

How setting aside some 'worry time' can help reduce anxiety over COVID-19 lockdowns

August 18 2020, by Dougal Sutherland



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Many New Zealanders will be feeling anxious, disappointed and even angry about the return of COVID-19 in the community.

Many of us prefer to suppress these emotions because they are unpleasant or we may feel under-equipped to manage them. But if left unrecognized and unchecked, they will drive our behavior.

We may act without thinking clearly and rush to the supermarket to stock up. We may lash out verbally or physically at those we see as threatening us. Or we may fall too easily for social media posts that give us a sense of relief, even if we're not sure about their accuracy.

Times of heightened [anxiety](#) are fertile breeding grounds for [conspiracy theories](#), especially among those with [low levels of trust in the government](#).

Anxiety and anger are normal reactions during uncertain times. We experience these emotions when we feel under threat, but the simple act of acknowledging them can ease their intensity.

Recognizing your emotional reaction

[Research New Zealand](#) has been conducting regular polls of New Zealanders since the first lockdown in March and April. Results show heightened levels of concern about health, [losing a job](#) and the economy in general. The most recent poll also shows New Zealanders were [worried about a new outbreak](#).

A heightened level of worry keeps us in a state of "flight or fight"—the evolutionary system that drives our response to fear. But if we pause to notice what we're feeling, even correctly labeling our [emotional state](#) can [reduce the intensity of these feelings](#).

The regular practice of mindfulness, best described as deliberately paying attention to the [present moment](#), has been shown to help [reduce the reactivity of our flight or fight system](#). Physical activity helps to

dampen our physiological symptoms of anxiety, and diaphragmatic or belly breathing is a simple but effective means of doing this.

Once we've gained some measure of regulation of our emotional state, we are better able to engage our prefrontal cortex in planning, reasoning and decision making. Noticing what we are thinking and saying to ourselves is a first step and a core part of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which has a strong evidence base in the [treatment of stress and anxiety](#).

If we say to ourselves that this is "disastrous" or "unmanageable," we may feel increasingly emotionally overwhelmed. If we think that "someone has exposed us to infection," we may feel quite angry toward that person. In contrast, if we recognize that this style of thinking is not helpful, we may be able to adopt a more balanced view of the situation.

Managing your anxiety

Anxiety wakes you up in the middle of the night as your brain churns over and over. It's important to recognize what our brains are doing in these instances. They are trying to remind us not to forget about something we perceive as a threat.

This makes sense from an adaptive point of view. Being alert to perceived danger can ultimately keep us alive. But it can also bring with it a sense of loss of control.

Having a "prescribed worry [time](#)" can be an antidote to this loss of control. Setting aside a set time of day to deliberately focus on your worries can both reduce our avoidance of unwelcome emotions and send our brains the message that we won't forget about this "danger"—so our brains don't need to keep reminding us of it so much.

Within this worry time, focusing our thinking on what is within our

ability to control, rather than on what is outside our sphere of influence, can also [reduce levels of anxiety and helplessness](#).

Ultimately, while our emotional reactions to the return of lockdown are normal and nothing to be afraid of, it can be comforting and motivating to remember that we've done this before and can do it again. And we may even learn some tips for coping under stress that are useful for the rest of our lives.

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