



Oxford Health
NHS Foundation Trust

Psychosocial Response Group

Coping with the Coronavirus

Introduction

This leaflet is one of a series about Coronavirus and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the Coronavirus outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Coronavirus key facts:

- This is a widespread outbreak, not limited to one area
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in wintertime
- For some people who are older and have pre-existing physical health conditions It is likely to be more severe, and may even be fatal, whereas for others it may be a relatively mild condition.

Whilst all of us are familiar with challenges in life, the Coronavirus outbreak and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone. Some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences that the Coronavirus has had for you and those close to you can take some time. This leaflet focuses on coping with feeling extreme fatigue; others cover bereavement, depression and coping with worry and uncertainty.

What might you expect following any virus?

Many people feel tired and exhausted after they have had a virus. Some people just feel a bit more tired than usual, whilst others feel exhausted and low much of the time, and find it hard to get back to normal levels of activity. Most of us will make a full recovery, but if you are still not back to your usual levels of energy, and you feel very tired and low, four months or more after you had the virus (or three months in children), then you may have post-viral fatigue.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Some people may go on to develop Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), sometimes also called Myalgic Encephalitis (ME), which is a condition which affects people in different ways. The main symptom is persistent fatigue (tiredness) and exhaustion which can be severe and disabling. The

symptoms can also include:

- Malaise – feeling unwell or 'out of sorts', especially after exercise
- Sleep problems
- Headaches
- Muscle pains
- Swollen glands
- Difficulties with concentration and memory

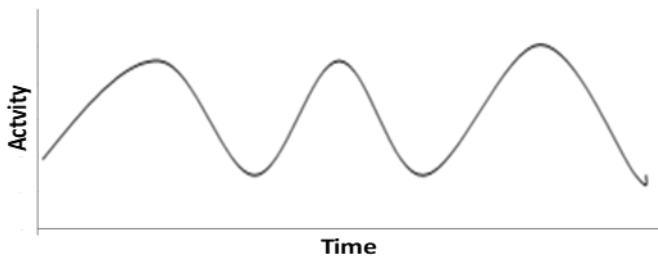
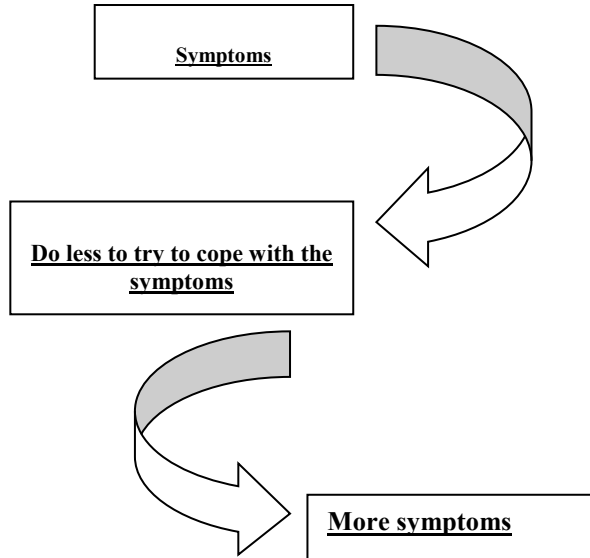
Who is likely to be affected?

Anyone can be affected by CFS, but there may be common themes for those with persistent problems. We know that there are both helpful and unhelpful ways to manage symptoms following a virus:

- Resting too much, for example spending most of the day in bed or doing very little, will lead to loss of fitness and muscle strength. When you then try to resume normal activities, you may find that you cannot do as much as you expect to do, and then rest more, causing further loss of fitness in a vicious cycle.
- Sleeping for hours during the day can lead to general malaise and problems sleeping at night. This in turn leads to more daytime fatigue and more resting, which in turn leads to more problems sleeping at night.
- Not allowing yourself time to recuperate and get better, such as going back to work too soon or resuming normal activities before you are fully well. People who have very high standards, like to do things well and do not like to let other people down, can push themselves very hard and do not allow themselves time to rest.

The Boom and Bust Cycle

The 'boom and bust' cycle is when people swing between extremes of doing too much and doing too little. When very fatigued and unwell, it makes sense that people change the way they do things. Some may reduce the hours they work or stop altogether. Others may do fewer enjoyable activities, particularly socialising and physical exercise. Others avoid doing anything new and rest more during the day. Gradually, they can become less fit.



This “over-activity and under-activity” cycle is a common pattern in many people with CFS/ME. It shows a downward spiral which results in further fatigue and wariness about your symptoms

Prolonged rest can result in weaker muscles and a drop-in fitness. Although the symptoms from over-activity subside, rest makes the body stiffer, painful and more tired.

Improving symptoms of CFS

Three main ways you can improve the management of chronic fatigue are:

1. Pacing and activity management
2. Graded exercise

Pacing and activity management

Pacing and managing your activities is a good way of breaking the 'boom and bust' pattern we described above.

Make sure there is a good balance between times when you are active and times for resting. A daily diary of your activities and rest periods will help you to look at what you are doing. Your 'boom or bust' pattern might include doing all your chores in the morning and then resting all afternoon, or doing too much on your 'good' days, when you feel more energetic, then feeling too exhausted to do anything on your 'bad' days.

You may notice that your life is unbalanced, either doing too much work and activity, or too much resting, with very few pleasurable moments. See if it is possible to:

- Alternate mentally tiring activities with a short rest or a physical activity.
- See if you can do something which gives you pleasure and

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Early Morning activity							
Rest							
Late Morning activity							
Lunch break							
Early afternoon activity							
Rest							
Late afternoon activity							
Evening Meal break							
Evening activity							
Bedtime							

Gradually reducing rest and increasing activities

We know that resting too much makes CFS worse, but many people are very nervous about overdoing things and making themselves more unwell. You may have experiences of trying to do more and feeling much worse for a few days afterwards. As a result, you may have a very limited range of activities.

Gradually reduce the length of your rests and gradually increase your activities. For example, if you are resting for three hours every afternoon, gradually cut down this time by 15 minutes each week, until your rest is at a point where it does not interfere with your sleep during the night. This will also help you to do more in the day and feel you have a more satisfactory life.

Improve your sleep

Reducing your daytime sleep is very helpful in improving your sleep at night. If you are continuing to have difficulties sleeping, the following may help:

- Go to bed and get up at a set time each day, regardless of how well you slept the night before.
- Avoid coffee, energy drinks, or too much alcohol.
- Try and establish a bed-time routine, such as having a bath, reading or listening to music to help relax. Avoid electronic devices and phones before bed.
- Rather than lying awake worrying about not sleeping, get up and do something else for a while, such as reading or watching television, and go back to bed only when you feel sleepy.
- If you have things on your mind or are worrying, write down what you are worrying about before you go to bed, put it on one side and remind yourself that you cannot solve any problems during the night, and will tackle them the next day.

Graded exercise

Graded exercise has been shown to be effective in reducing fatigue and getting back your fitness after CFS. When starting to exercise, it is very important to begin at a level which is less than you are capable of doing.

The exercise activities you choose will depend on the severity of your condition. They should be:

- Realistic and enjoyable
- Performed several times a day
- Performed every day - good days and bad - otherwise the benefits of the activity already gained by your body will be lost.

The following activities are of varying physical intensity to do in the early stages of recovery. You may wish to choose a selection of gentle activities according to what is available and your individual needs. You don't need to join a gym to exercise, it is possible to exercise at home and when convenient to you.

- Standing
- Walking
- Stair exercises
- Using an exercise bicycle
- Yoga
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Keep fit type exercises

Walking or using a stationary exercise bike are both practical in the beginning stage. You could start with walking for five minutes, twice a day, or pedalling on an exercise bike for two minutes twice a day, and gradually build up the time and intensity of exercise when you begin to improve.

CBT to help with difficulties in pacing activities

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy which has been shown to be helpful for CFS/ME. It helps you to identify thoughts and beliefs which maintain the problems, and gradually test out ways of changing these. CFS/ME may relate to longstanding problems such as depression, chronic worry, perfectionism or low self esteem. You can get some ideas on using CBT for yourself from the books mentioned below, or alternatively ask your GP for a referral to local CBT services.

Key Points

- A period of feeling tired and run down after a virus is normal. Remember to give yourself time to recuperate.
- Persisting symptoms, 'boom and bust' patterns of activity and sleep problems may be a sign that you are suffering from CFS.
- Pacing, graded exercise and working on improving your sleep are all helpful in reducing symptoms and establishing more healthy and fulfilling patterns of activity and rest.
- CBT can help you if you are experiencing difficulties in managing the recommended strategies, or if you have other, related problems such as worry.

Further information

Books to find out about CBT approaches and fatigue:

- Overcoming Chronic Fatigue 2nd edition: A self help guide using CBT (2019) by Mary Burgess.
- Self Help for CFS: A Guide for Young People (2016) by Katherine Rimes & Trudie Chalder Publications.
- Manage Your Mind (2018) by Gillian Butler, Nick Grey and Tony Hope.

Internet & other sources of information

About mental health and wellbeing:

- www.mind.org.uk – provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- www.samaritans.org – offers support to people who are despairing or suicidal.
- Self-help leaflets by Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust: <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>

About Coronavirus:

- Go to www.nhs.uk or <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs->

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