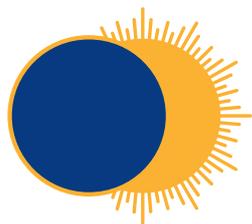


Coping with COVID-19: sources of help for families



Royal Hospital for
Neuro-disability



This global pandemic has created a difficult and frightening time. Feelings such as anxiety, worry and depression are all normal reactions to this very unusual situation.

As human beings, we all want to feel in control of our lives, but the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made many of us feel distressed, helpless and uncertain about the future. In addition, we understand that the limits on visiting hours at the RHN are creating a great deal of added stress for the families and friends of our patients and residents.

We know that in normal circumstances, many families like to visit their loved ones frequently, and see with their own eyes that they are healthy and well cared for.

You have told us how much you value talking with the nurses, healthcare assistants and other clinical staff, to get the latest information about your relative, and we appreciate that this isn't as easy when you're not able to visit in person.

And we know that, in normal circumstances, many of you enjoy spending time in the RHN community – talking with other families, enjoying our gardens, getting spiritual support, and contributing to life at the RHN.

We are very much looking forward to the day when we can welcome you back to the RHN. However, we hope that you understand that our biggest priority is to protect the health and safety of your loved one – and all of our other patients and residents. We therefore need to keep our doors closed to visitors until we know it is safe to open them.

If you feel like you are really struggling to cope, then we want to help you find the right source of support for you. If you're feeling very tearful every day, or if your anxiety is so overwhelming that you're not sure how to get through the day, or if you're potentially feeling as if you might harm yourself or others, it's important that you get help.

Here are some places where you might find the right help for you:

1. Your GP

Your GP is a really good place to start if you need help for any type of emotional distress, because all GPs have lots of experience in having these sorts of conversations – according to a recent survey done by the charity MIND, 40% of all GP appointments involve mental health!

Your GP will help you to work out if you need urgent help, and where to get it from. They can also advise you on medicines, talking therapies, or other wellbeing activities that might help you if your needs are less urgent. Your GP will know that different strategies suit different people, so they will understand if some ideas appeal to you but others do not, and they will not try to force you to try anything that doesn't feel right to you.

2. Call 111

If you realise you need help when your GP surgery is closed, or if you feel uncomfortable talking to your GP for whatever reason, the NHS 111 number is available for calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This phonenumber is staffed by healthcare professionals with training in both physical and mental health, and they will be able to help you identify what help you need and where you can get it.

3. IAPT – improving access to psychological therapies

Wherever you live, your borough will have access to an IAPT service, which stands for 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapies'. These services give people the chance to try out talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which have been shown to be helpful for people who are distressed, anxious, and/or depressed.

Your GP can refer you to an IAPT service. However, if you prefer not to speak to your GP, you can contact your local service directly and refer yourself – to do this, use any internet search engine to look for your borough and IAPT (for example, type 'Wandsworth IAPT' into Google).

4. In an emergency – call 999

If you are at immediate risk of hurting yourself or someone else, then call 999. Immediate risk of harm to a person is always considered an emergency, and you will be able to get help very quickly.

If there is any reason why you feel you can't call 999, other sources of emergency support include the Samaritans (freephone number **116 123**), or MIND (www.mind.org.uk – they have an 'I need urgent help' button on this website)

Remember that all of the people who deal with these types of calls have lots of experience talking to people who are feeling distressed. They will be keen to listen to you, and will help you find the support you need.

What if you don't want to seek formal help?

Perhaps you feel that you are still coping reasonably well, or that you don't want to trouble healthcare professionals with your worries. While your GP and the other suggestions above are always available to you, there are other ways that people try to find support when they feel unhappy or worried.

Family or friends

Are there members of your family or friendship groups who may be able offer support to you? Even if you haven't been in touch for a while, you may be surprised by how pleased people are to be contacted. Imagine if the situation was reversed, and one of your friends reached out to you for help and support – how would you feel? Most people like to feel helpful to others, and all of us can empathise with how challenging the lockdown has been. You may find that you strengthen some of your relationships for a lasting positive change!

People in your faith group

Many people find comfort from others who share their faith. Have you considered reaching out to a priest, rabbi, imam, or other person of faith, who may be able to offer you spiritual guidance or link you in with others from your community?

Managing anxiety about your loved one

We are happy to give you updates about how things are on the ward, and how your loved one is coping. It is obviously hard for our staff to answer frequent calls, as the majority of their time is spent caring for our patients and residents. However, we don't want you to spend lots of your time worrying. One suggestion that may help is to have a pen and paper handy to write down all of your burning questions as they come to mind. Then you can refer to this when you speak to our ward staff to make sure you remember to ask everything that is important to you. We want to make sure that we always give you the information that you need in order to switch off and relax.

Taking care of yourself

Whatever outside help you decide to access, here are some simple tips for looking after yourself that you may find useful:

- Try to focus on today, rather than thinking about the future. Take each day one day at a time.
- Try to avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope. This may feel tempting, but any short-term benefit is likely to lead to you feeling worse afterwards, and you may end up creating longer-term problems for yourself.
- Keep in touch with your family and friends – for example through phone calls, video calls, or text messaging.
- Do something you usually enjoy. Even if you don't really feel like making the effort, tell yourself that it's worth a go. You may be surprised at the lift you get from concentrating on something that's more enjoyable than the news.

There are more self-care tips available on our RHN website, so please have a look and give some of the suggestions a try: www.rhn.org.uk/coronavirus/tips-for-wellbeing/

Whatever action you choose to take please take care of yourself – we want you to be in good health, ready for us to welcome you back as soon as we can!