

FD Consultants

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Specialist Services

Coronavirus – Keep it Simple

Mindfulness has been teaching us for thousands of years to 'keep it simple'. What does that mean in the current unprecedented and challenging climate? We have been stripped back from our normal routine, necessities and luxuries. The resources we have turned to in the past to take care of ourselves or reduce our stress levels may not be available to us anymore, like attending social events or going to the gym.

We will all be impacted by coronavirus in one way or another. I have found myself waking early hours in the morning worrying about what is going to happen. Worrying about myself and my loved ones. Worrying about health, finances and whether there will be enough medical care and food for everyone. Having facilitated workshops on stress management and trauma awareness for years now, I am aware that you cannot switch off your survival response. Worry, anxiety and mood swings will impact us all at different times, and sometimes when we are least expecting it to. I ask participants at the beginning of my workshops, what do you want from the training? One individual answered, 'to never feel stressed again'. As I mentioned we cannot switch off our stress response, and we don't want to. It informs us when things are not right, it makes us question our situation or environment, and it can save our lives. But what we can do is learn to manage our stress response well. Mindfulness practice also enables us to live in the moment – invaluable when we are being forced to learn a new way of being that will challenge every aspect of our lives - by learning to appreciate the smaller things, and treasure every moment we have.

What is the Survival Response?

Our survival response activates the reactive part of our brain into 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze', and 'flop' behaviours. We will witness this in the behaviours we see around us, and it is easy to begin judging one another. We don't really know how we as individuals will be impacted and what behaviours will be triggered in us throughout this situation. At times it may vary between all four. Therefore, we may feel an urge to 'fight' the cause, or be angry with everyone, or a certain group of people around us. We may see the fight response activated in the supermarkets when people are literally fighting over the last can of soup or toilet roll on the shelves. We may have an urge to run away from it all, get as far away from the threat as is possible, which means our 'flight' response has been activated. At times, we may feel 'frozen', unable to make decisions, feel frozen to the spot, fearful that whatever action we take will be the wrong one. Additionally, we may feel like we want to pretend none of this is happening, that it isn't real, which often relates to the 'flop' response.

As I mentioned it is easy to judge people that may have a different response to yours. But to maintain empathy towards others it is useful to note that all four responses are fear-based behaviours. The Coronavirus is a life/death situation and will activate the most primal parts of the brain.

How does the brain stuff work?

In trauma therapy we often refer to the triune brain, the three-part brain. In very basic terms the central, most archaic part of the brain, is called the reptilian brain. This part of our brain controls the body's vital functions such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature and balance. We then refer to the next layer of the brain as the limbic brain which regulates our emotions, memory and arousal system. We describe the outer layer of the brain as the neo-cortex, pre-frontal cortex. This part of the brain controls our higher functions such as, analytical and rational thinking, language and sensory perception. When we are stressed or anxious the neo cortex part of the brain goes offline. That means we are left functioning from the limbic and reptilian brain, resulting in people's behaviour becoming more emotional and reactive. This means poor decisions can be made, communication can break down and people become more exclusive rather than inclusive.

Another part of the brain which is useful to know about in our current climate is the Amygdala, which is often referred to as our 'fire alarm'. It becomes activated when we perceive a situation to be threatening. When the brain is activated into the threat response, it will flood our system with the hormones adrenaline, nor-adrenaline and cortisol. This has a profound impact on the body.

What about the physiology of stress?

When our body is flooded with these stress response hormones, we can experience the following symptoms:

- Tension in the big muscles
- Headaches turning to migraines
- Stomach issues, such as stomach ulcers, IBS and nausea
- Our senses can become heightened
- Shortness of breath or palpitations
- Back pain
- Asthma, eczema, fibromyalgia
- High blood pressure or hypertension
- Problems with sleep
- A dry mouth or mouth ulcers

Psychological stress impacts our physiology significantly. Some of the symptoms above can cause more anxiety as we start to feel we have the early signs of the coronavirus. When we are stressed our immune system lowers, and we can be more susceptible to catch illnesses. Therefore, it is fundamental that we spend some time adjusting our resources to the current environment so we can reduce our stress levels.

How can I keep myself resilient?

I published a book in 2018 entitled 'Psychosocial Support for Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Roadmap of Trauma and Critical Incident Care' (Dunkley, 2018). Although it focuses on the humanitarian aid sector specifically, it is useful for anyone who is exposed to trauma indirectly or directly. The Coronavirus is activating our trauma response. I often describe stress, anxiety and trauma as having very similar symptoms as discussed above. The difference with trauma is that we have a slightly different brain patterning, which can lead to flashbacks and intrusive thoughts.

One chapter of the book focuses on the RESPECT resilience model I created. The best way to get our neo cortex back online is to have a varied list of resources which we can turn to in times of stress. The acronym RESPECT stands for: Relaxation, Education, Social, Physical, Exercise, Creative and Thinking.

What are people doing to support themselves:

- **Relaxation** – Logging onto mindfulness apps or remote yoga sessions - you can also access several mindfulness exercises on my website (www.FDconsultants.net); learning simple breathing exercises- one simple technique is to make the out breath longer than the in breath, which does the opposite of the stress response and activates our parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Education** – Getting to understand the stress cycle, by identifying our own symptoms and triggers and building this resource list for ourselves, will all help us to feel more in control. Many teachers are offering online courses, local neighbours out of work are offering individuals classes online. It is helpful to understand that we all have a saturation level when watching the news, because it can fuel us with adrenalin, we may struggle to switch it off. If you feel you are getting more and more anxious limit your exposure to the media.
- **Social** – Since the Coronavirus has taken precedence, I have come across virtual singing groups, exercise classes, quiz evenings, neighbourhood Facebook pages, and WhatsApp groups. Letters have been dropped through people's doors checking if they need anything, and new connections have been made with local people. Giving and kindness is a wonderful resource. It builds a sense of worth, and a sense of control over a situation that feels out of our control. It keeps us connected and keeps our hearts open. Organisations where staff are working from home have created remote tea breaks and catch up groups. I plan skype and tea

(or sometimes wine) catch up with my family and friends. Many funny quotes and videos are making their rounds on WhatsApp, humour is an important resource.

- **Physical** – We need to consider our diet, and monitor our alcohol, nicotine, sugar and caffeine intake. We often reach out for these substances when we are under a great deal of stress, but they can exasperate our stress levels.
- **Exercise** – For those that can get access to the outdoors, neighbours are offering to walk dogs for each other, and people are enjoying the outdoors more. If you are more restricted in leaving the house there are now several exercise classes and apps you can access online. If you still have access to exercising outside personal trainers are still offering sessions, abiding by social distancing. I came across an old hula hoop in my attic that I plan to start using. Some people are tending to their gardens or creating a vegetable plot, which not only gives us a sense of satisfaction but is also a great form of exercise.
- **Creative** – I have been so impressed by the wonderful and creative ideas that are beginning to emerge from being in lockdown or respecting social distancing. Activating the creative part of the brain does the opposite of the stress response. Dancing, music and keep fit sessions have taken place in the street, or on balconies, respecting social distancing. Is it time to learn an instrument, a language, a course that you've always wanted to do online but never got around to? Our neighbourhood has started painting pictures of certain topics each week and putting them in their windows, this week it is rainbows.
- **Thinking** – Many neuroscientists state that we have a negative brain bias. When we are stressed, we are going to have some of the following thoughts, 'I am not coping', 'I am not good enough', 'I am powerless'. A common stress thinking patterns at this time would be catastrophising, 'something bad is going to happen to me or my family' or 'this is never going to end'. Identify what negative thoughts are being triggered for you at this time, write them down, and write a counterargument or mantra that helps you to challenge the negative thought.

Write a list of your RESPECT resources and add new ideas to it each day. If we make this tangible, it helps us to become observers of ourselves, which enables us to change the negative destructive behaviours that can be activated through stress and will help us to keep connected to our resources, which in turn will increase our wellbeing.

I hope this guide sheet helps for now. We will continue posting articles and blogs to help guide individuals through this uncertain and challenging time.

At FD Consultants we are offering all our individual and group sessions online. We are also able to offer our stress management and resilience building workshops, and our trauma awareness workshops remotely.

During such a confusing and complex time, I will end with the message to 'keep it simple and appreciate the small things.' We need each other to survive so let's keep our minds, hearts and rational brains online.

About FD Consultants

FD Consultants support anyone who has been impacted by trauma through work or personal circumstances, whether directly or indirectly. We offer consultancy to organisations when implementing a trauma management programme and duty of care policies for psychosocial support. FD Consultants offer services to enable individuals to remain resilient in highly stressful environments and situations. We support individuals suffering burnout, vicarious trauma, cumulative stress, and compassion fatigue. We believe in working and walking alongside individuals or organisations empowering them to find their own solutions and we strongly believe everyone can recover from mental health challenges with the right help and support.

