or exist alongside other mental and physical health conditions and a thorough assessment will help to determine the right treatment which can include;

- Self-help (leaflets, books, tapes, videos, etc., or relaxation and combating stress)
- Anxiety management and psycho-educational courses
- Talking Therapies
- Counselling
- Cognitive therapy
- Medication
- Mindfulness based stress reduction or other relaxation techniques

(Source: [\*Inspire Wellbeing\*](#))

# Mindfulness Exercises

There are hundreds if not thousands of online resources to practise mindfulness. Here we include one on mindful breathing, but a simple google search will yield many other options until you find one that suits you best.

## Mindful Breathing

1. Start by breathing in and out slowly. Each breath cycle should last for approximately six seconds.
2. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.
3. Try and let go of your thoughts. Let go of your plans and responsibilities for the day, or any pending projects that need your attention. Simply let thoughts rise and fall of their own accord and concentrate solely on your breathing
4. Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your sense of awareness on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life.
5. Then watch with your awareness as it works work its way up and out of your mouth and its energy dissipates into the world.

If you found this one minute exercise useful, repeat for two or three minutes, or as desired.



# Conclusion

We truly are living through exceptional times, and while the pandemic is soon coming to an end with the arrival of a vaccine, it may still be a long time before the job market returns to what we perceive as “normal”.

You may now spend longer seeking work than you would have previously, but it is important to acknowledge that this is normal, and not a reflection on you or your value.

Take this time to consult more resources and services, reach out to friends, speak with recruiters, do online courses and upskill.

We might need to put extra effort into looking after our mental health for the next while, but we will get through this. Take care of yourselves.

For those in employment, many companies have an Employee Assistance Programme that can provide a range of supports from mental health to financial guidance. Reach out and see what is available.

Finally, below we have included some helplines and links that may be of use to anybody struggling during this difficult time:

## **Your Mental Health**

[YourMentalHealth.ie](http://YourMentalHealth.ie)

1800 111 888

## **Samaritans**

Freephone 116 123 any time,  
24/7

Email [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)

## **Text 50808**

Text HELLO to 50808

*anytime day or night*

Visit [www.text50808.ie](http://www.text50808.ie)

## **Sources in relation to COVID symptoms**

[WHO - Coronavirus Info](#)

[HSE - Coronavirus Info](#)

[HSE - Seeking help from a GP](#)

## **Graphics Courtesy of #littlethings Campaign by the [HSE](#)**





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