



Wednesday 25 March 2020

Dear staff and students,

Re: COVID-19 (coronavirus) and Mental Health

In uncertain times such as these, it is perfectly normal to feel all sorts of emotions, like stress, anger, anxiety or confusion. Indeed, the people you usually look to for support including your family members, teachers, counsellors, friends and associates are most likely also struggling to grapple with what is happening. It is OK if you're not feeling or functioning like your normal self at the moment – in fact, it is to be expected, as nothing about this situation is normal. Many of us are shifting in and out of survival mode (sometimes referred to as fight, flight or freeze mode).

I am not going to downplay this situation or tell you everything will be OK as we really are in uncharted waters here. It is more important than ever during challenging times like these that we look after our mental (and physical) health as best we can. I know you're probably already overloaded with information about COVID-19 but here are a few things that may help you to keep your mental health on track.

- Get back to basics and make sure you're getting enough sleep, eating regular meals and drinking water. Getting these things right is like laying the foundations required for mental and physical health so if you focus on anything, let it be this.
- Try to do some regular exercise – this can be a really good outlet if you're feeling stressed.
- Maintain personal hygiene. A particularly important one if you're working from home. Take a shower, change out of your pyjamas – whatever makes you feel like yourself.
- Try to stick to or create new routines for yourself. For students who are studying from home this might mean working on subjects as per your timetable or having a lunch break at the same time.
- Write lists. This can include things you need to remember to buy from the shops or of appointments you need to cancel, etc. Putting stuff down on paper will reduce your overall mental load and free the brain up for other things.
- Write out your worries. Consider having some dedicated worry time. Put some parameters around this if you like (e.g. do it for 10 mins before you go to bed). Once again, putting things down on paper can sometimes break cycles of rumination.
- Be kind to yourself. Lower your expectations for yourself at the moment – don't expect to be able to work as productively, to be as present as a parent, student, etc. We are all freaking out so let's just lower the bar and aim to get through this.
- Talk to each other – simple really - but if we can stay connected, even from a physical distance, we will be able to support each other through this. When interacting with others, please refrain from telling anyone to relax, chill out, get over it, that they are being dramatic or alarmist, etc.
- If you're finding you can't stop watching the news or reading articles about COVID-19, this may represent an attempt to gain a sense of control over the situation. Whilst we all want to know what's going on, if you think you've become a bit obsessed, consider asking yourself, "What am I looking for here? What do I want to feel? What do I need?"

- Consider trying out a meditation app to help you to relax. Practice a progressive muscle relaxation exercise and/or deep breathing exercises that are proven to have physical as well as mental health benefits.

If you experience the following, it may mean that your mental health has been significantly impacted and you should seek additional mental health support:

- Suicidal / homicidal thoughts
- Self-harm
- Inability to sleep for several days or not wanting to get out of bed
- Physical health symptoms like headaches or stomach aches that don't seem to go away
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Lack of interest in any activities
- Ignoring responsibilities for extended periods
- Hallucinations
- Social withdrawal
- Illogical and/or delusional thinking
- Lack of self-care
- Unusual behaviour
- Increased and/or excessive use of substances or relying on substances to cope

Staff members who may be experiencing these symptoms should contact Access Counselling on 1300 66 77 00. Students should make contact with the student counselling service who can either provide support or refer you to external mental health services.

Some other useful contacts for staff and students are:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline – 1800 551 800

Thanks.

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Psychologist

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