Hello everyone,

We all find ourselves in stressful and unfamiliar circumstances currently and it is completely normal if we are feeling unsettled. Some people may be feeling anxious, frightened or low in mood. These feelings may be experienced by anyone, whether they have previously struggled with mental health difficulties or not. Some anxious thoughts are likely to be present for most people at some time. This may have a negative effect on sleep, appetite and enjoyment.

As we are asked to stay in our homes, and travel is restricted, many people may be feeling lonely and isolated and unable to access their usual support systems or resources that help them to feel well and happy. This can be unsettling and can leave people feeling helpless and hopeless.

Some people may be worried about family and friends, particularly if they are unable to be with them at the moment.

It is so important to remember that this situation will not last forever. We are all looking forward to the time when we can return to our normal activities again.

We are all in this situation together!.......so we can support each other to get through this whilst also remaining physically and mentally as healthy as possible.

**Positive routine**

Most people will have their usual daily routine disrupted currently, with restrictions to their usual leisure and social activities. If jobs or studies are paused, this can also result in lack of daily structure. People may feel they have ‘nothing to do’, resulting in long periods of time for thinking and worrying, a lack of sense of purpose, reduced motivation and energy, and often a negative effect on mood, anxiety and general wellbeing. This can result in a negative spiral of emotion which is tricky to get out of once it becomes habit......the new routine.

We should not underestimate the power of having a good routine and maintaining or adapting as many as possible of our normal activities and basic human requirements for good mental wellbeing. This can halt the ‘negative spiral’ and start a positive spiral of emotions......the more we do that makes us feel happier, productive and fulfilled- the more we feel able to do, and the happier we feel!

Try to stick to roughly the same time for going to bed and getting up as you would usually. I know its tempting to sleep in during the day, but this usually results in us feeling ‘groggy’ and lethargic when we get up. It also ‘steals’ time for activities, social interactions and tasks that are likely to allow us to feel better. Daytime napping also adversely affects our sleep pattern, so we are likely to have more trouble getting off to sleep at night.

Exercise has a positive impact on sleep. If we have spent all day thinking, worrying, studying or sedentary working, we can feel tired at the end of the day- but if we have not been physically active, this ‘mis-match’ between brain and body tiredness can result in us struggling to get to sleep and not feeling well rested on waking. Even thirty minutes or so of physical activity daily can help us match up our brain and body tiredness and allow us to sleep better.
Try to eat three healthy meals each day. This helps maintain good energy levels and has a positive effect on both our physical and mental health.

Consider setting yourself a new routine, with something to account for your time during the morning, afternoon and evening. This does not need to be regimented, and certainly does not need to only involve work or jobs....it should also involve fun, interests and relaxation! It may help you to feel that your time is more structured, with improved sense of purpose and achievement.

**Stress reaction**

I’m sure you will have heard of the body’s ‘Fight or Flight’ response to stress. This is a normal physiological reaction that occurs in the presence of something that is frightening, either mentally or physically. The response is triggered by the release of hormones that prepare your body to either stay and deal with a threat or run away to safety. The sympathetic nervous system stimulates the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and noradrenaline, resulting in an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. This response is helpful in the event of a physical threat as it enables us to fight or flee the danger. However, sometimes the perceived threat is psychological, or it may be on-going. In these cases, we may become fearful of our body’s response to the stress, which may cause the symptoms to last longer, resulting in us feeling anxious, on-edge and sometimes overwhelmed.

When we are feeling stressed, the first step to feeling better is to identify the cause and to see if we can do anything to reduce this. The coronavirus situation is undoubtedly a big cause of stress for most of us currently. We may feel powerless to stop this virus individually, but we can all do our bit to reduce its spread. Changing a difficult situation isn’t always possible- try to concentrate on the things you do have control over.

**What can we do to address stress, and feel better?**

1. **Take control:**
   The feeling of loss of control is one of the main causes of stress and poor wellbeing. The act of taking control is empowering and can help you to feel better. So...... we can take control by following the government advice about staying at home, only going out for essential tasks and keeping at least 2m away from others to reduce the spread of the virus. We can also take control of our own wellbeing by putting into practice some of the following techniques to help us feel calmer and happier.

2. **Connect with people:**
   Humans need social contact with others in order to feel well. We often rely on friends and family to help us relax. We can have fun together- laughter is an excellent stress-reliever! We may also find relief from talking through problems together and supporting each other if we are finding things tough. If we are having to stay inside with other people in the same household, are there new ways to enjoy each other’s company and have fun? Playing board games or computer games together, cooking and eating together- there are many ways to enjoy each other’s company and support each other.
   If we can’t physically be with people we care about at the moment, please make time to stay in touch regularly by telephone- or even better by video link. There are so many on-line forums for staying in touch- using something like Zoom or Skype so that we can see our
loved ones, can really help us feel connected. How about some creative thinking...? A virtual quiz night, bake off or exercise class might be fun?

3. **Be active:**
   Exercise does not take away the stressful problem, but it helps by reducing the emotional intensity of your feelings, allowing you to feel calmer and think more clearly. It also helps you feel physically fitter and can have positive benefits on your daily routine and sleep. At the moment our outdoor activities are restricted and sports centres are temporarily closed, so many people may be feeling the impact of not being able to do their usual activities.
   We need to think outside the box! What can we do at home to keep active and give us the same health benefits that we would get from our usual activities? If you have a garden, make the most of it! It feels good to get some fresh air when we can. Could you set up a small circuit for training or do skipping, star jumps, jogging on the spot? Any cardio activity can be beneficial.
   There are lots of on-line ‘exercise from home’ resources available that you might find helpful. I have included a few options below for you to have a look at, but you might have some others of your own that you prefer.
   Try to build some physical activity into your daily routine. You might find it helps to do it first thing in the morning to set you up for the day…. or early afternoon for an energy boost if you feel you tend to feel sluggish in the afternoon. Whatever works best for you.

   www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-benefits-of-exercise
   https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/10-minute-workouts/
   10 Minute Intense Tabata-style Workout The Body Coach- Joe Wicks- YouTube
   10 Minute CARDIO and ABS workout The Body Coach- Joe Wicks- YouTube
   P.E with Joe Wicks: every weekday live Monday-Friday 9am on YouTube

4. **Time for yourself:**
   What do you enjoy doing? What makes you feel happier, calmer, more relaxed? You might struggle to think of things at first, but that’s OK....... perhaps you could try something you have enjoyed doing in the past, or share ideas with friends or family to try something new.
   We need to be thinking about activities we can do at home at the moment. Creative tasks can be soothing and give a sense of achievement...... how about trying your hand at painting, sewing, baking? Do you play an instrument? Do you like listening to music, playing computer games, watching films? Puzzles can be a helpful way of keeping your mind active.
   It is important for all of us to take some time out regularly for some quality “me time” away from work and other pressures.
   Some people practice mindfulness and/or meditation techniques and can find this helpful. It can take practice to get into these and some people find it easier than others. There are lots of mindfulness resources on-line if you fancy giving it a go, or you could try downloading one of the free apps such as Headspace, which offers guided meditation and mindfulness for stress and anxiety.

5. **Challenge yourself:**
   While our usual activities and pastimes are more limited, this may be an opportunity to try new things. Learning new skills can be fun and rewarding. It also helps us to feel emotionally stronger and to feel more energetic and positive and less passive.... we want to avoid feeling
stuck in a negative cycle of behaviour and thoughts. Let’s try to put new positive activities into our routines, to help us feel better and more confident! Could you start to learn a new language? Or tidy out those cupboards that have been cluttered for ages?! Or learn to cook healthy delicious meals? You never know what you might achieve...... and most importantly, you are likely to feel the benefits of keeping busy, learning new skills, and being productive.

6. Avoid unhealthy coping strategies:
We can all do this sometimes......turn to things like alcohol, smoking and caffeine as a way of coping with stress and difficult feelings and emotions. It might provide temporary relief from immediate symptoms, but in the longer run it is more likely to create new problems for you rather than solve any.
Alcohol actually acts as a depressant...... quite apart from the hangover, it can also make you feel sluggish, lacking in energy and low in mood.
If we can try to minimise or preferably avoid these unhelpful coping strategies, we can try to develop alternative, healthier ways to help us feel better.

What alternative tools could we use to help ourselves feel better if we are feeling overwhelmed or emotionally distressed? Have I told you about the ‘self-soothe toolkit’?
I love this concept- I think it can help anyone, as we can all sometimes feel that things get “too much”. The idea is that if we are feeling ‘broken’- overwhelmed, distressed, emotionally upset- we can use a series of tools from our personal toolkit to help us feel better. We know the toolkit won’t make the stressors go away- but hopefully by using the toolkit we can allow ourselves to feel better so that we feel calmer and more able to manage our difficult feelings.

Making your toolkit:
- Try to think about this when you are feeling calm and well-it is hard to do this when you are already feeling distressed. You may want to involve a trusted friend or family member to help you- or it could be fun to do this together?
- Imagine an old fashioned tool box, with 3 drawers that ‘step out’ when you open it. We want to ‘put’ tools in those 3 drawers ready for us to use when we need them. We should start taking tools from the bottom drawer and work up the ladder as we start to feel better.
- Try to include ‘tools’ that involve all 5 senses, as this can help soothe us and help us to feel calmer.
- When we are feeling really overwhelmed or upset, we need quick easy things in the bottom drawer of the toolbox, to help us feel slightly better. These should be things that require very little effort or planning......such as looking at a photo of an up-lifting scene, a happy memory or friendly familiar face- or listening to some cheerful music- or making a favourite hot chocolate...... There are no right or wrong things to put in your toolkit, as it is personal to you.
- Once we have tried a few things from the bottom drawer, if we are feeling slightly calmer, we could try some tools from the middle drawer. These tools require slightly more input. You might include things like reading a book, practising mindfulness, calling a friend for a chat.
- We move to the top drawer when we notice we are feeling slightly better again. The top drawer involves more active tasks...... maybe doing a Joe Wicks 10 minute
• workout on YouTube, playing an instrument, arranging a ‘virtual’ meet-up with friends to ‘share’ a coffee?!
• The idea is, we are unlikely to manage to achieve tasks from the top drawer right at the start if we are feeling overwhelmed and distressed……. but if we work up the ladder starting with simple tasks, we can help ourselves to feel better gradually- and arm ourselves with tools to use in future whenever we might need them.
• Some people make an actual ‘toolkit’, using a box or bag containing helpful items and reminders- some people write their ‘tools’ down in the drawers of the toolkit- and some prefer to keep their ideas as thoughts in their head. Whatever works best for you- but have a think about dividing your coping strategies up into 3 categories for instant access, slightly more involved, and then more complex.

7. Help other people:
Evidence shows that helping others can result in people feeling more mentally resilient themselves. Activities such as volunteering can be very valuable, as well as simple acts of kindness shown to others in our community, family and friends.
In this unusual situation that we find ourselves in, are there opportunities to help others that we haven’t previously considered?
Could we assist elderly relatives in accessing on-line grocery shopping if they are not familiar with this? Or get friends and family involved with group ‘meetings’ on Zoom etc- so people feel connected and less isolated. How about taking on the role of quiz master and hosting a ‘virtual quiz night’?! Perhaps you could organise or be involved in a WhatsApp group with local neighbours, checking in on other residents and offering help if people are struggling with practical issues, or are lonely and in need of support?

8. Try to think positive:
We all acknowledge this is a very difficult time and we do not in any way aim to trivialise the serious nature of the situation and the resulting distress. However, it can be helpful to focus on the positives and the things for which we feel grateful.
There has been some coverage on the news about the positive impact the reduced travel and industry is having on climate change. Maybe a positive outcome from this crisis could be a shift in attitude and lifestyle choices with improved longer-term outcome for our planet. There may be some changes in working style that can be continued after this crisis is over.
I’m sure there are lessons to be learnt regarding working efficiency, work/life balance and understanding our core values, that we can reflect on in future and use to shape our choices for the better.
Communities are striving to come together (virtually!) to support each other and get through this together. Individuals are sharing creative ideas to make themselves and others feel better, happier and safer. For some this is an opportunity to pause their usual routine and to try something new or develop a new skill.
Also, it can help to acknowledge the small pleasures that continue to exist all around us, even at this difficult time. I put a new bird box up in the garden last weekend… and yesterday a family of bluetits ‘moved in’!! I felt surprisingly delighted! Maybe you could hang a bird feeder outside your window? Watching birds can be a restful and mindful way to spend a few minutes of “me time” and re-charge.

I do hope you stay well and healthy,
Best wishes, Dr Helen Winter
If you need additional support with your mental health:

- **Is it an emergency?**
  eg overdose, self harm, suicide attempt
  Call 999 or attend the **Accident and Emergency department** nearest to you. In Sheffield this is at the Northern General Hospital, Herries Road, S5 7AU.

- **Do you need urgent support?**
  - Call the **University Health Service** on 0114 2222100 to speak to a nurse or doctor, or call your usual GP surgery if registered elsewhere.
  - **SAMHS** remains open but online registration is currently closed. You can access telephone or online support by sending an email entitled “request for support” to: SAMHS@sheffield.ac.uk. Please include your telephone number, student registration number, university email address, current address and GP practice details in your email, and you will receive a response as soon as possible, usually within a few days.

- **Other options for seeking support:**
  - **IAPT** are offering support via telephone or video link. You can be referred by your GP, or refer yourself using the following link: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/free-therapy-or-counselling/
  - **Wellbeing advisors** work linked to the university departments. Please follow the link to book a call: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/wellbeing

- **Helplines and resources:**
  Samaritans 0114 2767277
  HOPE LineUK  https://www.papyrus-uk.org/help-advice/about-hopelineuk
  The phone, text and email support is open 10am – 10pm weekdays, 2pm – 10pm weekends, 2pm – 5pm bank holidays
  CALM 0800 58 58 58
  Department of Health confidential helpline, open 5pm – midnight, Sat – Tue
  Sheffield Helpline  0808 801 0440
  Sheffield Mind is a charity providing support to people in Sheffield with mental health issues: https://www.sheffieldmind.co.uk
  SHOUT textline for support in a crisis: TEXT 85258
  Free apps: Headspace, Calm Harm, Catch It, Virtual Hopebox, distrAct
  Every Mind Matters: https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/
  NHS wellbeing: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/