



Mental Health and Wellbeing with Long Covid

Mental health after Covid

- Being unwell can have an impact on your mental health.
- It's not unusual to experience lower mood or increased anxiety after being through a significant event such as Covid.
- Anxiety and low mood can continue over time, especially if you are experiencing 'long-covid' symptoms
- It can take a while to process what you have been through and the impact this has had and may still be having on your life.
- If you have not been able to do the activities that you would usually do, this can have a big impact on your mood as well.

Anxiety

- Experiencing a stressful event like having Covid or a stay in hospital can cause anxiety.
- This is a normal reaction when we're in danger or under threat, and one that we all experience at times throughout our lives.
- Anxiety can be particularly bad when things change suddenly or we don't feel in control.



Worries

- You may worry that you may contract covid again, or have another stay in hospital and this can make you feel more anxious about the future.
- Such concerns are normal and are often experienced by those with long covid.

Typical worries can include:

- Worries about health and recovery (e.g. **'I'll never get back to how I was'**)
- Stress about being off work and the impact on finances (e.g. **'I'll lose my job', 'How will I manage the same hours?'**)
- Fears about family and friends also getting ill (e.g. **'What if my mother gets it?'**)

Typical anxiety symptoms

Anxiety affects people in different ways, and symptoms are often part of the body's natural 'fight, flight or freeze' response. This is your body's way of preparing you to respond to a threat. You may have:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Trouble sleeping■ Difficulty concentrating■ Difficulty remembering things	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Changes in mood Flashbacks■ More breathlessness■ Rapid shallow breathing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Difficulty slowing your breathing down■ Chest pain■ Racing thoughts
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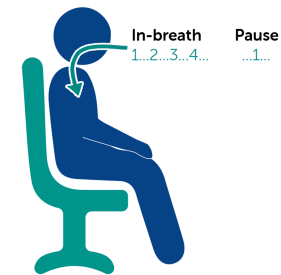
Everyone experiences anxiety symptoms from time to time. For many people, these symptoms will only last for short periods of time, but some may persist for longer and can start to affect your daily life.

Anxiety self-help - Relaxation techniques

- When we feel stressed or anxious, our bodies tense up and we can experience symptoms such as headache, shallow breathing and dizziness.
- As these symptoms are similar to typical Covid symptoms, this can make us feel even more anxious.
- Relaxation can be used to help to manage these physical symptoms of anxiety.
- You could try doing an activity you already feel relaxing (e.g. reading a book, having a bath, sitting outside or having a short walk)
- You can try specific relaxation techniques such as those on the NHS inform website (<https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/stress/breathing-and-relaxation-exercises-for-stress>).
- Using these techniques can also help you to better manage post-viral fatigue

Breathing exercise

- This exercise will focus on slowing down your breathing. It will help you find your own pace and rhythm for your relaxed breathing. It involves breathing and counting.
- Try breathing in counting to 4 pause for 1and then breathe out counting to 4.... If counting to 4 doesn't work for you, pick another number which feels right.
- Repeat this 3-4 times before coming back to your normal rhythm.
- Try to practice this in a calm moment rather than when you are feeling stressed.



Anxiety self-help - Mindfulness

- After being unwell, we can become caught up in worries about the future, or difficult memories from being unwell.
- Sometimes people find it hard to focus on the 'here and now'.
- The aim of mindfulness is to help you to focus on the present moment, and to 'step back' from any worries.
- More information about mindfulness is available here: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>

Anxiety self-help - Five senses exercise

- Use this exercise to quickly ground yourself in the present when you only have a moment. The goal is to notice something that you are currently experiencing through each of your senses.
- Notice what you can **see, feel, hear, smell** and **taste**.
- Try to focus on things you maybe wouldn't usually notice, such as a small crack on the floor, or the background hum of the fridge.
- Some people have ongoing difficulties with taste and smell following a Covid-19 infection. If this is the case for you, you can just focus on what you can see, feel and hear.
- There is no right or wrong way to do this exercise, the aim is just to help your mind to focus on the present moment, and step back from worries or memories.

Anxiety self-help - Getting back to usual activities

- It can be normal when you've been through a difficult time to stop doing things which feel too difficult or unsafe.
- This can help you to cope with being unwell, but sometimes you can lose sight of what is important to you.
- Avoiding activities can also make them feel even more scary.
- Getting back to normal activities may feel overwhelming, breaking it down into small steps can help it to feel more achievable and may help you to manage your energy.
- For example, if you are keen to get back to shopping, try visiting a local shop for one or two items, rather than trying to visit a busy supermarket or shopping centre right away. You can gradually build this up over time.

Anxiety self-help - Positive self-talk

- When you are noticing racing thoughts and worries, it can be helpful to try to take a step back and reassure yourself.
- Try to notice what the worry or difficult thought is, write it down and see if you can think of an alternative, kinder thought.
- For example, if you notice yourself thinking 'I'll never get back to how I was', you could try telling yourself '**I'm making progress but recovery takes time. It's ok to take time to rest and look after myself**'.

Typical low mood symptoms

- If you are experiencing long-covid symptoms which are getting in the way of you living your life in the way you would like, it's not uncommon to experience low mood as a result.
- Signs and symptoms of low mood can include:

▪ Sadness	▪ Low self-esteem
▪ Feeling anxious or panicky	▪ Frustration
▪ Worry	▪ Anger or irritability
▪ Tiredness	▪ Lack of interest in activities

A low mood will tend to lift after a few days or weeks. However, a low mood that doesn't go away can be a sign of what doctors and psychologists refer to as depression.

Symptoms of depression

Symptoms of depression can include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Low mood lasting two weeks or more▪ Not getting any enjoyment out of life▪ Feeling hopeless▪ Feeling tired or lacking energy▪ Comfort eating or losing your appetite	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Not being able to concentrate on everyday things like reading the paper or watching television▪ Sleeping more than usual or being unable to sleep▪ Having suicidal thoughts or thoughts about harming yourself
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If negative feelings don't go away, are too much for you to cope with, or are stopping you from carrying on with your normal life, you may need to make some changes and get some extra support. If you experience depression symptoms most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks, you should visit your GP.

Low mood self-help - Look after yourself

Simple lifestyle factors can have a big effect on mood. Try to:

- Stick to a routine
- Limit your alcohol intake
- Choose a well-balanced diet
- Do some exercise
- Get enough sleep

Low mood self-help - Connect with others

- Reach out to family and friends and speak with them on the phone or video-call if you're not able to see them face to face.
- If talking feels too much, try to stay in touch through messages instead.



Low mood self-help - Engage in meaningful activities

- When we feel low, we sometimes don't feel like doing our usual activities.
- You might also find that you cannot do all the activities you used to do while recovering from Covid.
- Try to think about small achievable activities you can complete every day which will give you a sense of enjoyment and accomplishment.
- This could be doing 10 minutes of a craft activity you used to enjoy, or re-watching one of your favourite films.

Low mood self-help - Write a recovery diary

- Try writing down how your recovery is going and the small achievements you have made along the way. It can be helpful to look back on the positive progress you have made.
- It can also be helpful to write down any difficult thoughts and feelings you have been having, in order to help you to 'step back' from these.



Low mood self-help - Be kind to yourself

- Recovery takes time and it is important to let yourself rest and recover.
- This can feel difficult if any ongoing symptoms are 'hidden'.
- You might find that you are being very hard on yourself, seeing yourself as lazy.
- However, if you had broken your leg, you would not be trying to run a race straight away.
- It can be helpful to think about what you would say to a close friend or family member in your position.

Values based living

- When you are recovering from Covid, or have long-covid symptoms, you can get 'caught up' in how things have changed, or with looking for a cure or treatment.
- We usually approach life in a goals focused way. Having a barrier such as ongoing symptoms can make us feel stuck.
- An alternative is using a **values based** approach. Values are the beliefs or standards of behaviour which are most important to us.
- Try to identify why an activity is so important for you. Perhaps it gives you connection to others, or allows you to feel you are achieving something.
- Are there any other activities which would fulfil the same value but which are easier for you to do despite your ongoing symptoms? These may look very different but if they tap into the same value, may give you the same sense of meaning and fulfilment.

If you spent time in ICU

- Having a stay in an intensive care unit (ICU) can be a traumatic experience.
- In the period after you go home, you may find you have difficulty sleeping, or experience nightmares and/or flashbacks of your time in ICU.
- You may also feel more anxious , 'jumpy', or lower in mood.
- These symptoms are all really common and normal after any traumatic event, going over the event is your brain's way of processing what has happened to you.
- In most cases these subside over time as you process what you have been through but may persist for some people.
- If they do persist, seek help from your GP who can refer you to an appropriate service for support and treatment.

When to seek help

- Although feelings of anxiety and low mood at certain times are completely normal, you should see your GP if your daily life continues to be affected (e.g. when it stops you from doing things that matter to you).
- This is especially important if:
 - You have symptoms of depression that aren't getting any better
 - Your work, relationships with friends and family or interests are affected by your mood
- Your GP will ask you about your symptoms, your worries, fears and emotions and let you know what help might be available in your area.
- You may be able to access a computerised **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** course (Beating the Blues) or be referred for talking therapies.

Urgent help

- If you start to feel like your life isn't worth living, or that you want to harm yourself, get help straight away.
- Either see your GP or call the NHS 24 '**111**' service.
- You can also call [Breathing Space](#) on **0800 838 587** or [Samaritans](#) on **116 123** for confidential, non-judgemental emotional support.

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Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland



The following organisations contributed to this presentation

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

