

By **LOUISE
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HUMANS are simply not wired to tolerate uncertainty. No wonder, then, that as the coronavirus situation changes by the day, we're experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, say psychologists.

A 2016 study at University College London found that stress is maximised when uncertainty is at its highest. In fact, the study concluded that uncertainty is more stressful than knowing something bad will happen.

According to clinical psychologist Dr Frances Goodhart, your body is likely now primed to do something to improve your odds of survival because your nervous system is constantly pumping out stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which will leave you feeling jittery and anxious.

So, here are some tips to stop you feeling overwhelmed:

STICK TO ROUTINES

ONE way to exert control over this situation is to establish a routine for your day: set a time to get up, shower, get dressed, have meals, and a time when you go to bed each night. 'This helps you create some certainty in your day,' says Dr Goodhart, author of *The Cancer Survivor's Companion* and *How To Feel Better*.

FILTER NEWS INTAKE

'ANXIETY will be maintained by constant information-checking, and with news available 24-hours

a day, this couldn't be easier,' says Harley Street psychologist, Dr Meg Arroll.

'You might not be able to control the progression of a virus, but you can control how much you check the news. So be aware of the number of times you do this.'

Dr Arroll suggests giving yourself a 'worry window' to think through your concerns and write them down to get them out of your head.

FOLLOW THE RULES

CLOSELY following guidelines on hand-washing and social distancing is not just good practice, it can ease stress, too.

In that 2016 study on uncertainty, the researchers found participants who prepared for uncertainty performed best. So obeying the new rules can help you feel some sense of control and mitigate stress.

Anxious? Then have a cry...and punch a pillow!

HAVE FUN

ANXIETY is worse when the brain has space to be scared, so fill your time and focus on tasks that bring you joy. For example, you could learn how to play the piano or to speak a foreign language. 'Creative pursuits all boost emotional health and can help you cope with self-isolation,' says Dr Arroll.

SOCIALISE

REGULAR communication with friends, family and neighbours via phone or video chats is very important to help maintain perspective, provide distraction and lift mood. 'Humans are social creatures,' says Dr Goodhart, 'so staying connected is important, otherwise being unable to socialise can become an additional stressor.'

Although face-to-face contact might be limited, help could take

the form of giving to food banks, helping neighbours or engaging in online community support.

EAT AND SLEEP WELL

IT MIGHT sound obvious, but stress is exhausting, and it depletes your body's reserves of nutrients needed to bolster your immunity.

Dr Goodhart warns: 'Disrupted sleep is a feature of stress, and poor diet and excess alcohol will only contribute to your burgeoning stress levels.' She recommends good sleep hygiene — go to bed at a set time following a calming evening routine, and avoid stressors such as mobile phones and the news at night.

BE ACTIVE

EXERCISE can counteract the chemical impact of a stress response. 'All the evidence shows that ten-minute bursts of activity

are sufficient to dissipate stress,' says Dr Goodhart.

BE POSITIVE

DR ARROLL says: 'Practising gratitude during times of heightened fear and anxiety helps us to cope and lifts mood, which works to maintain psychological well-being.' When you find a positive, take every opportunity to share it in any way you can.

BREATHE DEEPLY

STUDIES show simple breathing exercises can give you a powerful stress-busting tool in a crisis.

'When we are in "fight or flight" mode, the body draws in as much oxygen as possible to fuel the muscles, but you can calm this response very simply by ensuring you exhale for longer than you inhale,' says Dr Goodhart.

Just breathe in, hold that breath for a few seconds, then very slowly and gently exhale — as if through a straw. This triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, which causes your heart to slow and blood pressure to drop.

CRY IF YOU WANT TO

DR GOODHART says sobbing, shouting or expressing your anger and frustration by punching a pillow are all acceptable ('even sensible') forms of relief.

'If tears build up, don't suppress the emotion,' she says. 'It is important to let yourself cry.'

'But you might want to take yourself away and keep your outburst out of sight of anyone who might be distressed by it.'