

COVID-19: Looking after your mental health

A guide for people living with lung disease and lung cancer

Although we have been told that living with COVID-19 is our new normal, people who are living with a lung disease or lung cancer may not be able to live as they did before the pandemic and are having to adjust to a new way of living. Lung Foundation Australia, in collaboration with Clinical Psychologist Debra Sandford, offers the following advice on looking after your mental health during this time.

"When social distancing first started, we were not used to it, it felt awkward and unnatural. Now, for some of us, as restrictions have reduced and stopped, standing too close together can feel awkward and some people can feel like their space has been invaded. It's ok to take a step back and create a space that feels ok for you.

Debra Sandford, Clinical Psychologist

There isn't a stereotypical way for people to react and it's normal to develop feelings of anxiety, distress, fear, or anger.

Now is the time to prioritise both your physical and mental health. The following information aims to equip you with strategies to cope with feelings that might arise when social distancing and self-isolating.

**Please note the following advice is of a general nature and is not meant to replace individual counselling, therapy and/or medical or mental health advice.*

Getting reliable information and treatment options

Maintain perspective

When feeling anxious or worried, remember health professionals, officials and researchers are working to ensure the community is safe and protected and to help those in need.

Media and the internet

As the focus about COVID declines in the news cycle, the impact on how we feel will also most likely change. As the world learns to manage COVID, the media has also changed and reduced the number of reports about it. For some that might be a comfort, for others, you may want to keep informed about how many cases are around. The Australian Federal Government Department of Health website has reliable facts and figures on its webpage and is a good source of information.

Choose reliable media outlets, such as state or federal government, hospital, or university webpages. Social media pages can often contain misleading or incorrect information, so caution should be followed if you read or see anything on social media. Lung Foundation Australia is also a good source of information, especially for people with a lung disease. They regularly update their webpages and information sheets and ensure that the advice they provide is sound.

Follow government advice

The Australian Government continues to update its advice on how to protect ourselves during this time. It can feel overwhelming when the advice changes unexpectedly. Remember, the advice is aimed to protect you and your loved ones.

Treatment options

For many people who are immune compromised and have chronic health conditions, there are treatment options available to you if you contract COVID. Having a supply of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) on hand will help with a quick diagnosis and being able to access anti-viral treatment options. You can discuss what treatment may be suitable for you with your GP or Respiratory Specialist.

Social distancing, wellbeing, and self-isolation

Mask wearing

Mask wearing has declined significantly over the past few months. However, if you feel like you need to wear a mask, wear one. The research suggests that being in well-ventilated and open-air situations is generally quite safe, but if you are in small room or rooms that are not well ventilated or crowded, you may want to put a mask on. It is also ok to ask others to wear a mask around you, if you feel like you might be at risk.

Stay connected

Don't let physical distancing turn into emotional distancing. Stay in touch with your friends and family regularly though the telephone or online via video calls or social media. You can try modern means like Zoom or Facetime so you can see each other's faces, or you can make a telephone call. Whichever way you do it, try and make time to connect with someone at least once a day.

Health and wellbeing

Focus on keeping yourself well physically which will help improve your mental wellbeing. Regularly drink water and eat healthy and nourishing food to fuel your body and try and keep your body moving. Other things you can do to help ensure you look after yourself are:

- Aim for 7–9 hours of sleep a night.
- Try to go to bed and get up at approximately the same time each day, this helps your circadian rhythm.
- If you feel anxious or distressed, you can try to do something that has in the past brought you a sense of calm, peace, or joy.
- In the evening, keep the lights low and make your night time routine gentle and calm. Avoid loud, noisy, or active things in the evening.
- If you tend to ruminate when you try to go to sleep, try to journal your thoughts before you go to bed, this helps to 'clear your mind'. For more information on how journaling can help google '[Mental Health Benefits of Journaling](#)'.
- Room temperature is important—too hot or too cold, makes for poorer sleep. You may also want to get yourself a new pillow.

"If you are struggling to exercise because of your health, try sitting out in the fresh air and getting some sunshine. This will help you feel a bit better and it will definitely help with your sleep routine," Debra says.

Maintain routine

Try and maintain your normal day-to-day routine as much as possible. If you typically go out for a coffee with friends, consider making a coffee at home and telephoning or video calling each other to catch up. If you do go and meet your friends, ensure that you wash your hands frequently with warm soapy water and maintain social distancing. Stay home if you're unwell and connect with your friends online. In stressful times, we cope better with support from those close to us.

"As tempting as it is, don't stay in your pyjamas. Wake up when you normally would and get dressed for the day. Try and keep as much of a normal routine as possible. Perhaps use this time to complete jobs around the house that you will be proud of, such as tidying the kitchen cupboards," Debra says.

If you are working from home, try and set up a dedicated workspace and treat it like you would a normal day in the office. Remember to take regular breaks and keep normal work hours. Maintaining a healthy work/life balance is key.

Self-isolation

For most people, COVID-19 social distancing restrictions have officially reduced or ceased. This might mean that if you get COVID and have to stay at home, your family or housemates might not be as supportive as they might have been in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is ok to still want to socially distance and stay at home if you think you might have COVID-19.

Connect

If you are isolating because of COVID, schedule time each day to focus on making connections with the people who are important to you.

This can still be a challenging time. If one of your family or housemates gets COVID, it is ok to ask them to isolate from you. Perhaps discuss how you will manage a COVID infection and make plans before it happens, to help avoid misunderstandings and arguments. That way you can look after each other's health and mental health.

Above all, be respectful of and patient with one another. For many of us our lifestyle may have changed, and this is still unfamiliar territory so try to help each other through it.

Techniques to reduce anxiety and stress

When you are feeling anxious or stressed, you may find yourself breathing quicker. While slow deep breathing techniques are useful for most people, they may not be relaxing for someone with a lung condition. Below is another technique which you may find helpful.

The five senses exercise

The goal of this exercise is to calm your mind by using your five senses to focus on your environment instead of your thoughts.

- First, notice five things that you can **see**. Look around you and become aware of your environment. Try to pick out something that you wouldn't usually notice.

- Second, notice four things you can **feel**. Bring your attention to the things that you're currently feeling, such as the texture of your clothing or the smooth surface of the table you're resting your hands on.
- Third, notice three things that you can **hear**. Listen for and notice things in the background that you don't normally notice. It could be the birds chirping outside or an appliance humming in the next room.
- Fourth, notice two things you can **smell**. Bring attention to scents that you usually filter out, either pleasant or unpleasant. Catch a whiff of the pine trees outside or food cooking in the kitchen.
- Finally, notice one thing you can **taste**. Take a sip of a drink, chew gum, or notice the current taste in your mouth.

For this exercise it doesn't matter whether you are breathing slowly, rapidly or in short bursts, just focus on your body and the space you are in. If you are looking for more mindfulness techniques, perhaps try a meditation class on YouTube.

Things to keep in mind

Remind yourself that this is a temporary situation; particularly if you are self-isolating because you're unwell or have tested positive to COVID-19. Staying at home is not a punishment, it's to protect yourself and those around you by slowing the spread of the virus.

Take time to be grateful for the small things, like the sunshine or catching up with an old friend on the telephone.

Focus on the things that you can control such as maintaining good hand hygiene, practicing social distancing, limiting negative news consumption, and treating yourself and other with kindness.

Make time for activities you enjoy such as reading a good book, watching a new TV show, or tending to your garden.

Above all, be kind to yourself.

"Language and thoughts are powerful contributors to emotions so try to be aware of your own self-talk. This involves recognising when you have unhelpful thoughts and being able to turn them into balanced thoughts. For example, if you have a thought along the lines of "I'll never get better", it can be helpful to reframe this thought to "many people with long COVID have found ways to manage their symptoms and I can too," Lung Foundation Australia, [long COVID resource](#)

Seek support

People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms. If you need to talk to someone, reach out to a support service such as Lifeline on **13 11 14**, who provide 24-hour support to listen to how you are feeling and offer you information and advice.

If you would like to hear more from Debra, we have recorded a webinar which is available on our YouTube channel, Lung Foundation Australia.

We're here for you

Remember our Information and Support Centre staff are available to connect you with resources and support services to help you during this time. Also keep an eye on our website and Facebook page for the latest updates. Our Information and Support Centre is open Monday to Friday 8:00am-4:30pm (AEST). To contact us please free call **1800 654 301** (option 3).

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