

Anxiety toolkit

As COVID-19 takes hold, the way we live has changed indefinitely. Every family in Australia has been affected. As businesses close leading to mass job losses, families are struggling financially. Parents are living with the overwhelming fear of not being able to support their families. Emotionally, we are challenged by being asked to stay in our homes, away from family and friends, creating a sense of loss as families are isolated from parents and grandparents. And the pervasive threat of the time bomb of the COVID-19 virus hangs over our heads.

The stress and anxiety we are all feeling is real.

If we fight against the reality of this virus, it hurts. Everything is close to home at the moment. Stress and anxiety are skyrocketing and freaking us out as a nation.

What are our commonalities as human beings right now? Our level of fear, dread, grief, heartache, panic, anguish, hopelessness, anxiety and the need to feel safe brings us together. In the past we have been told to think we need more security, more money, more success, to work harder, have a bigger house, to have a greener house, be a better parent, lose weight or be more organised and everything will be OK. But it's not.

Human beings think on average 100,000 or more thoughts a day; many of them are repeats of thoughts of the day before. We need to create new neural pathways in our brain - those stimulated by gratitude, kindness, optimism, cheerfulness, buoyancy and hope. When we think more hopeful thoughts, our bodies release dopamine and serotonin, two types of neurotransmitters that relax the nervous system. Both of these chemicals are linked with happiness.

And be aware of our self-talk. It's often not what's happening that causes the problem, it's what we say to ourselves about the event, because our self-talk usually takes the problem up a rung, whereas being in the moment takes things down a rung.

What we really need is to care for ourselves better and let our worried minds have a rest. Stop constantly accessing the news or having it on as background noise; at least take it down a couple of notches. Being hammered with the same event over and over again is not healthy. Rolf Dobelli's recent book, *Stop Reading the News* is a manifesto of creating a happier, calmer and wiser life. Spending time in the outdoors, reading more, meditating, experiencing art and literature, these are the things that nurture our hearts and make us more peaceful and wise. How can we possibly benefit from seeing tragic events up close and personal duplicated on screens and social media?

Develop a self-care toolkit. This can look different for everyone. If you feel yourself falling into apprehension, when the fatigue of anxiety deepens, practical suggestions include, first

recognising this state. Then calming yourself, stepping away from the area if things are getting too stressful.

We need to be clear with ourselves and those around us about the difference between the things we can control and those we can't and get cracking on the ones that are within our control. My daughter has a "feeling" seat in the garden. A place where she can go and feel her feelings of anxiety, anger, worry and fear. She may ask someone to sit with her, but not try to fix her. Just to hold her while she sits in the feelings. And when she feels any kind of small shift, she then connects with her five senses, bringing herself into the moment by noticing five things she can see around her, naming four things she can feel, three things she can hear, and identifies two things she can smell. Finally, she recalls one good thing about herself before she gets on with what she was doing.

Stop thinking about things that you are not prepared, or not able to do anything about. Turn off the television, have a break from your screens, re-runs of the day's events are not necessarily in perspective and stepping them up is unhealthy and causes further angst and anxiety.

Compassion is activated when we feel empathy for another person. It's important to be able to care deeply for another, but not at the expense of caring for ourselves. It's a healthy option to support others from a base line of deeply supporting ourselves.

Create distinct internal boundaries of what you will and won't do. Being clear in your mind about your values and live and reflect these in your behaviour. The only viable state is to give from a position of strength rather than giving from burnout and fatigue. Think: 'What can I do right now that is going to have a positive effect on me and those around me?' It is only sustainable to support and give to others based on having already supported and given to yourself. Self-sacrifice is not sustainable.

We're all going to have to evolve if we're to become the people who can navigate the turbulent waters of COVID-19 and steer our world into safer waters. Let's support each other in doing that. This is not a time for giving in, but for managing ourselves through the weariness by build personal strength through having a healthy toolkit and finding hope.

Vicki Bennett a corporate trainer and author of *The Book of Hope – Antidote for Anxiety*.
www.vickibennett.com.au