Flinders Wellness Blog

This new section of the newsletter will host short submissions on topics related to wellness from Flinders clinicians and researchers. This submission is from Hannah Whittall. Hannah is a registered psychologist and clinical psychology registrar working in the Cancer Wellness Centre.

Managing stress and uncertainty during the pandemic

Over the past 24-months, we have seen a constantly changing landscape within our healthcare system, community, and even in our friendship circles. These changes have seen lockdowns, social distancing, working from home, school online, telehealth, all with their unique challenges. It is not surprising, that this uncertainty and constant change has seen an increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns across Australia. Below are some strategies that may be helpful during these times:

- **Be aware of the 'controllable' and 'uncontrollable' aspects of the pandemic**

  COVID has meant many of our day-to-day activities look different to the way they did two years ago. For many of us, this has made us feel like we cannot control even the simplest of things. More often than not, this is our anxious brain talking. Our anxious brain is always on the lookout for things that could go wrong. Here we need to try and focus on the things that we can control, this can include things like sleep, exercise, following health advice, and staying connected with others.

- **Be mindful of your sleep**

  During increased times of stress, we see that our sleep can deteriorate. Gone are the days when we would fall asleep within 10-30 minutes. It is likely that many of us have experienced what we call 'rumination' – thought patterns that are immersive or repetitive (and usually negative). This rumination can mean we take much longer than usual to fall asleep. We might think over whether we remembered to sanitise as we entered the shops, we might think about loved ones who may be at greater risk, or we might think about that upcoming holiday that we will likely have to cancel. Again, these thinking patterns can be slowed down by considering the controllable and uncontrollable aspects of the pandemic. And if sleep is still tricky, try listening to music, a calming podcast (no true crime), or even get up and read a book. There is no point lying in bed trying to sleep if your brain just isn't ready – all this does is start building negative associations between bed and sleep.

- **Limit time on social media**

  As with most things, the social media landscape has also changed. Where we once saw clothing and electronic devices being advertised, we are now seeing face masks and fancy hand sanitisers. The over-saturation in the media, online, and in our friendship circles can make it feel like COVID is the only thing we have in common, which of course is not the case. So, try to be mindful of the amount of information you are consuming online, perhaps set a screen-time limit on your phone. And if you do want to be updated, remember to look for this information from a reputable source.

Most importantly, try to be kind and patient with those around you. We are all experiencing varying levels of stress during this pandemic which has been hard on everyone.

If you or somebody you know is struggling with the worry or uncertainty caused by the pandemic, please reach out to your GP who will be able to refer you to a psychologist using a Mental Health Care Plan. Otherwise, there are lots of great organisations like the [Black Dog Institute](#) that can help.