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The Rotunda Perinatal Mental Health Service

Mind your mind during the Covid19 Pandemic

It is natural to feel worried at a time like this – our world has changed very quickly and we all have to adjust. Feeling anxious about the COVID19 virus or about its impact on your family, friends and the population in general is a natural response. One of the hardest things about this time is the sense of uncertainty that we all face – and that no one can tell us exactly what is going to happen. Naturally this results in us feeling unsafe and ill at ease.

Several threat-based emotions can be triggered during uncertain times including anger, disgust, sadness, and anxiety. The body's way of preparing for a potential threat is to engage in the 'fight, flight or freeze response'. These responses are natural reactions to help us to avoid or confront danger and they are helpful when there is immediate danger that we need to escape from. These responses can emerge when a danger is real or perceived.

Fight/ flight can result in physical feelings of anxiety/ anger in the body such as feeling sick in the stomach, feeling dizzy, sweating, shallow breathing, increase in heart rate, feeling hot, feeling tense, and needing to go to the toilet. There may also be an increase in irritability, frustration and anger.

When we are anxious our thoughts become more threat focused so that we can see danger and move away from it. Anxious thoughts can help prompt us to act in safe ways when feeling threatened such as following preventive guidelines, hand washing and limiting contact with those at risk. Anxiety is pushing us into action and this can help us regain a sense of control and belief that we can cope with the situation.

However, increased anxiety can become unhelpful, for example when we begin to worry excessively about our health so that it stops us living our life or when we cannot stop predicting negative outcomes (catastrophizing). Unhelpful anxiety can spiral out of control, overwhelm us and result in extreme actions or obsessive thoughts.

It is important to remember the facts about the virus, for example, the information available to date suggests that pregnant women are not a high risk group. While pregnant women may pick up infections more easily than non-pregnant women, the evidence to date is that these infections are not more likely to be severe when compared to the general population. (RCOG, March 2020)

Below we have outlined some useful techniques and strategies to help you to mind your mind over the coming weeks and months.

Self-Care

Self-care in the wake of the coronavirus includes **focusing on things you can control** (like having good hygiene and social distancing) instead of those you cannot (like stopping the virus). It also includes eating healthily, exercising and minding yourself and your baby.

Routine

Whether you are no longer working, working from home or going to work but working differently it is important to maintain a routine and to put structure on your day. Routines help us feel in control and can give us a sense of meaning and purpose. It might be helpful to fill out an activity diary at the start of the week so that you have an idea of how your week will look.

It's important to pay attention to your needs and feelings, especially during times of stress. You may still be able to do some of the things you enjoy and find relaxing.

For example, you could try to:

- exercise regularly (even if you need to self-isolate)
- keep regular sleep routines
- maintain a healthy, balanced diet
- practice relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises
- read a book or magazine

We have included a blank activity diary and an example activity diary at the end of this document.

Manage your social media

While social media is a great way to maintain contact with friends and the wider world while we are engaging in social distancing it can also become a source of worry and concern. If you notice yourself becoming anxious while scrolling please take a break. Limit the time you spend on social media or disconnect from sites that make you feel stressed. Remember that some people use social media as a way of releasing their own anxiety but this can easily feed into other people's worries. Try to stick to factual and well known sources of information and to switch off from other sources of advice. Well-meant advice is not always factual and is often unhelpful.

Please get information from reputable sources:

<https://rotunda.ie/covid19/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-pregnancy.html>

<https://www.rte.ie/news/>

Take time to connect with your baby

Naturally a lot of your worries will be about your baby. We would direct you to the official information about the impact of Covid19 on your baby while it is in the womb and after it is born. If you have any questions please talk to your team in the rotunda during your next appointment.

It could be beneficial to set aside some time daily to tune into your baby, whether in the womb or if you have already given birth. Use touch to help you connect – perhaps you could stroke or rub

your bump or visualise your baby inside of you growing strong. If your baby is born, and you do not have Covid19, perhaps use massage, or tickles to feel close to your baby. Remember to practise good hand hygiene before touching your baby. You could also try to visualise somewhere you would like to take your baby, or imagine a special day you will have with your baby in a few months' time. You could even try looking at the world through your baby's eyes for a few minutes – ask yourself what are they thinking or seeing.

If you have a favourite poem or song you could read it to, or play it for your baby. The important thing with any of these activities is your intention to be close to your baby and to spend time with them.

Take time to connect with your children

If you have other children it is important to help them cope with stress and protect them from any unnecessary coronavirus worry. **Answer** their questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that children can understand. **Respond** to your child's reactions in a supportive way, **listen** to their concerns and give them extra care, attention and support. **Reassure** your children that they are safe. **Let them know** it is OK if they feel upset. **Share** with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope with you.

Some helpful resources that you can use to explain Covid 19 are:

<https://www.ppmid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Corona-Virus-Free-Printable-Updated-2-The-Autism-Educator-.pdf>

www.mindheart.co/descargables

How to cope as a family at home

- Stock up on board games and puzzles
- Ensure each family member has time to themselves- going on walks outside alone as well as a family
- Keep routine- breakfast and getting dressed into day clothes
- Playing games in garden if possible/ gardening
- Keeping bed time routine
- Healthy meals if possible to maintain good mental and physical health
- Baking and cooking as family activity.
- Organizing closets and spaces you usually would not have time to do
- Do some school work
- Spring cleaning/ De-cluttering
- Arts and crafts

Consider developing a mindfulness practise (that works for you)

Mindfulness is a great way to stay in the present moment and to help you acknowledge difficult feelings in a way that doesn't feel overwhelming. Mindfulness can be done in lots of different ways – using the breath, the body, the mind or nature.

Mindfulness is “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (Jon Kabat Zinn)

Some simple mindfulness exercises are:

Notice five things in nature

Take five mindful breaths

Take your shoes off and notice the sensation under your feet, rise up on your tippy toes.

Do a mindful scan of the sensations in your body

Buy some bubbles – blow them for yourself and notice their colour, texture, the sound of them popping etc. If you are looking after your baby/ other children notice their reactions and join in – participate fully in the activity.

You can also use mindfulness apps, websites or listen to podcasts, for example:

www.stvincents.ie/departments/psychology/

<https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/audio>

www.beaumont.ie/marc

www.mindfulness.ie

www.franticworld.com

Mind the Bump

If you begin to feel overwhelmed or your anxiety is starting to impact on how you live you can try to use this acronym to feel **CALMER**

C = Come into the present moment: use your senses (sight, sound, smell, taste or touch) to come back to the present moment. Find a way of doing this that works for you.

- Slowly press your fingertips together
- Stretch your arms or neck, shrug your shoulders.
- Take five slow breath
- Notice the sensations beneath your feet

A = Attune to your body and your baby. Notice any sensations in your body. If you are currently pregnant perhaps place a hand on your bump, take some deep breaths and say hi to your baby. Whether your baby is in your womb or in your arms let them know that they are safe and that you are here for them. If your baby is with you take a moment to ask yourself what they might need right now – perhaps some milk, a nappy change, a nap or a cuddle. Respond to their needs as best you can. Then ask yourself ‘what do I need?’ – Perhaps you need a rest, a break, a sleep. Respond to your needs as best you can too.

L = Listen to your body, thoughts and feelings. Compassionately acknowledge whatever is ‘showing up’ inside you: thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, sensation, urges. Try to be curious and observe what’s going on in your inner world even if what is there feels challenging or difficult. Resist the urge to shut these feelings down or to fix things immediately.

M = Maintain relationships. Keeping in contact with those you love during times of stress is very important. Social connections can be maintained even at a physical distance. Ring, skype, write and laugh together. Make plans for what you can do when this crisis is over. Be aware that when you are feeling anxious, scared and confined you are more likely to become irritated. Try to notice your reactions and communicate effectively to those you love in order to avoid unnecessary conflict.

E = EMBRACE and open yourself to government guidelines. Try to think about how the government guidelines relating to social distancing and self-isolation align with your own values. For example as mothers or mothers-to-be we want to be healthy and well for our baby, we also want to protect our baby to the best of our ability. The HSE guidelines will help us act in line with these values around protection and care. Having family and friends around is so important when a new baby comes into the world, again if we can think of these guidelines as helping to ensure the safety of our social network and the health of those we love they will seem easier to incorporate into our lives.

R = Resource yourself. Write a list of activities that you find nourishing and that you can continue to do while your movement is restricted. Schedule these activities into your day and use them to resource yourself. This may require some planning – perhaps you could gather physical resources together and put them in a box, you might need to order some things online or ask a friend can you borrow something. Try to make a plan to do one thing every day that you find nourishing.

Finally here are some **Mind your mind: Do's and Don'ts**

Do structure your day and maintain a routine

Do practise self-care – from hand hygiene, to healthy diet to long soaks in the bath

Don't give up on movement or exercise even if you're in isolation

Do practise mindfulness, meditation or yoga

Don't criticise yourself for feeling anxious but do promise yourself that you will do something to reduce feelings of distress

Don't isolate yourself from connecting with others – skype, write, text, talk, email

Do have fun and laugh with other people

Don't forget to find time to connect with your bump or your baby

Don't spread fear or believe everything you read

Don't give up hope – this too will pass.

Do find moments of beauty and compassion in every day

Do ask your perinatal team for advice if you have a valid concern and follow the directions given by the Health Service Executive

Activity Schedule:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7am							
8am							
9am							
10am							
11am							
12 noon							
1pm							
2pm							
3pm							
4pm							
5pm							
6pm							
7pm							
8pm							
9pm							
10pm							

