

COVID-19: Mental Health Support and SCI

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Living during the COVID-19 pandemic can be stressful, and it is common to feel worried, sad, or anxious from time to time. This sheet contains information about some resources, techniques, and tips to help support your mental health in the time of COVID-19.

Key points

- COVID-19 pandemic may cause increased mental health concerns in people who have already experienced sweeping changes in life due to spinal cord injury (SCI).
- Feelings of worry and anxiety in times of global uncertainty are common, and it is important to know that you are not alone.
- Learning to recognize and acknowledge your anxiety and to engage in concrete, meaningful actions and activities can help you manage your worries.
- Refer only to reliable sources of news about COVID-19. Limiting yourself to appropriate information consumption can reduce the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed or in danger.

Looking after your psychological and mental health

How can I organize and structure my day to benefit my wellbeing?

Our normal daily routines and activities are changing with the current pandemic situation, which can feel unsettling. You may find that some things you usually did to look after your wellbeing have become difficult to carry on. Though you may not have control over those changes, you can focus on what choices and coping strategies you have that are within your control.

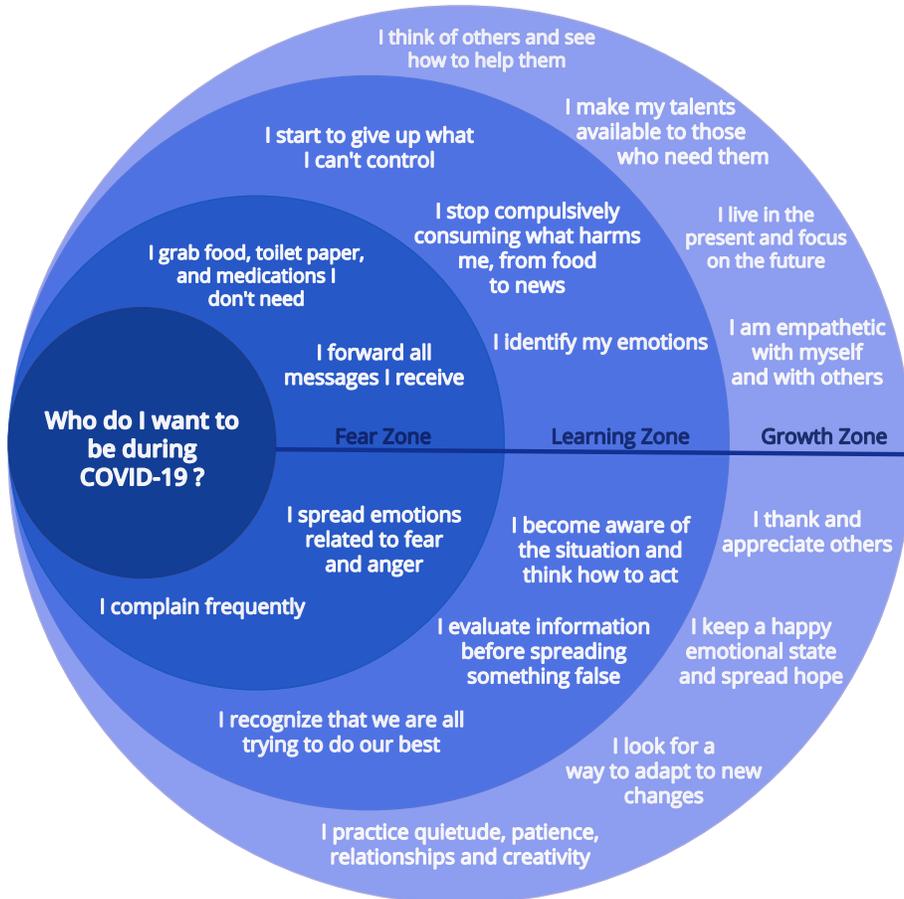
Maintain balance

Try organizing your days to include a variety of activities that you know will improve your general mood. You can strive for a routine that is a balance of activities that give you feelings of pleasure, achievement, and closeness.

You will get a sense of accomplishment when you, for instance, choose to finish a work task, complete an exercise routine, or learn to cook a new recipe. A pleasure activity may be reading a book or watching a favourite comedy show. Schedule a video call with a friend or family to feel connected.

If you feel overwhelmed or unmotivated, break tasks down to pieces that you can work on, or set a goal to work for a small chunk of time rather than having the goal to finish something all at once.

What can I do to deal with this time of uncertainty to help me to stay in a healthier place?



Fear, learning, and growth zones.¹

As someone with a spinal cord injury (SCI), you have likely already experienced uncertainty. It is the ‘not knowing’ how things are going to turn out that can be difficult to cope with. The coronavirus uncertainty and isolation can be particularly worrying when you have additional health care needs.

There are different levels of worry and anxiety. Anxiety is a natural emotion and worrying is common during change. Remind yourself that you will not feel this way forever and that there are things you can do to cope. Use the diagram on the left to see if you are in the ‘fear zone’ and identify specific steps you will try to move towards learning and growth zones.

Coping with worry during global uncertainty

Why do I worry even when nothing seems wrong, and how do I stop it?

It is common during times of uncertainty, like the COVID-19 pandemic, that you may notice more worry thoughts, some even leading to worst-case scenarios. The graphic below illustrates how worries can quickly escalate even from something relatively minor that you would not have recognized as being a worry trigger before.



I could lose everyone I know and love

Everyone will pass it on and die

I might have passed it on to everyone at work yesterday!

What if it's coronavirus?

I have a headache

Worry Escalator

To reduce this type of worry, the first step is to practice noticing when your thoughts are reaching a later, more catastrophic point. For instance, if you first notice a feeling of anxiety, ask yourself, “What was I just thinking?”. Step back to the event that began your worries, and ask yourself if you have reasonable evidence to believe that the initial event is likely to lead to the worst-case scenario, or whether there may be other explanations you can consider. Are you assuming a negative outcome when the situation is actually an unknown?

Think of a strategy that may have helped you with a similar problem in the past. Make a list of things that generally help you relax and choose one that is possible to do now.

Which category does your worry fall into?

Worry becomes a problem when it stops you from living the life you want to live, or if it leaves you feeling helpless or exhausted.

Assess the impact of your worries on your life. Seek professional help if you are noticing that you are not able to carry out important roles or activities in your life because of interference from worry.

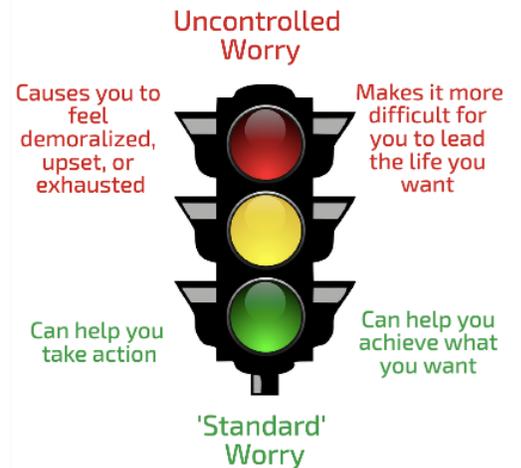
Worry Time

Another effective strategy is designating a specific *Worry Time* – schedule a time for later in the day when you allow yourself to worry as much as you feel the need to. This can be helpful in two ways:

1. it can prevent worry from interfering with your important daily activities, and
2. postponing worry can sometimes circumvent the worry from happening at all (at the scheduled time, you may not even feel like worrying, in other words, it was an ‘in the moment’ worry).



Worry Time may be particularly effective if your worry is hypothetical or in the future (and action is not possible). The worry should be put aside, and your attention focused on a technique or activity that will distract you from your worry thoughts (re-focus on something that is in the present).



Uncontrolled vs. “Standard” Worry.⁵

The bottom line

The current pandemic has brought many changes to the lives of people with SCI, and you may notice yourself having new or different concerns for your well-being. Awareness and reminders of active, positive coping strategies are especially important.

Even though there is much about the COVID-19 situation that you cannot control, you can shift your focus to what you can influence and have power over:

- Choose your routine. Plan how you spend your time and what you focus on during the day.
- Choose your distractions. Have a list of small, practical, or creative tasks that you can easily accomplish.
- Choose your information. Limit how much news you watch and when you take in new information.

“With awareness and active steps, we can exercise the positive power of being able to recognize our fear and patterns of survival” (Vicki Enns, Clinical Director, Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute)

Related resources

[SCIRE Project: COVID-19 & SCI](#)

[SCIRE Project: COVID-19: Mental Health support](#)

[SCIRE Project: COVID-19: Social Isolation with SCI](#)

Reference list

Duff, J. (2000). Coping Effectiveness Training reduces depression and anxiety following traumatic spinal cord injury. *Proceedings of the British Psychological Society*, 8(1): 17.

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Enns, V. (2020, May). How to Cope with Post-Traumatic Stress During COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://ca.ctrinstitute.com/blog/how-to-cope-with-post-traumatic-stress-during-covid-19/>

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