



My Coping Kit

COVID-19 AND YOUR
MENTAL HEALTH

H²

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY



Who am I?

I live in Phnom Penh with my family and have done so since 2006, with a couple of years in other locations. I am originally from Sweden, but spent many years in London, UK, where I did my under- and post grad studies. My career background is in public health, with a focus on social and behavior change communications. Close to two years ago, I decided to embark on a slightly different career path and took up Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) studies. I have now finished my studies and will be available for therapy support in Phnom Penh in the near future.

The COVID-19 'Coping Kit'

This 'Coping Kit' is mainly based on CBT principles, but some other complimentary theories, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness will be included too.

The **first section** includes some basic information and the key premises of CBT. You can skip this and go straight to the **second section**, where information and coping suggestions specific to the COVID-19 situation can be found. The **third section** includes more detailed information about CBT concepts as well as additional techniques which can help to better cope with common mental health complaints. These can also be very useful for this specific situation.

My best,

Helena Horal



SECTION 1: WHAT IS CBT?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

A brief introduction

SECTION ONE

SECTION 1: WHAT IS CBT?

Therapy of the Common Sense...

CBT offers a common sense, structured and systematic therapeutic approach. It focuses on problem solving in the here-and-now and rests on the foundation that your emotions are not caused by outside events but rather by your interpretation of them.

CBT: Main Principles

From: Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond by Judy Beck (1995).

CBT:

- Is based on an ever-evolving formulation of the client and her problems in cognitive terms;
- Requires a good client-therapist relationship;
- Emphasizes collaboration and active participation;
- Is evidence-based, goal-oriented and problem focused;
- Emphasizes the present;
- Is educative; it aims to teach the client to be his/her own therapist;
- Aims to be time limited;
- Sessions are structured;
- Teaches patients to identify, evaluate, and respond to their dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs;
- Uses a variety of techniques to change thinking, mood, and behavior.

SECTION 1: WHAT IS CBT?

WHAT DOES CBT STAND FOR?

C = COGNITIVE

- Derives from the Latin word *cognito* - to get to know;
- The C in CBT stands for our cognitions, our thoughts.



Our thoughts have a direct impact on our feelings and emotions which, in turn, have a direct impact on our behaviour.

B = BEHAVIORAL

In other words: what we do in response to a particular situation or stimuli



T = THERAPY

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on a person's thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes and how these affect their feelings and behaviors.



SECTION 1: WHAT IS CBT?

CBT: THE BASIC PREMISE

- What we think decides how we feel and react (respond/ behave);
- Thoughts are the building blocks which determine whether we feel happy, angry, sad, surprised...;
- It's the fusion between thoughts and feelings/emotions that shape our behavioral responses/reactions, which also effect outcomes.



SECTION 2: HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Handling your Covid-19 anxiety

SECTION TWO

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Taking Control over your Worries

First and foremost, I want you to know that it is completely normal to feel worried about CORONA-19. This is a new situation for all of us and it may be difficult to know exactly what to expect and, therefore, become somewhat overwhelmed with negative thoughts and emotions. Try to be kind to yourself and acknowledge that you are doing the best you can in a tricky situation.

Below, I have put together a little 'Handling Your Anxiety during COVID-19 101. Though the list is non-exhaustive, I believe it covers some of the most essential points to help you cope better and lessen feelings of anxiety.

1. Limit your news intake

Pick a small number of reputable and trustworthy news sources and limit the number of times you check these. It is easy to become slightly obsessed and subsequently feel the need to constantly refresh your news-or social media feed for the latest updates. Though it is wise to keep up-to-date with changes, you really do not need to know each and every update in real time. It may be helpful to disable automatic updates and notifications as constant signals from your phone and other electronics only serve to keep your body on a constant alert.



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2. Write down your thoughts, worries and fears.

Remember that it is normal to feel worried. Don't be too hard on yourself: you are allowed to feel anxious and your feelings are valid. The COVID-19 virus has made it necessary for many of us to distance ourselves from friends and loved ones, home-school our children and change our daily routines. Many of us are also far away from our families.

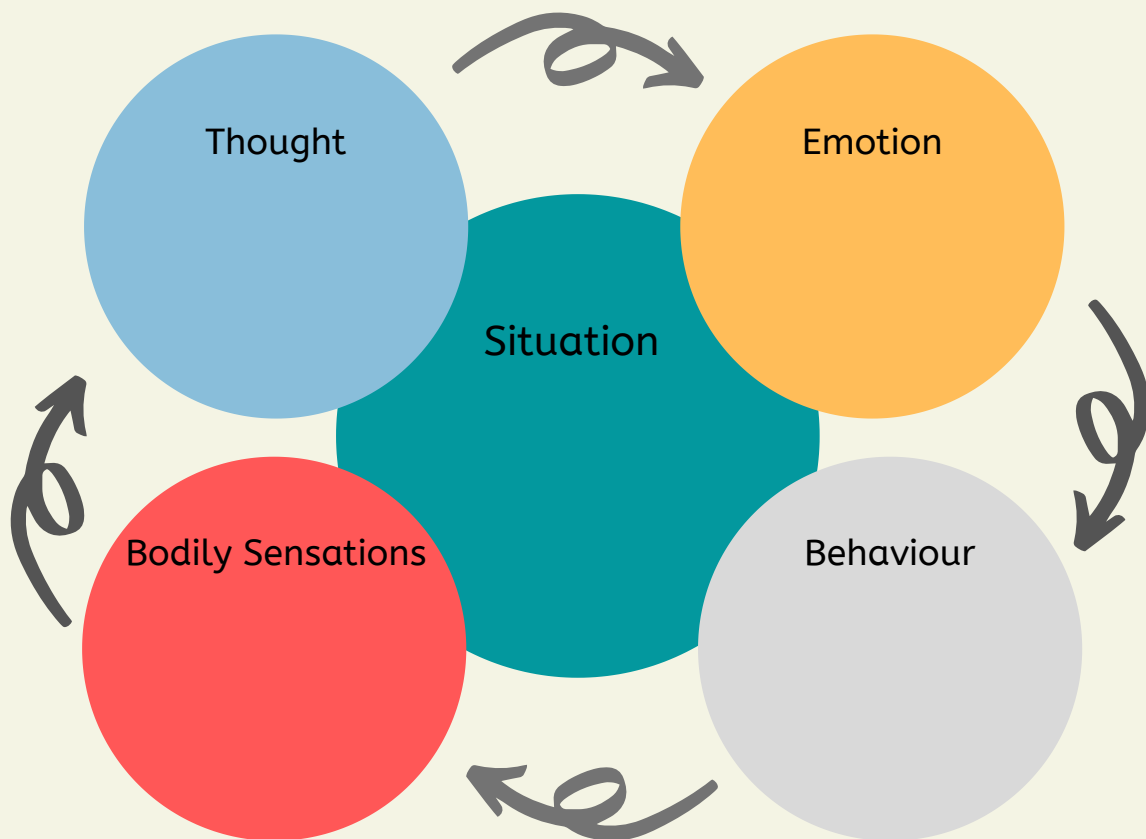
Our thoughts and emotions profoundly impact our lives. However, we are often unaware of just how we are feeling at any given moment, as well as how our emotions affect our behaviours. To help deal with difficult thoughts, worries and fears, it can help to write them down on a piece of paper. It may sound trivial, but by putting words to your feelings, they will actually become easier to handle: "name it to tame it." If we are not fully aware of our (negative) feelings, they will be difficult to change.

To help you get started, I have created a few simple templates that you can use to practice on below:



HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

The CBT Model



The diagram shows the relationship between thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and behaviours. Use this model to practice and try to understand your specific thoughts, emotions, sensations and behavior in a triggering situation. Try also to jot down when you are calm or feeling happy for a comparison.

It can be a bit tricky to catch the thoughts that pop up in your head. They are often fleeting, so we often don't notice them. We do, however, experience the associated emotions. So, when you notice an anxiety surge, ask yourself: what thought did just run through my head? That way, you can learn to catch your negative thoughts. I will include a separate section on what is referred to as negative automatic thoughts (NAT) and how to work with these.

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Circles of Control



Within my control



Outside my control

In the first circle - within my control- write down things or situations which makes you feel anxious and worry you and which are ***within your control***, e.g. things that you can change or do to affect these feelings. E.g.:

- Following scientifically sound advice;
- Practicing social distancing;
- Limiting the number of news sources and the number of times you update these;
- Trying to keep physically active and follow routines;
- Practicing daily gratitude (I am grateful for...).

In the second circle - outside my control - write down the things or situations that worry you but which are ***outside of your control***, e.g. things or situations which you are unable to affect or change. E.g.:

- The action of others;
- The duration of the COVID-19 situation;
- How the situation will progress.

It can help to clarify the things that you actually can do and what is out of your control to ease anxious feelings.

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Daily Journal

DATE:

THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS & BEHAVIOURS

LEVEL OF ANXIETY (1-10):

Sometimes it may help to add a bit more details about how a day has progressed. It can make you step back and evaluate your thoughts, emotions, and behavior, create some distance and provide self-discovery. You can use this template or simply pick up any kind of journal, notepad, laptop or tablet and start writing.

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3. *Thoughts are Simply Thoughts*

Our brain is fantastic in so many ways, but it is not always a very reliable source of information. When negative thoughts pop up in our heads, we often take them as truths and trust them blindly. Try to remember that a thought is just a thought and doesn't necessarily reflect reality.

If you have the thought:

"We are all going to get the corona virus and it will be terrible."

Try to change the sentence and instead say to yourself:

"Right now I am thinking that we will get corona and I am thinking that it will be terrible."

4. *Question your Thoughts: Countering Technique*

Once you've named your fears and anxious thoughts, the next step is to question and confront them with fact-based, rational counter statements. E.g.:

Thought: We will all get sick and it will be horrible

Counter: Although number of cases are increasing, we are still more likely to not get sick as long as we follow scientifically recommended advice. And if we contract the virus, approximately 80% experience only mild symptoms and won't need hospitalisation. Below is a template for you to practice on.

In later sections, I will include more information and practice sheets on negative automatic thoughts, neuroplasticity, cognitive distortions and how to counter these.

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Questioning your Negative Automatic Thoughts

NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHT RECORD

Situation	NAT	Emotion	Evidence supporting NAT	Evidence not supporting NAT	Alternative to NAT
Home-schooling my child, losing my patience and shout.	I am a lousy mum	Guilt	My child looks upset and says: You're a horrible mama. My emotions don't lie...	My child often expresses her love to me and wants to be around me all the time My daughter is a secure, confident and happy child.	Losing patience is normal, particularly in this new situation. It doesn't mean that I am a bad mum.

Many of our thoughts are automatic in nature. This is, generally, a good thing as it would be exhausting to actively have to think about all the actions we routinely take each day (we don't actively think: "now I am getting a cup of water because I am thirsty"). However, the automatic nature of our thoughts can also give rise to issues if they are negative in character. Negative automatic thoughts (NATs) are negative, fleeting interpretations of what we believe is happening to us. We readily accept them as truths about ourselves and they negatively affect our mental well-being. However, if we practice, we can teach ourselves to notice these thoughts and, thus also, challenge them.

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

5. Ask for Support

There is a lot stigma attached to mental health issues and, for many, opening up about struggles can be scary and may leave them feeling exposed and vulnerable. If we all openly admit that each and everyone of us have worries and that mental health problems are very common and normal, we can together reduce the stigma and unwillingness to seek support

Though we may have to physically distance ourselves from others right now, today's technology fortunately makes it possible to reach out to family, friends and others who can provide support. Online counselling is also an option for guidance and support.

Word of caution: Try to avoid to constantly seeking reassurance from others (e.g. relying on your partner to reassure you that you don't need to worry, that you don't have a hot forehead or that everything will be OK). Though providing temporary relief, it can easily become a vicious cycle which fuels your anxiety. It is better to try to identify and question your thoughts and work on these without the constant reassurance from others.

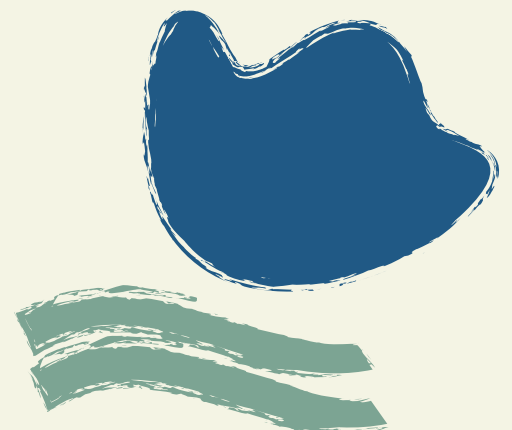


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6. Stick to a Routine (but don't set the bar too high)

In order to not get too bogged down and wrapped up in anxious feelings, keeping to a daily routine can help keep worry in check and create normalcy in the situation we are currently in. Sticking to a routine can help sustain purpose and make it easier to stick to your goals in life. As schools across the country have closed, many of us are home-schooling our children and many are practicing social distancing, we are spending an increasing amount of time at home. It can be tempting to forego morning routines, waking up late, staying in PJ's all day and not going to bed until very late at night. It can help to create a schedule and try to stick to it as much as possible, while allowing for flexibility. Below is a simple schedule template that may help.

Keep this in mind: it is important to remember that our daily routines have changed quite a bit in the past couple of weeks and as the situation continues to change, we are likely to see even more changes to how we go about our daily lives. Therefore, don't be too hard on yourself and accept that you won't be able to get as much done as before and that expectations (yours and others) will have to be lowered. Setting the bar too high will only create more stress and guilt. We will, with certainty, have days where everything seems overwhelming and nothing gets done; there will be days where we will walk around in PJ's all day and pour a glass of wine by 2 pm. And that's OK too. That doesn't mean that all days will be the same or that you have failed. One day at a time!



HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK STARTING:

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri

Notes:.....
.....
.....
.....

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

7. Don't Ignore your Basic Needs

Our minds and bodies are closely connected. If we ignore one part, the other will likely suffer too. It may be easy to forget our basic needs during stressful times. Unfortunately, if we don't tend to our needs, this will soon have a negative impact on our mental well-being too.

Don't forget to nurture your:

- Sleep;
- Exercise, physical activity;
- Nutrition;
- Self-care.

Below are some suggestions on what to do to care for your basic needs.

Sleep

Set your alarm for a morning wake-up and go to bed at your normal bed-time during the weekdays. If you normally need 8 hours, try to stick to it during this time too (this goes both ways, try not to sleep too little or too much). I will include sleep resources in a later section in case someone is struggling with their sleep.



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Exercise & Physical Activity

Physical exercise has mental benefits of a neurochemical character: it reduces the body's stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) and stimulates production of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers and mood boosters.

Though our normal exercise routine may have been disrupted by the COVID-19 situation, there are still much you can do. At the moment, there are no restrictions on being outdoors, taking walks, jogs or exercising in parks. Waking up early and going for a morning walk or jog is a beautiful way to start the day and can help clear your mind, fill up your vitamin D depot and get those endorphins pumping.

You can also do lots of exercise indoors - there are a large variety of videos on YouTube and several Apps to download.



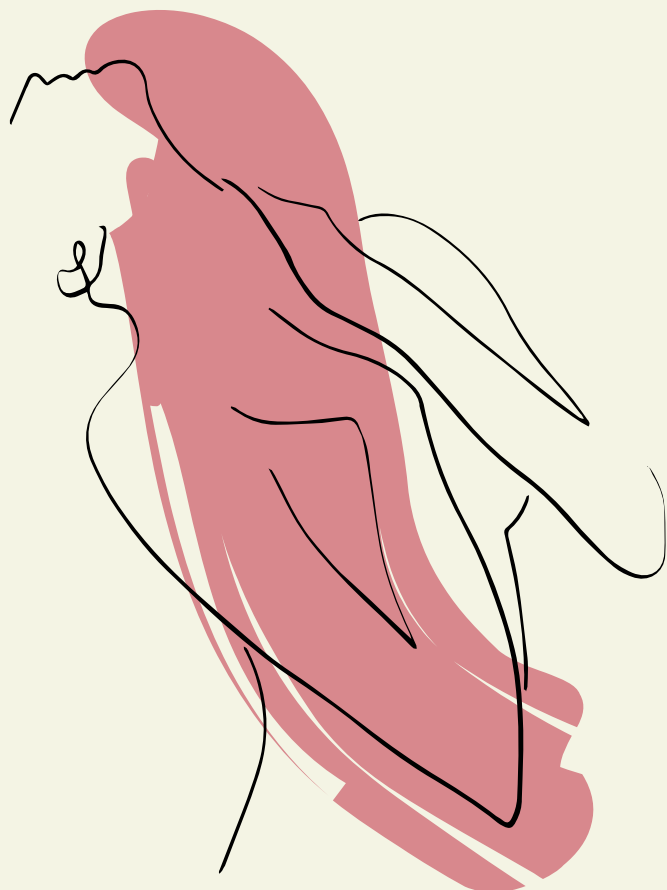
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Sexual Healing

Stress and anxiety can put a damper on our libido and we may not feel at our sexiest right now in the middle of a pandemic. However, sex can actually be a great stress and anxiety reliever (as well as good exercise). Sex, like physical exercise, can reduce stress hormones and release hormones, such as endorphins, oxytocin and serotonin which make us feel happy, affectionate, relaxed and satisfied.

Remember that it doesn't always take two to tango: an orgasm will release the same kind of mood boosting hormones whether you reach it on your own or with a partner.

Word of caution: You should never feel pressured into having sex. Human touch, a cuddle or holding hands can be enough for getting some oxytocin (the cuddle hormone) pumping.



HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Nutrition

The evidence linking the food we consume to our mental well-being is a hot topic and not all agree to the extent our diets impact our mental health. Having said that, there is growing evidence on how a poor diet can contribute to the worsening of poor mental health. It is fairly safe to say that the food we eat, at least indirectly, impact our mood. E.g., it affect our cognitive function, gut bacteria, hormones and energy levels.

I am not a nutritionist so I will refrain from giving detailed advice on nutrition. I will only add that, generally, a diet rich in colorful vegetables and fruit, whole-grains, fermented foods, oily fish, unsaturated fats and lean proteins is generally thought of as healthy.



Self Care

Perhaps you normally enjoy going to the spa? Getting a massage, a facial or a hair wash? Though this may come across as shallow, these kind of "self-care" activities can actually make us feel grounded and centered.

Even if you are mostly confined to the four walls of your home, try to make sure you and your family members, or the people you live with, get well-needed "me time". It may have to come to locking yourself into the bathroom with a glass of wine and a good podcast, reading a book, taking a nap, or watching your favourite TV show on Netflix. During this time, no-one is allowed to interrupt or call for you (no: "mama, I am hungry" and no: "can you help with dinner"). Make a plan and stick to it so you all get equal amount of "me time". This also includes your children.

HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Self Care (2)

Don't forget to also treat yourself now and then. Perhaps a nice meal? Take turns with your partner or other people in your household to cook special meals and dress up for the occasion. Or order a nice meal for delivery from one of Phnom Penh's many local restaurants to support them.

Small gifts (both giving and receiving) can also help boost our moods. Though I typically do not encourage consumerism, there are many wonderful local businesses that offer delivery services and I will encourage supporting these, particularly as many are struggling right now. Helping others and thinking outside of ourselves can also make us feel better: it's a win-win situation!



8. Mindfulness, Meditation & Grounding Exercises

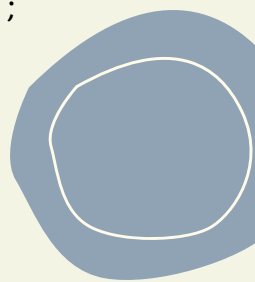
Like physical exercise, grounding exercises (grounded = well balanced and sensible) can help reduce anxiety by making you refocus on what is happening in the present moment.

Below are some exercises that you can practice on:

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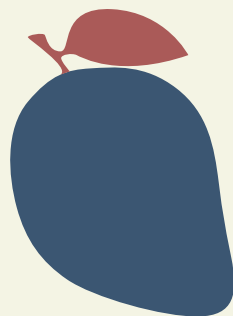
Deep Breathing

- Inhale through your nose while counting to 4 seconds. Pay attention to how your lungs feel when they fill up with air and expand on the inhale. If it helps, you can think "inhale" while you inhale;
- Hold your breath for 7 seconds and pay attention to how your lungs feel;
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds. You can think "exhale", "relax" or "calm" (or any other word that you find helpful) when you exhale. How do your lungs feel when you slowly exhale? Pay attention to the feeling;
- Repeat for 4 - 8 rounds.



Pick up & Feel an Object

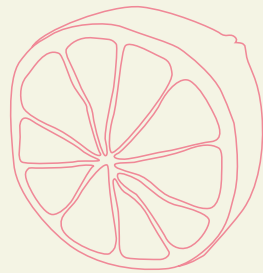
Focus on how the object feels in your hand. Is it light or heavy? Smooth or rough? Can you squeeze it? Is it hot or cold?



HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Taste Something

Select something to taste - a piece of food or a drink that you like. Take your time, savor the food or drink and notice what it tastes like. What flavours can you detect? What does it smell like? Is it spicy, sweet, fizzy? Move it around on your tongue and notice how the flavour changes.

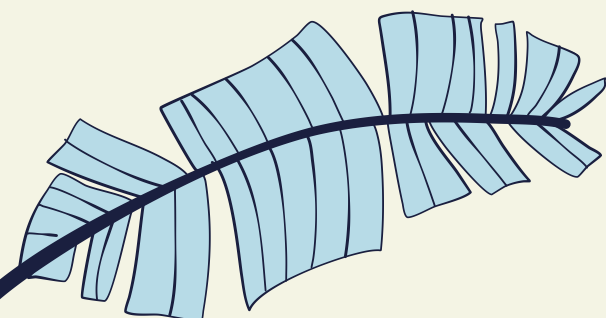


How does your body feel?

How does your body feel right now? Sit or lie down and start focusing on your toes. Move upward your body, paying attention to all different body parts. Does your neck feel tense? Is your stomach upset? Does your head feel heavy on your shoulders?

An excellent and grounding exercise is something called **progressive muscle relaxation**. One of our body's reactions to stress and anxiety is muscle tension. With progressive muscle relaxation, you tense a group of muscles as you breathe in, and you relax them as you breathe out. You work on all your muscle groups in a certain order. This deep relaxation technique is based on the assumption that mental calmness is a result of physical relaxation.

I will add more information and a step by step guide to progressive muscle relaxation in a later section.



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8. Practicing Daily Gratitude

It may be difficult to feel grateful at the moment and taking time out to think about what we feel grateful for may be the last thing on our minds right now. However, research on happiness (see e.g. Seligman 2000) show that people who write weekly gratitude journals feel better about their lives, are more optimistic about their futures and report feeling less stressed.

As many of us are cooped up indoors with the people we live with, I would also recommend expressing your gratitude to your family/the people you live with and ask them to do the same. Tell them what you appreciate about them (tell your child you feel happy they help do the dishes; explain to your husband/wife/partner just how good that morning cup of coffee tasted that they made you while still in bed).

This may seem trivial, but we often forget that the people we live with, however well they may know us, cannot read our minds. Expressing our gratitude to the people in our lives, often has a reciprocal effect, which can help contribute to a healthier, less tense and happier atmosphere in our houses.

Below is a template you can use to practice your daily gratitude:



HANDLING YOUR COVID-19 ANXIETY 101

Daily Gratitude Journal

DATE:

TODAY I AM GRATEFUL FOR:

I EXPRESSED MY GRATITUDE TO:

BY TELLING THEM THAT I:.....

.....

.....

.....

SECTION 3: CONCEPTS & RESOURCES

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

CONCEPTS & RESOURCES

SECTION THREE

SECTION 3: CONCEPTS & RESOURCES

Avoidance, Escaping and Safety Behaviours

We are often told: “*ignore that feeling*” or “*push that thought out of your mind*” or “*try to focus on something different.*” However, in CBT, the first step to take in order to deal with an issue is to identify it and name the thoughts and emotions associated with the issue. Ignoring or pushing away problems is the same as practicing **avoidance** or **escaping** something that gives rise to unpleasant thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

It may be tempting to avoid a situation that makes you feel anxious, but avoidance or escape actually maintain, and worsen, anxiety in the long run. This is because, if you avoid an unpleasant situation, you will never discover that your anxious feelings actually do not lead to the fear you hold, and you will not get to experience that your anxiety loses its intensity and fades over time.

Many also use what is referred to as **safety behaviours** to avoid or escape difficult feelings in the hope these behaviours will prevent their fears from happening. Safety behaviours act as a safety net that a person needs in order to feel safe when exposed to feared situation. For example:

- A student drinks alcohol before a presentation to lessen feelings of anxiety associate with being worried about being judged harshly by peers;
- A man who is scared of walking across a bridge (believes he will faint from anxiety and that the bridge will collapse) brings a friend to make it to the other side;
- A woman who is scared of cats counts (in her head) backwards from 30 to 0 (internal behaviour) when she sees a cat across the road because she believes that the counting will stop anything bad from happening and this calms her down.

SECTION 3: CONCEPTS & RESOURCES

Avoidance, Escaping and Safety Behaviours (2)

As with avoidance and escaping, safety behaviours are tempting to employ, but they also maintain, and worsen, anxiety in the long run. Safety behaviours prevents a person from finding out what actually would happen if they dropped them. From the examples above, dropping the safety behaviours would make:

- The student realise that the presentation actually was very well received by his peers and that though he was very anxious in the beginning, the intensity dissipated after a little while;
- The man makes it across the bridge on his own without fainting and the bridge doesn't crumble under his feet;
- The woman faces her cat phobia and walks calmly past the cat without counting down from 30. Nothing bad happens and the cat pays her no attention.

