



## Managing a Long-Term Health Condition During Covid-19

Due to measures in place because of the current pandemic, many of us are placed in circumstances where we have had to significantly adapt our daily lifestyles. At this time, we have had to maintain certain rules to ensure that we are keeping ourselves safe. This change can feel overwhelming in itself, uniquely affecting the ways in which we may think, feel and behave. This new way of living can feel difficult, especially when living with a long-term health condition and having to manage this too.

At the Bromley Well Mental Health & Wellbeing Service, we recently conducted a survey and found that over 85% of respondents reported a deterioration in their mental health since the start of COVID-19. The findings also showed a significant number of people having to shield or self-isolate due to having an existing health condition, which in itself can feel overwhelming.

Importantly, one of the key findings from research is that living with a long-term health condition at this time can cause feelings of fear. Whilst having a health condition does not make you more likely than anyone else to encounter coronavirus, people with long-term health conditions may be more at risk of developing serious illness if they contract the virus. Due to this, anyone with a long-term health condition that is classed as 'high risk' is advised to take extra care to protect themselves from the virus through a method called '*shielding*'.

### What are the common issues faced by people living with a long-term health condition through COVID-19?

Research has shown a number of common issues faced by people managing a long-term health condition at this time, these include feelings of:

Stress	Worry
Sleep difficulties	Low mood
Confusion	Fear
Anger	Frustration
Struggle to remain optimistic	Depression*
Loneliness	Low self-esteem

\*An experience of low mood due to lifestyle stressors is common for many people, and can usually be managed independently through appropriate self-help strategies. It is possible to notice that a state of low mood has become a state of depression, with little or no warning. Depression is classified as a mood disorder, and severely impacts a person's ability to think, feel and behave as usual for an intensive or extended period. If you feel as though you are experiencing depression, please contact a primary care service such as your **GP** or **NHS Talk Together Bromley** for some in-depth support during this time.

#### Bromley Well Health & Wellbeing Workshops

Our colleagues at the Long Term Health Conditions Service are currently running a virtual health and wellbeing programme for people living with long-term health conditions who need support to manage their lifestyle and wellbeing. The workshops are free to attend and cover topics such as diet and nutrition, sleep, mental health, and pain management. For more information, or to register contact the team on: 0208 315 2530 or [enquiry@bromleywell.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@bromleywell.org.uk).

## What can I do to manage my mental health?

**Cover the basics.** Make a plan of action for your 'sick' days. Think about what you need during these days and what will help you to boost your wellbeing. You could write out an action plan and keep it to hand for those days you need a bit more support to manage. Consider noting down your medications, food, daily habits and self-care strategies.

**Keep connected.** Whilst we have had to physically distance ourselves from others during this time, we are social beings and thrive from social connection. Reach out to loved ones via platforms such as: telephone calls, text messaging, video calls and social media platforms. This can also act as a helpful distraction. Perhaps think about how you can create regular ways of linking with people whether that be a group weekly video chat, or a telephone call with a loved one at the same time each week.

**Explore your worries or feelings.** Help yourself to explore your feelings safely, keep a mood journal and reflect on how you cope day to day, think of ways you could do things differently, set realistic goals and help yourself work towards them, and if you don't succeed the first time, remember you can always try again. Reach out to others for support where necessary.

**Set Goals.** You might want to start a new hobby learn a new skill or establish a healthy routine. Keeping our mind set on a goal, and working towards this can help us to keep our mind positively engaged, boost our overall wellbeing and self-esteem. Keep in mind that your purpose doesn't necessarily mean you have to change what you're doing already.

**Try to be more mindful.** Recognising the signs when we are experiencing mental stress means that we can help ourselves to stay safe and well. If our brains become too overloaded, or we reach a point of exhaustion, it can be detrimental to our health. Try finding 5-10 minutes in your day to stop and take a breath. Stand or sit somewhere quiet where you can breathe in fresh air, and relax your mind for a moment. Try to heighten your senses and feel grounded. If it helps, try using the web-based app Just6 for mindfulness and relaxation you can access in the palm of your hand.

**Look after your body.** Try to be proactive in eating a balanced and nutritious diet every day, and eat at least 3 meals a day, with 1-2 litres of water. Also focus on how you can be more active, making time in your day to stretch your body, and let your mind breathe is vital to elevating your emotional wellbeing. Try to introduce a 15-30-minute activity into your daily routine, whether walking, running, doing some yoga or stretching. Exercising releases endorphins, which increases mood and general positive thinking.

**Practice gratitude.** At times of uncertainty, engaging in gratitude practice can help to re-connect with feelings of joy and positivity. At the end of each day, take time to reflect on what you have been thankful for during that day. Try to be specific and look out for the little things; It was sunny at lunchtime, my plant has started to grow, I enjoyed my dinner.

### Useful Links

**Coronavirus: Advice for people with health conditions:**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51703892>

**The Secret Benefits of Routines:**

<https://www.headspace.com/blog/2016/08/22/the-secret-benefit-of-routines-it-wont-surprise-you/>

**6 Ways to Boost Your Wellbeing While Staying Indoors:** <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/blog/6-ways-to-boost-your-wellbeing-while-staying-indoors/>

## Where can I go for more help?

### **Bromley Well: Long Term Health Conditions Service**

The Bromley Well Long Term Health Conditions Support Service helps people aged 18+, who are Bromley residents and are living with health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, COPD - Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, etc. This service provides free and person-centred practical, emotional and lifestyle planning support to help people manage their conditions, and increase their confidence and resilience.

**Website:** [www.bromleywell.org.uk](http://www.bromleywell.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 0300 3309 039



**Long Term  
Health Conditions**

### **Talk Together Bromley**

Talk Together Bromley is a free NHS evidence-based service in Bromley offering Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and counselling. You can self-refer directly to the service via telephone or their website. The service is designed to support people who may be experiencing mild-moderate difficulties with their mental health, including feelings of stress, anxiety and low mood/depression.

**Website:** [www.talktogetherbromley.co.uk](http://www.talktogetherbromley.co.uk)

**Telephone:** 0300 003 3000



### **NHS Fitness Studio**

The NHS have a range of self-help guides online to help you the move gently, and build confidence with movement in the comfort of your own home. Including exercises for strength, flexibility and balance. Search NHS Fitness Studio, or website to download their free exercise guides now

**Website:**



### **Every Mind Matters**

Online platform providing expert advice and practical tips around how to maintain your wellbeing. Includes specific tailored support around managing mental health during the coronavirus pandemic and also offers an online tailored 'mind plan' depending on your needs.

**Website:** <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters>



### **Samaritans**

A national helpline providing free and confidential listening support to individuals who are struggling with low mood, stress, anxiety and depression, and callers do not have to be suicidal to make contact.

**Telephone:** 116 123 (Open 24/7)

**Website:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)



If you feel in crisis, tell someone. Text 'HELP' to 85258 for crisis counselling, ring Samaritans on 116 123 for listening support, or the Oxleas Urgent Advice Line on 0800 330 8590 for practical advice, all accessible 24/7. If you feel at risk to yourself, likely to cause harm or complete suicide phone 999-Ambulance immediately.

## Physical and Mental Wellbeing – Prioritising Mood Scale

This scale is designed to help you identify where you are each day with your physical and mental health, and to support you in making helpful decisions about ways to self-care and do something brave each day so you can continue to support your wellbeing, even on a really difficult day.

	<b>1</b> “Today is the worst possible kind of day, I have no energy or motivation, I will be in bed all day”	<b>2</b> “Today is a hard day, I lack motivation and feel down but I can get out of bed”	<b>3</b> “Today is a moderately hard day, I feel overwhelmed by the day but know I can do some things around the house”	<b>4</b> “Today I feel physically able to move around, I feel mentally stronger but my mood is still very low”	<b>5</b> “This is my average day, I am in pain but can move, I am low but can connect with others”	<b>6</b> “Today I feel physically and mentally stronger, but I still don’t want to go out”	<b>7</b> “Today I feel able to take on board new information and I feel moderately well mentally and physically”	<b>8</b> “Today I feel positive and have a gentle spring in my step, I feel able to do something new today”	<b>9</b> “I feel increasingly more like myself today, I can get out of the house and do what I want to”	<b>10</b> “I feel the best physical version of myself today, and I feel mentally strong”
<b>Psychological Experience</b>										
<b>Things I know that I really can achieve today to maintain positive self-care and build emotional resilience</b>	<p>Create personal space</p> <p>Stay in bed if I need to</p> <p>Manage the expectations of others so I don’t feel guilty</p> <p>Continue self-care: keep curtains open, eat and drink regularly, wash before sleeping</p>	<p>Have a positive morning routine to kick-start the day</p> <p>Think of a positive statement e.g. “I am doing really well” and repeat it back to yourself throughout the day.</p> <p>Be kind to yourself and pace your activity today</p>	<p>On waking, lay still in bed and giving yourself the time to gently wake up – feel your fingers and toes and breathe in for four, hold for three, breathe out for four.</p> <p>Do this throughout the day to increase calm</p> <p>Write down worries if things get on top of you.</p>	<p>Today try and move around at least once every hour to keep your energy levels up.</p> <p>If you feel you need someone to talk to reach out to the Silver Line.</p> <p>Treat yourself to something special.</p>	<p>Today consider gentle ways to reduce pain and discomfort e.g. chair based Pilates.</p> <p>Call a friend to come and see you, or see if you feel up to visiting them somewhere close to home.</p>	<p>Keep on top of your self-care routines and really work hard to make these enjoyable today.</p> <p>Do something brave today – tell someone about what you did, or write about it in your journal.</p>	<p>Today consider what you need to do over the next few days – prioritise what is important and action the most important task today.</p> <p>Relax with meditation exercises, take a nap, read a book, do a crossword.</p>	<p>Give yourself one small and realistic goal today e.g. sitting outside with a cup of tea to increase your interaction with green space, or attempting a gentle walk around the block to get fresh air, or trying a new craft or activity to boost your self-esteem.</p>	<p>Today consider what activities are happening in your area and choose one to go along to – don’t give up hope, phone a friend for encouragement, take mum with you for company, and phone Dial-A-Ride if you need a helpful lift.</p>	<p>Today enjoy the morning: have a mindful wash, open the curtains and say hello to the day, have your favourite breakfast, play feel good music and plan what you will do today. Be brave.</p>

**Signposts:** The Silver Line: 0800 4 70 80 90 | NHS Fitness Studio: <https://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/> | Dial-A-Ride: 0343 222 7777 or visit: [www.tfl.gov.uk/modes/dial-a-ride/](http://www.tfl.gov.uk/modes/dial-a-ride/)

## Challenging Your Thoughts

The **Take Your Thought to Court** activity is one you can utilise to challenge unhelpful thoughts. It uses the metaphor of a court trial with; A defence barrister – defending the truth of the unhelpful thought and a prosecutor – undermining the truth of the unhelpful thought. Gathering evidence in this manner allows you to assess how realistic and helpful the thought actually is.

<b>What is the Negative thought?</b> Choose an unhelpful thought from step one that caused the most emotional distress	<b>Defence</b> What suggests that the thought is true? What are the facts and evidence?	<b>Prosecution</b> What suggests that this thought is false? What evidence is there to discredit this thought?

### Step 3: Increase balanced and helpful ways of thinking

Our thoughts can negatively impact us in many ways; the purpose of this final step is to develop a more helpful and balanced way of thinking, in turn improving how you feel. You are not disregarding the initial unhelpful thought, you are just weighing up all of the evidence for and against this thought to get to an alternative perspective.

<b>Verdict</b> Given the evidence, what is a more helpful, balanced way of viewing this thought? Outline your new way of thinking. If a friend were in a similar situation, what would you advise?

### Next Steps...

Following these three steps, think back to the situation you were in when you had the initial unhelpful thought. In your head, replace the initial unhelpful thought with the new more helpful thought and explore how this thought might change the intensity of the emotion you felt at the time, and how you subsequently behaved. It might be that the first few times you try this the distress only reduces slightly but the more you practice this way of thought challenging, the intensity of the unhelpful thoughts should lessen and the associated emotional distress should decrease.

## A Mindfulness exercise

The 'five senses' mindfulness exercise is a relatively easy one that can be practiced anywhere quickly, helping to bring you to a mindful state, aware of the present moment:

1. Notice five things that you can **see** - Look around you and bring your attention to five things that you can see. Pick something that you don't normally notice, like a shadow or a small crack in the concrete.
2. Notice four things that you can **feel** - Bring awareness to four things that you are currently feeling, like the texture of your pants, the feeling of the breeze on your skin, or the smooth surface of a table you are resting your hands on
3. Notice three things you can **hear** - Take a moment to listen, and note three things that you hear in the background. This can be the chirp of a bird, the hum of the refrigerator, or the faint sounds of traffic from a nearby road.
4. Notice two things you can **smell** - Bring your awareness to smells that you usually filter out, whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. Perhaps the breeze is carrying a whiff of pine trees if you're outside or the smell of a fast food restaurant across the street.
5. Notice one thing you can **taste** - Focus on one thing that you can taste right now, at this moment. You can take a sip of a drink, chew a piece of gum, eat something, notice the current taste in your mouth, or even open your mouth to search the air for a taste.





## Creating my routine

✓	<b><u>Morning</u></b>
	Wake up at _____
	Mindfulness/gratitude/gentle stretches (a mindful activity)
	Eat Breakfast at _____
	Look at what you have achieved the day before from a 'have done' list
	Write down three tasks/goals you would like to achieve for the day
	Plan in regular breaks for the day, including times for lunch and dinner
	Begin tasks

✓	<b><u>Afternoon</u></b>
	Have lunch at _____
	Short physical activity (walking/stretching)
	Mindfulness exercise
	Add to 'have done' list
	Think about which tasks to focus on for rest of afternoon

✓	<b><u>Evening</u></b>
	Set a stop time for _____
	Engage in daily physical activity if you haven't already
	Prepare dinner (with others in your household where relevant)
	Add to 'have done' list
	Watch TV
	Read a book
	Come away from Mobile/Computer/TV an hour before sleep
	Complete gratitude journal for the day (three positive things)
	Decide to sleep at _____

## Goal setting for a sustained wellbeing

It can be helpful to think of one small change that you will trial after viewing the wellbeing tutorial. You could think of this one small change as a goal that you wish to set.

We know that it is easier to stick with your goal or small change if it has some details included. We call these the SMART principles.

Goals need to be:

**Specific**

**Measurable**

**Achievable**

**Realistic**

**Time boundaried.**

**Specific:** 'I want to feel better' is too vague as it is something we all want to do. You need to be clear about a specific situation/person/place when you are setting a goal.

**Measurable:** You need to ask how you will know when you have achieved your goal. 'Being happy' or 'feeling less anxious' cannot be measured, but 'travelling 3 stops on the bus' or 'reducing my anxiety by 50%' can.

**Achievable Goals** need to be something that you could do. It is pointless setting yourself a goal that is impossible – and will only make you feel worse. Small achievable goals are important. 'sorting my money out' may not be achievable, whilst 'paying my gas and electricity bills by the end of the week' may be.

**Realistic** This is pretty much the same as achievable. You may not win the lottery, in fact you are most unlikely to do so. However, saving £2.00 per week might mean that you could afford to buy yourself a treat.

**Time boundaries** It is important to set yourself a realistic time frame.

Based on the above, what small change will you make?

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