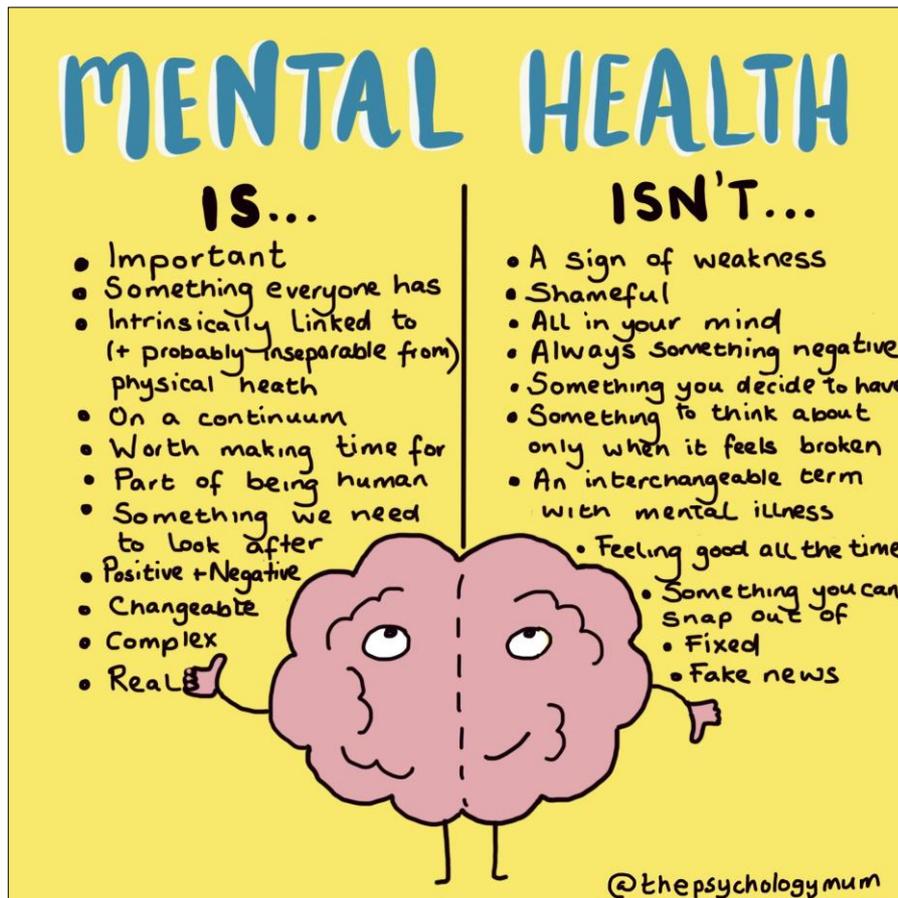


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## LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS (AND BEYOND) DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DR EMMA HEPBURN

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST



### The Changing Nature of Holidays

There is evidence that switching off from school work during the holiday period has a positive impact on mental wellbeing and helps avoid exhaustion and burnout. School holidays are usually defined by a separate period of time, clearly distinct from the school term and a time to anticipate and look forward to. Often there are particular activities or trips to plan, look forward to and enjoy, which by their very nature help us switch off. However the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social distancing measures have created challenges to the traditional holiday structure and the ability to switch off and use this as downtime. Some schools may also be open during the holidays for key workers, and some teachers will be working during the holidays, which provides an additional challenge to find time to switch off.

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## LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS (AND BEYOND) DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

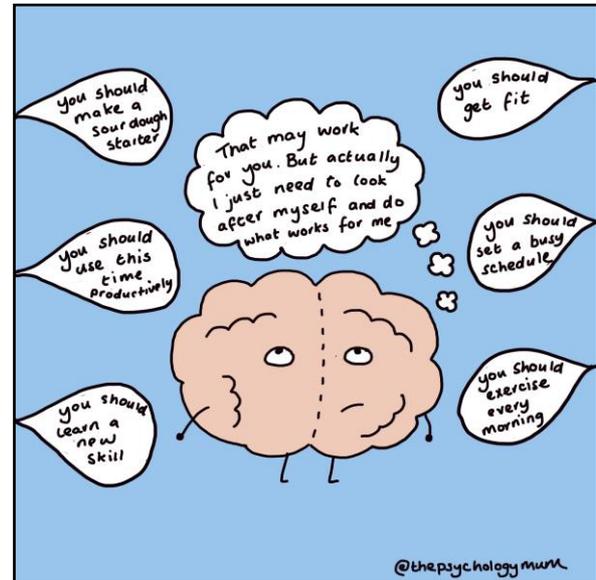
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### ALLOW YOURSELF TIME AND SPACE TO ADJUST

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It is important to allow yourself time and space to adjust to a new normal. There are big changes in our lives as a result of COVID-19 which require an adjustment and a significant mental shift. This takes time and often involves a range of emotions. It is normal to feel anxious, worried, low, scared, lost, overwhelmed and a whole range of other emotions. These are normal emotions in response to an abnormal time. Emotions do not come in nice neat individual packages- we can feel a whole range of, sometimes conflicting, emotions at once. Your brain is unique to you, and how you feel is individual to you. Each person will respond slightly differently as a result of their own unique circumstances and experience.



Advice on how to manage can, in itself, become overwhelming. While following the government advice around COVID-19 is imperative, when it comes to coping there is no one correct way to get through this time, as we all manage in different ways. The priority is looking after yourself, and your loved ones when possible, to help you feel as safe and as comfortable as you can during a stressful time and enable you to adjust to a different normal. No advice on how to manage can be universally applied. These are evidence based strategies to improve mental wellbeing that you may find helpful to use in your circumstances.

However it is also important to ensure any advice you follow does not add to your overwhelm at this particular time, so that it becomes unhelpful to you. Any advice you use should help you feel more safe and comfortable rather than creating additional stress. You can monitor this using the capacity cup below and noticing how you feel. We are all working out how we adjust to this new normal and allowing yourself time and giving yourself space to work this out can help this shift. As we learn and adapt we all get things wrong as we discover what works for us, and what doesn't, in our own unique circumstances. Nurturing and looking after yourself as best you can and treating yourself with kindness and compassion are anchors that can help you through these turbulent times.

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### ENSURING DOWNTIME IS ACTUALLY DOWNTIME

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## LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS (AND BEYOND) DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### Don't Forget the Foundations

Some of the things which have the greatest impact on how we feel are the basics of life- eating, hydrating, sleep, rest, daylight and exercise. These are the foundations of good mental health and cracks in the foundations can quickly escalate into something bigger. However, at times of high stress these things can easily slip and be overlooked, but they are fundamental to how we feel and our physical and mental wellbeing. Remember to hydrate yourself, eat regularly, move your body, get enough sleep, take breaks and rest periods and try to get some daylight every day (even if it's sitting next to a window). It doesn't have to be strenuous exercise to have a positive impact, just getting up and moving also helps. Looking after yourself as best you can is a priority right now as it provides a strong protective foundation to get you through a tough time.

### Stay Connected

Social distancing is about physical distancing NOT social distancing. Social connections are fundamental to well-being and one of the strongest predictors of good mental and physical health. We all need a support system. None of us can do everything by ourselves. At the current time, getting your support system in place is additionally important when we don't have ad hoc opportunities to connect. Your support system is there to provide a range of needs: it can be extra brain space to help you sort through emotions or come up with solutions, supervision for work situations, practical help, sharing experiences or just having a laugh. You might want to formalise some of these support systems so you know what options are available to you and when. For example have a friend who you know you can check in with if you are feeling bad, organise a weekly night-in or have specific supervision or coffee breaks times set up with work colleagues, if you are continuing to work during the holidays.

Ask for help if you need it. Many people find it far easier to provide help than ask for help. There are many barriers to asking for help, including feeling you should be managing and coping by yourself. However, asking for help is active coping, rather than indicating you are not coping or failing. In addition, most people are willing to help and enjoy helping because ultimately the evidence suggest that the benefits to them are even greater than for the person being helped!

If you have capacity to provide help to others, then there is evidence that helping others has a positive impact on your wellbeing. However, this only applies when you have the capacity and time to do so. When helping others starts to increase your pressure and stress it can have a detrimental impact on how you feel. If you are offering help to others, make sure it does not start to detrimentally impact on you.

### But Also Manage the Noise!

Watch out that the influx of groups/ chats/ messages doesn't tip over into the unhelpful zone and become overwhelming, increasing your stress. Take control of this if it does. For example, you could mute work chats when not at work, remove yourself from facebook groups you find overwhelming and manage your social media feed so it is something that makes you feel good. In addition, having the perpetual presence of your phone and all it's beeps and notifications can keep you in high alert mode and increase stress. Make sure you have times when you can switch off from social media, the online world and your phone completely. If you find yourself reaching for your phone ask yourself "is this helping me right now or making me feel worse?" so you can make an active decision about whether you will pick it up or not. This is particularly important at night time when blue light can disrupt the brain sleep hormones.

If you find, during social interactions, that people are bringing up information or talking about topics that are creating anxiety or becoming unhelpful, give yourself permission to limit or end these conversations. Having stock phrases

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prepared in advance that are polite but set clear boundaries can help you do this. Such as “I’m really sorry but I find talking about this doesn’t help me right now. Would you mind if we talked about something else?”

There is also a wealth of information about how to manage self isolation, home schooling, and emotional responses to COVID-19 generally. While of course the government advice around COVID-19 needs to be adhered to stringently, remember there is no-one size fits all advice when it comes to managing life generally, particularly in this new situation. We are all finding our feet in this new normal and learning how to manage it. Use reliable sources of information and a “take what you need approach” with advice about coping: feel confident in disregarding information that doesn’t work for you.

## Planning Activities to Anticipate and Look Forward to

Our brains are designed to plan and project into the future and they enjoy having activities to anticipate. The evidence suggests that thinking about these activities and plans beforehand may have as much benefit on how we feel as taking part in them themselves. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has removed many of the activities we can plan and look forward to and the nature of social distancing means that days can merge into one with very little structure. Therefore planning activities at this time may require greater creativity, but the positive impact on how you feel means this is worth thinking about. What you plan will be individual to you and the type of activity doesn’t matter, as long as it is something you look forward to that is different from your normal routine and that you enjoy doing. There are many lists of ideas and activities online to help come up with ideas to schedule that may suit your interests. Activities which you

Some ideas might include:

- Film nights- in person or a discussion online once you have watched the film. Netflix party offers a watch together experience.
- Special meals on particular days.
- Scheduling video or phone catch ups/ nights in with friends (most video-call apps enable lots of people to be on the call at one time).
- Quiz nights- in person or real life.
- Desert island discs nights- everyone chooses songs that mean something to them and talk through the songs.
- An online coffee morning.
- Join an online cook-a-long (a number of restaurants are currently doing this for their dishes) or other online activities scheduled for a particular time.
- Plan a virtual holiday round the world- plan what location you will visit and virtually visit locations (such as zoos/ museums that have webcams), make food from that location, watch a film based there and “take part” in a local activity or make something from the area.

can enjoy planning for provide an extra enjoyable activity too before the actual scheduled event.

## Planning Daily Joy and Relaxation

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While it is helpful to have activities to look forward to, it is also important to have enjoyable and relaxing activities on a daily basis. Enjoyment and relaxation are essential for mental wellbeing and physical health- they create positive feelings, down regulate your body and engage body systems that have a beneficial impact on how you feel and your general health. Most of the time we write lists of what we need to do and slot in the good stuff- what we enjoy and find relaxing- in any available space, or it gets overlooked entirely. This may still be the case currently, or you may find instead that you are feeling bored and have an excess of time. Either way, planning joy and relaxation are an essential component of any to do list or schedule. Try to ensure you have at least one thing you enjoy and one thing that helps you relax planned every day, but the more the better. These are not add in luxuries, they are essential for wellbeing.

### **Watch Out for Helpful Coping Strategies Becoming Unhelpful**

Many of the activities that help us relax and cope can also tip over into becoming unhelpful in particular circumstances. This may be more likely to happen during the current situation, as there is greater stress, less distraction and it is a new situation which we are learning to manage the best we can. There may be even more risk during the holiday period as there is less structured time and some people may find themselves with more time than usual and experience boredom. Some examples of coping strategies which can become unhelpful include social media use, caffeine, alcohol and even video games or watching TV. Try to notice if you are using your normal coping/ relaxation strategies more than usual and how they make you feel. Think about whether they are having an overall positive or negative impact on your life and how you feel, and whether they have tipped over into becoming unhelpful for you.

### **Keep a Check on Checking**

It can be very tempting to just have a quick check of the news, social media, work chats or work email. Often we do this as we are worried we have missed something or might need to do something, and checking gives us a sense of temporary relief. In addition, at times of uncertainty, we can feel a need for certainty, which checking the news, emails or social media can appear to fill. However, long term checking often increases anxiety as it puts us in a state of high alert and doesn't allow us to switch off. If you do have to check in with work, if you can, try to limit how and when you do this- for example do it at a set time and respond to what you have to then, rather than perpetually checking throughout the day. You also take control by turning off notifications for apps and email on your device, so you can decide when you look, rather than there being constant demand for you to look. Similarly, try to restrict your news consumption to set times and periods and consume news and advice only from reliable and trusted sources.

### **Be Aware**

There is good evidence to support that being aware of the present moment and noticing what is going on around you is beneficial to your mental wellbeing. However our brain often gets in the way of doing this as it is heading off to think

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about the future, or mulling over the past. Another obstacle to awareness is often perpetually in our pocket- our phone. When we use our phone it draws our attention away from what is happening in our environment.

Some people like to use meditation or mindfulness to help them be aware and there are some great online resources to help with this, if you enjoy this approach or want to try. However you can increase your awareness with simple steps too by shifting your attention to the here and now and what is happening in the present. Some people like to use the 5,4,3,2,1 technique (in the box) to help bring their attention to the current moment.

- Notice 5 things you can see
- Notice 4 things you can hear
- Notice 3 things you can feel
- Notice 2 things you can hear
- Notice 1 thing you can smell

## Manage Pandemic Pressure

Keep an eye out for experiencing pandemic pressure. There are many posts and articles at the moment suggesting we should be using this time to help others, develop new skills, increase our knowledge and get fit. And there are no shortage of pictures on social media or sourdough starters, fermented food and creative exploits. For some people these activities may be the right thing for them to do to manage boredom and keep themselves and their mind busy. However, also watch out for this type of information leading to comparison and increasing pressure. If you find yourself feeling stressed or overwhelmed about what you **SHOULD** be doing right now, remind yourself that it is equally as okay to allow yourself time to muddle through and manage as best you can, whatever that looks like. We don't have to come out the other end as a highly skilled baker with a Joe Wicks body. But we do have to ensure we come through this time looking after ourselves the best we can and feeling as safe and as good as we possibly can.

## Remind yourself you are doing well and what you have achieved

Our brains are goal orientated and we often focus on what we need to do, and forget to pause to think about what we have done. As a result, achievements often get overlooked. At the current time, and particularly during the holidays, it may feel like we are achieving less, because our choices are drastically reduced. Taking some time to reflect on the day and what you have done and achieved can help you both notice and remember your achievements and reflect on the positive steps you are taking to manage through this time. Your brain also has a tendency to pick up negative information more easily. This is also therefore a way of directing your attention to pick up on the positive aspects of your day, which otherwise your brain may miss.

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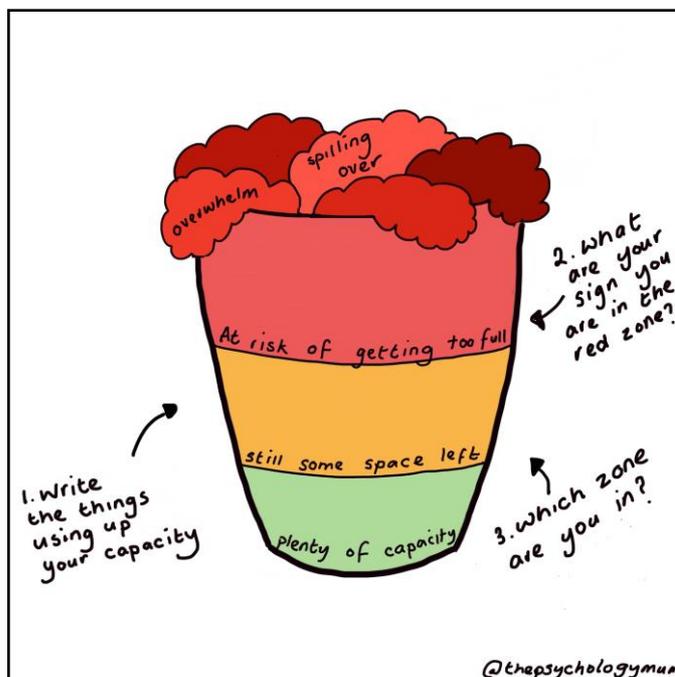
## GENERAL ADVICE FOR LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

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### Manage Your Capacity

We all have limited capacity and at times of uncertainty and higher background stress our capacity can be used up quickly, so you reach the point of overwhelm before you notice it. The capacity cup can be used to recognise how full your capacity cup currently is, and what the signs are that you are in the amber or red zone and need to take action before your cup overflows with overwhelm. If you notice you are reaching the top then it is important to take action to manage your capacity. You can do this in a number of ways:

1. Try to work out what is in your cup- is there anything you can throw out or that can wait until another time?
2. Try to problem solve or find solutions to the things in your cup that are causing stress
3. If you don't have very much capacity left, try not to take on too much extra as this will put you in danger of overflowing.
4. Be kind to yourself and try to find ways to relax that will help you reduce stress. If you notice you cup spilling over breathing exercises can be a quick way to manage your capacity in the here and now.

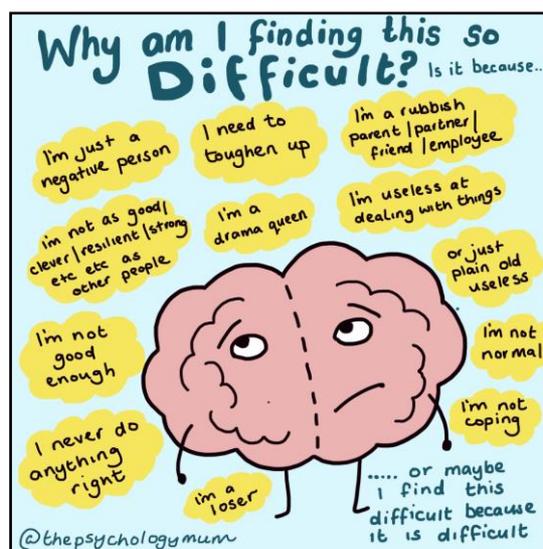


### Recognise and Validate your Emotions

When we feel bad, we often want to get away from our emotion and may try to ignore them. Even worse, we may shame ourselves for how we feel or interpret the emotion as meeting something negative about us. However the evidence suggests that trying to ignore emotions and push them away actually creates more stress. Instead, recognise how you are feeling and try not to criticise yourself for feeling this way. Naming the emotions and thinking why you are experiencing them can also help. Writing down how you are feeling or talking this through with someone else you trust can also help you make sense of how you are feeling.

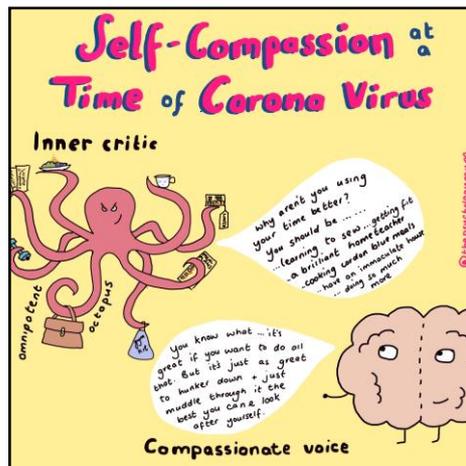
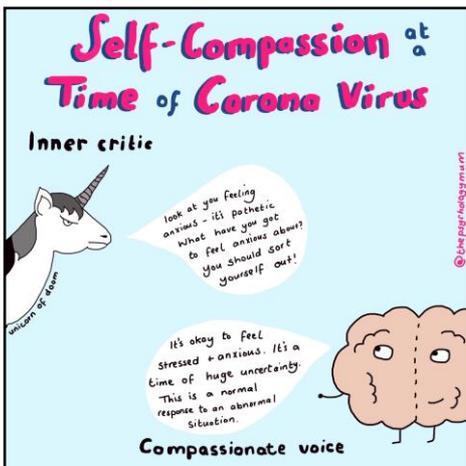
### Keep an Eye Out for Your Inner Critic

We nearly all have an inner voice and sometimes that inner voice can be our own worst enemy as it picks up on even minor mistakes, berates us for what we don't do well and, at times,



can be downright nasty. The inner critic triggers our threat response, which makes us feel more stressed. At times of uncertainty and stress this voice can get even louder and have a greater impact. Ways to help manage this are:

1. Notice that your inner critic is at work- what is it telling you?
2. Think about what you would say to a friend in a similar situation? Usually you will find this is more objective and kinder.
3. Now apply the same compassionate thinking to yourself, as this is a fairer and more objective way to look at the

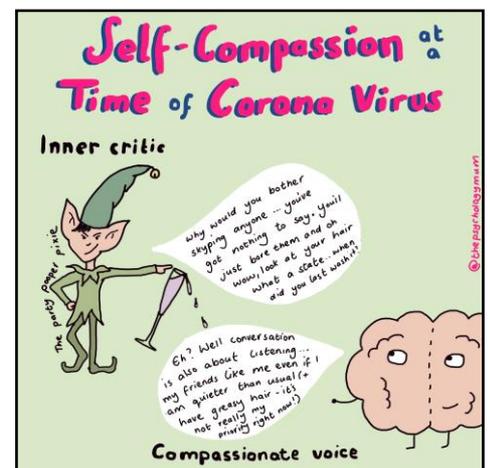


situation.

### Keep Catastrophising in Check.

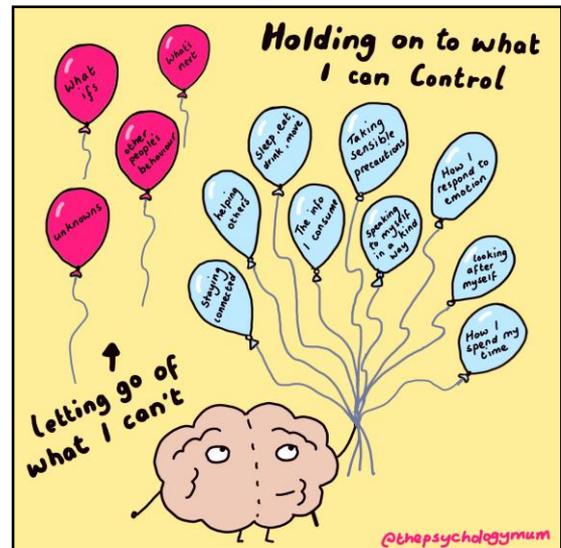
Our brains are designed to plan and project into the future and this can be extremely helpful. However at times of high stress and uncertainty this can sometimes become unhelpful. Uncertainty creates a gap in knowledge about what will happen next, which our brains can fill by catastrophising, projecting into the future to predict the worst case scenario.

Keep an eye out for your brain running away with itself and predicting a worst case or negative outcome that seems certain but is actually based on conjecture and is only one possible outcome. Remind yourself of the facts. Stick to reliable sources of information to provide these facts. You can also use the technique above (in the inner critic section) by thinking about what you would say to a friend/ colleague in a similar situation.



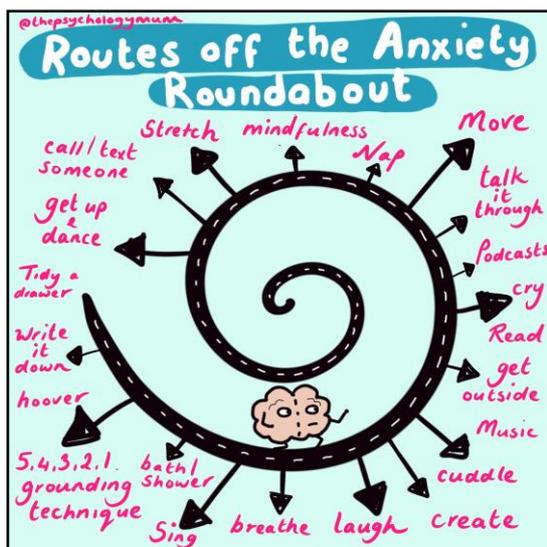
## Focus on What You Can Control

Uncertainty can make things feel out of control. It's important to recognise that there is a lot out of our control at the current time. However, it can be helpful to shift our focus onto what we can control and consider how we can use our limited resources to manage these helpfully. You can use this drawing to think about what you can control, and focus on and direct your resources to these aspects of your life. You can also use this technique with worry. Separate your worries into "worries I can do something about" and "worries that are beyond my control". Shift your focus and resources to identifying how you can tackle and problem solve the first type of worry.



## Find Ways Off the Anxiety Roundabout

Anxiety is a result of your mind predicting threat (which can be real or perceived) which throws your body into flight/fight/ freeze mode. At the current time there is a greater general level of threat so you may find you are experiencing anxiety symptoms more often. When your brain predicts a threat, it releases chemicals which activate your sympathetic nervous system. This gets your body ready for action so you can respond to the threat. Everybody experiences this differently but some common bodily reactions are racing thoughts, tight muscles, rapid breathing, increased sweating, shakiness and a churning stomach. You might also find yourself getting more irritable or angry, or avoiding people and/or situations- which provides short term relief but long term can be unhelpful.



To get off the anxiety roundabout you need to find ways to calm your body's heightened threat response and engage your parasympathetic nervous system instead, which has a calming effect on your body. There are many ways to do this, and breathing slowly without forcing the breathe is a extremely effective way, as is moving your body. It can be helpful to proactively think of ways that help you get off the anxiety roundabout, so that when you do feel anxious - a symptom of which is your brain has difficulty thinking of what to do next- you have this information to hand. There are some ideas in the image above and you could draw your own anxiety roundabout detailing what helps you de-escalate your threat response when you are feeling anxious.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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## Further Sources of Support

**Breathing Space Scotland** is a free and confidential phone and web based service for people in Scotland experiencing mental health concerns. They provide a safe and supportive space by listening, offering advice and information. <https://breathingspace.scot> **0800 83 85 87**

**Shout** provides support in a crisis via text message. [www.giveusashout.org](http://www.giveusashout.org) Text SHOUT to **85258**

**Samaritans** 24 hour support line for anyone struggling to cope. [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) **116 123**

**Mind** is a charity that provide information and advice about mental health [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**Scotland's 24-hour Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline** <https://safer.scot> **0800 027 1234**

## Apps



**Headspace** aims to help you learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by Using the app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on topics including stress & anxiety and sleep, including short meditation on the go.



**Calm** provides guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.

**The breathing app** Simple visual guided breathing exercises

