Managing anxiety in the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic

Guidance by NHS Lanarkshire Psychological Services. Version 1, 17 March 2020

First of all: what you're feeling is normal

- It is **normal to be feeling stressed, anxious and scared** right now. Most of us haven't experienced anything like this before. That's true right around the world.
- One of the scariest things is **uncertainty**, especially as everything unfolds so fast. Human beings hate uncertainty, and want guaranteed answers. Because there aren't any, our anxiety is likely to be high. Again, this is the most normal thing in the world right now.
- Anxiety brings with it lots of **different physical feelings**. This can include a racing heart, chest pain, sweatiness and a shortness of breath. Again, all of these are very normal.
- In response to those feelings, our minds might say: "What if it's coronavirus?" That's normal too. The NHS Scotland website, **www.nhsinform.scot**, is very good on what the actual coronavirus symptoms are.

What we can all do (and what we can't)

- No matter how much we want it, we *can't* get certainty right now. So, **allow yourself to feel what you're feeling**. It's OK not to feel OK.
- Different people will feel different things at different times, and that's OK too.
- It's tempting to spend a lot of time looking online for news – especially at social media – in the hope that this will help. However, it often makes us feel worse. So, **if you're going online to look for updates then try to do it only once or twice a day, at specific times**.
- Use **trusted sources**, such as **www.nhsinform.scot** and **www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk**, which have links to the latest updates, and to a free information line.
- We *can't* switch off anxious thoughts and feelings. But we *can* learn ways of coping with them. We've put together some ideas below.

How you can help your own mental health

- The key thing is to **be kind to yourself**. Try to eat healthily. Take some exercise if you can. Stick to a sleep routine. Pace yourself. And, most of all, don't blame yourself or beat yourself up if you feel you're not coping as well as you'd like.
- **Be kind to others, too**. Doing this makes us feel good about ourselves as well.
- How we **breathe** makes a big difference. Search online for "NHS breathing exercise for stress" and you'll see the page at www.nhs.uk where there's an excellent, short technique you can try. There are also some recordings of helpful exercises at the website **stresscontrolaudio.com**.
- **Take time to do the things you enjoy**. Watch, read, listen. Play games. Look after yourself.
- **Stay in touch with people you like and trust** if you can. If you're socially distancing or you're having to self-isolate, why not reach out by phone, message or video call?
- Remember that alcohol and drugs are *never* good coping strategies. Even if they feel it in the short term, they very quickly cause problems to mount up.

Finally …

- If you are currently seeing an NHS Lanarkshire mental health professional, the team will keep you updated about any changes to appointments.
- Remember that GPs and other NHS staff are likely to be extremely busy right now, and you might find it more difficult to get hold of them. **www.nhsinform.scot** is the go-to website for advice. It also has lots more self-help tips about managing anxiety and low mood.