

Original material: Dr Gareth Palmer working with Men's mental health.

In Manchester [www.menshouldtalk.com](http://www.menshouldtalk.com)

## 10 Tips for Emotional Health during the Virus Emergency

Making positive use of this unique time, whilst maintaining emotional good health:

We are all aware of the massive changes we all currently face, many of us concerned about loved ones and potential economic fallout.

But we also know that a feeling of powerlessness, in the face of these changes can only make us feel worse.

Our aim here is the simple but important one, of putting you in charge of your emotional responses. Rather than reacting to the crisis we are promoting ways to make you be and feel, proactive and connected. Yes - it is possible to emerge from this crisis stronger than before. That might seem a stretch of the imagination, but put the following into action and you may be surprised:

**1. Exercise.** Self-isolation isn't a license to veg out in front of the tv. This is an opportunity to get into shape and in so doing, generate the brain chemicals (endorphins) that will give you the energy to fight illness, strengthen your immune system and boost your mood. You need not go mad, even fifteen minutes or so per day of an intense cardiac workout would form a baseline. From here you'll feel more like taking a brisk walk for example. This will also help you to appreciate your body as it becomes once again something for you to enjoy, rather than just enabling you to work and service the needs of others.

**2. Have a plan.** Part of the business of getting stronger and clearer is ... Making a plan for the day. Research indicates that structuring your use of time gives you a sense of control. Rather than being told what to do or being pushed into panic mode, write down what you want to do, go through this list as the day proceeds. Ticking off tasks will give you a sense of achievement, and the feeling of ownership of your life. This will buffer you from the constant stream of media chatter.

**3. Make contact.** Its tough to be stuck indoors but that doesn't mean you have to self-isolate from your social world. Do contact existing friendship groups, but don't rely on these – they may have their own unique set of challenges.

A kind way to make contact work, is to reach out to two people a day you haven't contacted for a while. Whether you call, messages or send emails doesn't really matter. What does matter is your kind intention. Do your best not to off-load on them, but try to become an active listener. It will take you out of your worries. The very fact that someone is hearing them will make these contacts extremely grateful. And while we're on the subject -

**4. Deepen your gratitude.** Research conducted in the last twenty years has found that feelings of gratitude can make a huge difference to our day. We get a chemical lift from feeling grateful and furthermore it offers us a fundamental connection to others. One of the best ways of developing this is to go through your days thinking of all the things you are grateful for - cups to tea made for you, talks with others, something you've eaten. Something small that you appreciate. The trick here is not to compare these experiences, but just to dwell on the feeling.

Try this at night before sleep - list four good things that happened each day. It's a great way to bring body and mind together at a time when you really need to rest.

**5. Meditate.** You'll be aware of the recent fashion for meditation and mindfulness, but for a lot of people this will seem like a strange response to the crisis: It's not. Meditation is a very useful way of getting in touch with your autonomic nervous system. But work your way into it - a few minutes a day is enough to get you started. Experiment with this by noticing how you feel during the day - not immediately after. You can add to your meditation with contemplative work - like dwelling on pictures or experiences in a reflective, mindful way. What we're after here is a calmer frame of mind and a gentler more attentive relationship to the body.

Good Apps are Oak & Headspace, plus there's lots of free stuff on Utube.

**6. Limit your media intake.** This is important right now. The continual stream of information about the crisis is destabilising people. Mainstream media argue that they are just providing information for citizens, but the truth is they are selling news headlines. Their real aim is to involve you in emotional stories which deepen your connection to them, this can weaken you emotionally over time. Please remember that much of the media exists to profit, in this case from your anxiety. Plan a daily ten-minute, news update, don't watch all the associated detail over and over.

Remember, if the news is getting you down, you can choose to distance yourself from it. The same goes for social media, limit your exposure to the negative. Switch off the alerts on your smartphone.

**7. Allow your emotions.** A lot of people (particularly men) do all they can to ignore their emotions. Acknowledging emotional responses is seen as soft (unmanly) and not useful. Some people label it as a sign of weakness, of not coping. **This needs to change.** Anyone who claims not to find this situation frightening is living in some sort of bubble: it is scary and unlike anything we have seen before. But pushing responses underground will not banish them - it will make them emerge later in unpredictable and possibly unpleasant ways. We strongly advise that you accept feelings of being frightened and anxious so that you can face them. This is absolutely not, a recommendation that you dwell on these feelings. Our guide here is far more proactive than that, but we don't recommend unrealistic macho pretending. (for anyone) Lets acknowledge that it's ok to be scared for a little while. Then let it go and crack on with your plan.

**8. Laugh.** Apart from the fact that a good laugh exercises all the muscle groups, it also helps generate valuable chemical responses to lift your mood. Now is the time to start exploring all those humorous avenues - books, podcast, tv sitcoms etc that you've previously only snatched a moment for. Share your tips for good comedy online - its a happy version of sharing the love and kindness that we all need at this time. Didn't someone say, "laughter is the best medicine".

**9. Be aware of your thinking** - and let it go. In these uncertain times, it's easy to dwell on a time when the world seemed comfortably predictable. Where knew the fridge was full, and you had holidays around the corner. But when your mind travels back, it takes you away from the only time we really have - which is **now**. This is not some kind of airy-fairy idea - its the absolute truth. Living in the past or the future is doing you no good at all. Concentrate all of your senses on being here **now**, and giving your attention to what's in front of you - not what isn't.

It's also worth noting that the most important quality children respond to, is your attention - this is worth far more than anything you might buy them. It's this quality of being appreciated which will make them strong and better able to go forward with you.

**10. Design a project.** This is a grand title, but what I mean by this is develop a project that will carry you through the days ahead. This could be writing or drawing or scrapbooking or DIY. The most important characteristic of this work should be that it's down to you, and is not determined by outside factors. This is a time to get better at self-reliance and looking after yourself and those closest to you. A project integrated into the plan mentioned above will give a focus to your day and keep you focused on **the present - the only time we have**.

It would be unusual not to be affected by constant news about the virus - especially when it's presented with the most colourful and dramatic language on TV. But reflect on your experience. Is watching a never-ending stream of headlines helping or weakening you?

This is a time to develop an inner strength and self-care that will serve you and others in going forward. You can choose to **disengage** from the constant news and social media coverage. Limit your intake.

Wishing you all the very best.

**Dylan Powell.** [www.letstalk-therapy.co.uk](http://www.letstalk-therapy.co.uk)

Working with adult anxiety (including OCD) in Lymm & Warrington.