

A NEW NORMAL?

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As the nation gradually emerges from lockdown, many people may choose or be advised to continue self-isolating or ‘shielding’. Consultant Clinical Psychologist Dr Jane Duff, who heads up the National Spinal Injuries Centre (NSIC) Clinical Psychology Service, gives tips on looking after your mental health and psychological wellbeing during this difficult period.

As someone with a spinal cord injury, you’ll know what it’s like to live with uncertainty. Initial rehabilitation and leaving hospital, and then finding out what worked at home (and what didn’t), would have been a very unpredictable time. It’s the ‘not knowing’ how things are going to turn out which is extraordinarily difficult to cope with, and the coronavirus uncertainty and isolation can be particularly worrying when you have additional health and care needs.

Looking after your psychological / mental health

Looking after our psychological health is in some ways like looking after a car – there are things that help keep a car running well and on the road and the same is true for us. It may sound strange, but our psychological health is closely linked to our physical health; things like sleep, rest, and nutrition. Psychological health can get knocked off balance when these basics are missed. You’ve probably got a good idea of the things that help you most when you’re under pressure and especially having lived through and coped with the first phase of lock down. As we emerge into a different phase it’s about continuing to choose to do the things that are most effective for you, the things that take the pressure off, but also maybe managing new worries that may emerge as some things in society resume and whether / when you can resume. In this article I’ll run through some of the things that can help support your mental health and wellbeing at this time.

Another important, underlying factor that affects our mental health is having a sense of security, which can be more difficult at the moment, especially as things are changing day to day. Feelings of uncertainty and a sense of threat that go on for too long and aren’t managed can, in the longer-term, lead to poorer mental health. Here are some tips from evidence-based

research to support your psychological wellbeing and increase your feelings of security to help you manage this uncertain time:

- **Routine** – You’ve probably developed a bit of a ‘routine’, albeit different over the past few weeks. Having a general structure to your day is a huge help because it gives you a sense of purpose and predictability. It may be a different routine from your usual one, with changes in care or personal assistance availability or may be moving into a different phase now. It might be a good time to review what worked and what didn’t. And if you are continuing in isolation / shielding, as many people with SCI will be, to try and tweak your routine to represent how this new phase works for you. If you have not developed a routine so far, this would be a good time to develop one as it looks like it’s going to be quite a long haul. So, for example, eating meals at a planned time and, if you usually work, a routine that reflects your typical working week with a different structure for weekends.

There’s good research to show that getting a balance of three things every day supports mental health and wellbeing:

- the things you need to do to keep your life running (cooking food / washing)
- the things you enjoy doing
- and something that is a skill that needs some concentration (like learning a language or a hobby where you can see your improvement).

Maybe now could be the time to broaden your social contacts to try and reach out to people you’ve not been in touch with as we move into this new phase? Setting yourself a goal can help, for example to call three friends over the next week to whom you haven’t spoken in a while. Do things that give you a buzz, a boost and a sense of purpose or meaning. Also, humour is an antidote to stress: watch old episodes of comedies you’ve previously enjoyed if there’s nothing new that interests you.

- **Sleep** - you may be less tired if you aren’t going out as much. It’s important to have a routine time for going to bed and getting up. Try to avoid napping in the daytime if you don’t usually do this, as it will detract from a good night’s sleep. If you usually rest in the daytime to help manage pain or fatigue, stick with what works for you. If you’re having trouble sleeping or have lost your routine, [the sleepio website](#) could help
- **Headspace and ‘bandwith’**

- Limit how much news you listen to each day, which may be difficult as things seem to change frequently in terms of the rules, but maybe limit it to just catching up once or a maximum of twice a day. Although I usually like talking radio shows, I've found I can only hear so much about coronavirus and people's thoughts about it and have switched to listening more to music shows. It's all about assessing 'does what I am doing helping me positively, or is it having a negative impact on my mood or increasing my worries?'
- When we're under pressure our 'bandwidth' or tolerance can reduce; we can become cross more easily or find decision making hard. Give yourself space at these times. A simple thing to do if you find this starting is to STOP, BREATHE, THINK for just a minute. This can help you to 'reset' before you go on. This was the early advice given to staff working in ICU which really helped them, and it works well for us all.
- Put the majority of your energy into things you can influence and control. For the things that you can't control – either turn this into a proactive strategy (like writing to your MP / contacting your bank / care agency / making sure your catheter prescriptions are in place), or limit yourself from dwelling on the issue.
- **Practical help** - many areas have now set up a local warden system to look out for people who are isolating. If you don't know about that or haven't already connected with people in your local area to register your needs, do so now and contact your citizen's advice bureau / GP to find out what's happening where you live. You can also find existing local volunteer networks in your area via [Nextdoor](#) and others that have been set up specifically to support and connect people during the pandemic, such as [Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK](#).
- **Connect with nature / fresh air / culture** – this can be hard if you don't have access to outdoor space or if it's difficult to go out because of your mobility. Despite this, it's really important for your psychological health to try and connect. This could be through getting the breeze on your face through an open window, looking out and focusing on a plant or tree swaying in the wind, or even watching nature programmes.
 - Some zoos are live streaming their animals e.g. at Tembe Elephant Park and Washington National Zoo. Search for them or 'live zoo streaming' online.

- Some museums are now offering virtual museum tours. You can access these by searching online for: artsandculture.google.com.
- Many operas, plays and shows are available to stream online. You could search for some of these by visiting the website: operavision.eu or search on youtube.com for 'Opera on the Sofa' or 'The London Symphony Orchestra'. The Royal Opera House is also offering ballets to view.
- **Stay in touch** as much and as regularly as possible – this may be with family and friends but could also be through the communities that charities like SIA and Back Up have created. To join the virtual cafes co-hosted by SIA, Back Up and This is Spinal Crap, [visit the SIA website](#). For people who are feeling the impact of social isolation and loneliness, this is a good resource - www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/

All of the above can help protect your psychological health, as can doing things that give you a sense of value and purpose.

Psychological health – there are different levels of worry and anxiety. It's likely that you may be worrying more than usual – that's ok, worrying is usual when things change – it doesn't mean that you will always be this way. I've also found when talking and supporting staff and patients, that people's mood can vary much more than usual within the day or day to day, with small things knocking them off course. This can be particularly difficult to cope with if this isn't usual for you. The information below is staged and gives you some resources depending where you are at:

- **Are you worried about things you would expect to concern you?**
Maybe your financial future or whether your carers will become unwell, will you be able to continue to get hold of your medication supplies or have the right PPE, what will the new track and trace mean for your care provision? Identify the concern and where possible do something practical about it. Also, you may have heard about something called 'mindfulness' which can help increase your 'bandwidth' and which in turn helps you think and plan clearly. The resources section below gives ideas for inspiration. Take a look at this diagram by Tom Senninger; see if you are in the fear zone and purposefully try and move into the learning zone.

- The King's College London Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience website [has some useful resources](#).
- **Are you very worried or feeling lower in general in yourself?** If this has continued for more than a few days, you've not been able to shake it off by calling friends or doing the things that usually brighten your mood and it's affecting you most of the time, then it would be good to seek some professional psychological support:
 - Across NHS England, people can access psychological support through a scheme called Improving Access Psychological Therapies (IAPT). Many areas have given this a more user-friendly name, for example in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire it's called Healthy Minds. IAPT provides tiered psychological support and you can contact them yourself and don't need to go through your GP. Unfortunately, most of the NHS England Spinal Cord Injury Centres (SCICs) don't have enough clinical psychology staff to be able to provide psychological reviews or support, so please contact IAPT in the first instance or your GP.
 - Spinal Injuries Association run a free telephone counselling service for SCI. More information is available [on their website](#).
 - If you're over 65, you can contact [the Silver Line](#) for information and support.

If you develop symptoms and are admitted to hospital and ICU, and feel very anxious, please let your nursing and medical team know. Some ICUs have clinical psychologists and they can help support you.

For people who are starting to return to work / expand their time outside

The British Psychological Society (BPS) has put together [information for parents who are Keyworkers and their children](#), both of whom could feel worried about infection. This is relevant for us all as we start to move into the next phase and more 'critical workers' join the work place.

- [Leaflet for children of Keyworkers](#)
- [Leaflet for parents who are keyworkers](#)

Looking after those you're spending time with or isolated from:

- children and young people:
 - <https://www.bps.org.uk/blogs/guest/parenting-young-babies-whilst-self-isolating-and-social-distancing>
 - <https://www.childline.org.uk>
 - <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
 - <https://www.themix.org.uk/>
 - There's also been a couple of good books that are free to access:
 - <https://nosycrow.com/blog/released-today-free-information-book-explaining-coronavirus-children-illustrated-gruffalo-illustrator-axel-scheffler/>
 - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Huge-Bag-Worries-Virginia-Ironside/dp/0340903171>

A book that I've used with children to help them develop mindfulness is "Sitting Still like a Frog".

- Information is also available from the BPS regarding [older people with dementia](#)

Online self-help booklets and resources

- The [Mind website](#) has general information about mental health as well as [specific information](#) about looking after yourself during these challenging times.
- For online psychological courses and practical information visit the [Living Life to the Full website](#).
- For written self-help leaflets, also in large print and audio for a range of psychological conditions, see <https://web.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>
- For other audio-guides try [the NHS website](#).

Useful Apps



Mind Shift - a mental health app designed specifically for teens and young adults with anxiety. Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. It can encourage you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions and face challenging situations.



Self Help for Anxiety Management (SAM) might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time and learn 25 different self-help techniques. You can also use SAM's 'Social Cloud' feature to connect confidentially with other users in an online community for additional support.



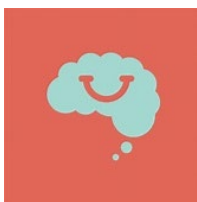
Happify - need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training programme, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts.



The **Headspace** app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus. The app also has a handy 'get some headspace' reminder to encourage you to keep practising each day.



Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programmes, and relaxing music. This app is truly universal; whether you've never tried meditation before or regularly practise, you'll find the perfect programme for you.



Smiling mind is a way to practise daily meditation and mindfulness exercises from any device. It's a unique tool developed by psychologists and educators to help bring balance to your life. This is really helpful during times of stress and is a fun and unique way to help you put a smile on your mind 😊

Other NHS approved apps: <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

National Support services

Samaritans

- **Phone** 116 123 (24 hours, 7 days a week)
- www.samaritans.org.uk

Anxiety UK

- **Phone** 03444 775 774 (Monday to Friday, 9:30am – 5:30pm)
- www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Sane Line

- **Phone** 0300 304 7000 (everyday, 4:30pm-10:30pm)
- www.sane.org.uk

CALM (for men aged 15 to 35)

- **Phone** 0800 58 58 58 (daily, 5pm to midnight)
- www.thecalmzone.net

Mind

- **Phone** 0300 123 3393 (Monday to Friday, 9am-6pm)
- www.mind.org.uk

This is an unusual time for us all and one requiring much adaptation to our usual way of doing things. Hospitals and Spinal Cord Injury Centres have had to do things differently also, whilst still trying to maintain the quality and care we would usually provide.

As a Clinical Psychology Team at the NSIC, we have been on the wards supporting patients and staff every day, adhering to social distancing guidelines. We've continued to provide face-to-face support to patients, with PPE as required; used technology and remotely supported people if we can to reduce infection risk and spread and connected inpatients as much as possible with family and friends. Like most hospital and care environments, the NSIC is still closed to visitors, but our family counsellor has provided telephone therapeutic support to many. The NSIC is part of Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust and there is a whole philosophy around the care we provide as a Trust, recognising that staff provide the best care when they receive the best support. The Trust has widened its staff wellbeing support substantially during this time and

the NSIC Clinical Psychology team have been part of this as well as the daily support on NSIC ward and for clinical teams.

I would like to thank the NSIC Clinical Psychology Team for their support and great team work throughout this time, and to thank in particular Trainee Clinical Psychologist Liz Templeman and Clinical Psychologist Dr Allie Tyler for their help in compiling these resources.

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This article also appears in the June issue of SIA's FORWARD magazine.

[More information about FORWARD.](#)

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