

**Guide**

UK English

# Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty

## About this guide

Our world is changing rapidly at the moment. Given some of the news coverage, it would be hard not to worry about what it all means for yourself, and for those you love.

Worry and anxiety are common problems at the best of times, and when it takes over it can become all-encompassing. At Psychology Tools we have put together this free guide to help you to manage your worry and anxiety in these uncertain times.

Once you have read the information, feel free to try the exercises if you think they might be helpful to you. It's natural to struggle when times are uncertain, so remember to offer care and compassion to yourself, and to those around you.

Wishing you well,

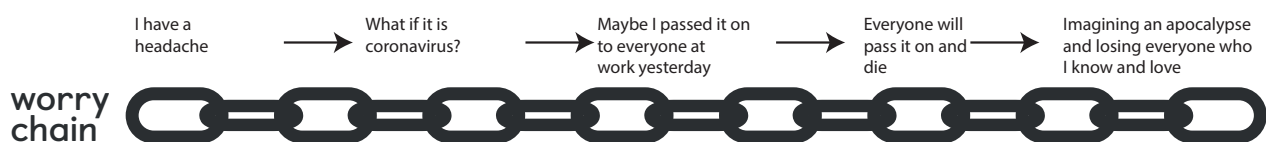
Dr Matthew Whalley & Dr Hardeep Kaur

## What is worry?

Human beings have the amazing ability to think about future events. 'Thinking ahead' means that we can anticipate obstacles or problems, and gives us the opportunity to plan solutions. When it helps us to achieve our goals, 'thinking ahead' can be helpful. For example, hand washing and social distancing are helpful things that we can decide to do in order to prevent the spread of the virus. However, worrying is a way of 'thinking ahead' that often leaves us feeling anxious or apprehensive. When we worry excessively, we often think about worst case scenarios and feel that we won't be able to cope.

## What does worry feel like?

When we worry it can feel like a chain of thoughts and images, which can progress in increasingly catastrophic and unlikely directions. Some people experience worry as uncontrollable – it seems to take on a life of its own. It is natural that many of us may have recently noticed ourselves thinking about worst-case scenarios. The example below illustrates how worries can escalate quickly even from something relatively minor. Have you noticed any thoughts like this? (confession: we both have!)



Worry isn't just in our heads. When it becomes excessive we feel it as anxiety in our bodies too. Physical symptoms of worry and anxiety include:

- Muscle tension or aches and pains.
- Restlessness and an inability to relax.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Feeling easily fatigued.

## What triggers worry and anxiety?

Anything can be a trigger for worry. Even when things go right, you might manage to think to yourself "*but what if it all falls apart?*". There are particular situations where worry becomes even more common, though. Strong triggers for worry are situations that are:

- **Ambiguous** – open to different interpretations.
- **Novel and new** – so we don't have any experience to fall back on.
- **Unpredictable** – unclear how things will turn out.

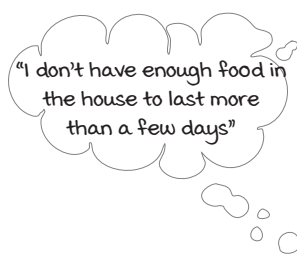
Does any of this sound familiar at the moment? The current worldwide health situation ticks all of these boxes, and so it makes sense that people are experiencing a lot of worry. It is an unusual situation with much uncertainty, which can naturally lead us to worry and feel anxious.

## Are there different types of worry?

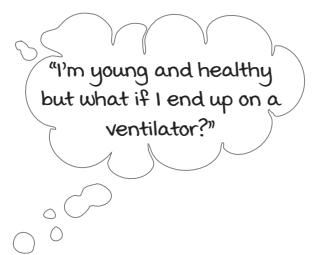
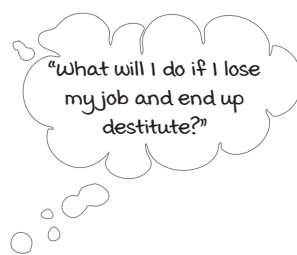
Worry can be helpful or unhelpful, and psychologists often distinguish between worries concerning 'real problems' vs. 'hypothetical problems'.

- **Real problem worries** are about actual problems that need solutions right now. For example, given the very real concern about the virus at the moment, there are helpful solutions which include regular handwashing, social distancing, and physical isolation if you have symptoms.
- **Hypothetical worries** about the current health crisis might include thinking about worst-case scenarios (what we might call catastrophising). For example, imagining worst case scenarios such as *most* people dying.

**Real problem worries**  
are about *actual* problems  
that are affecting you *right now*.



**Hypothetical worries**  
are about things that do not currently exist,  
but which *might* happen in the future.





to remind yourself that your mind is not focusing on a problem that you can solve right now, and then to find ways to let the worry go and focus on something else. You might also use this tool with children if they are struggling to cope.

- **Practise postponing your worry.** Worry is insistent – it can make you feel as though you have to engage with it **right now**. But you can experiment with postponing hypothetical worry, and many people find that this allows them to have a different relationship with their worries. In practice, this means deliberately setting aside time each day to let yourself worry (e.g. 30 minutes at the end of each day). It can feel like an odd thing to do at first! It also means that for the other 23.5 hours in the day you try to let go of the worry until you get to your 'worry time'. Our *Worry Postponement* exercise will guide you through the steps you need to give it a try.
- **Speak to yourself with compassion.** Worry can come from a place of concern - we worry about others when we care for them. A traditional cognitive behavioural therapy technique for working with negative, anxious, or upsetting thoughts is to write them down and find a different way of responding to them. Using the *Challenging Your Thoughts With Compassion* worksheet you can practise responding to your anxious or worrying thoughts with kindness and compassion. We have provided a worked example to get you started.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Learning and practicing mindfulness can help us to let go of worries and bring ourselves back to the present moment. For example focusing on the gentle movement of your breath or the sounds you hear around you, can serve as helpful 'anchors' to come back to the present moment and let go of worries.

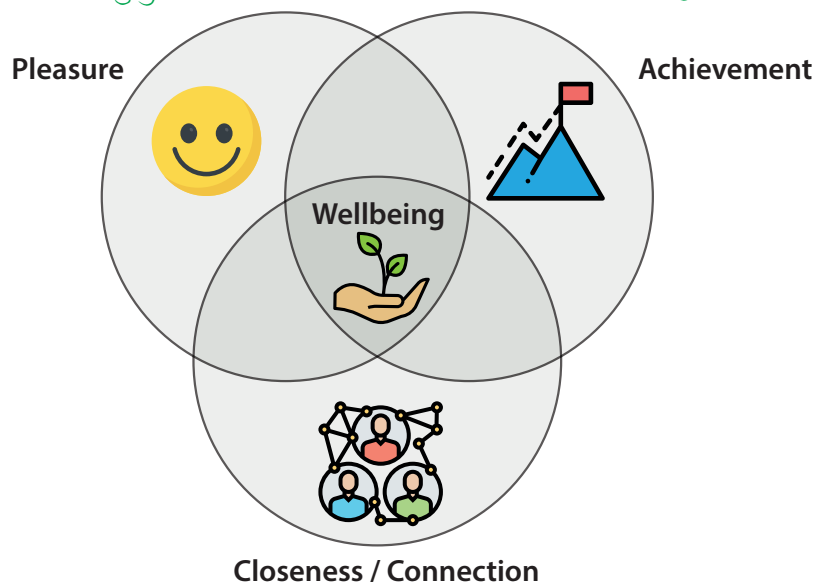
## Look After Your Wellbeing By Finding Balance

With the current health situation, many of our normal routines and daily activities are changing. Naturally this can be unsettling, and we can find that the things we usually did to look after our well-being have become difficult. Whether you are working from home, or in some form of physical isolation or distancing, it can be helpful to organise a daily routine that involves a balance between activities that:

- give you a sense of **achievement**,
- help you feel **close and connected** with others and
- activities that you can do just for **pleasure**.

When we are struggling with anxiety and worry, we can lose touch with things that used to give us pleasure. Plan to do some activities each day that are pleasurable and make you feel joyful. For example, reading a good book, watching a comedy, dancing or singing to your favourite songs, taking a relaxing bath, or eating your favourite food.

We feel good when we have achieved or accomplished something, so it's helpful to include activities each day that give you a sense of achievement. For example, doing some housework, decorating, gardening, a work task, cooking a new recipe, completing an exercise routine, or completing 'life admin' such as paying a bill.



We are social animals, so we need and naturally crave closeness and connection with other people. With the current health crisis many of us may be physically isolated or distant from others, so it's important that we consider creative ways to connect in order that we don't become socially isolated and lonely. How can you continue to connect with family and friends and have social time in a virtual way? Perhaps using social media, phone and video calls you could set up shared online activities e.g. a virtual book or film club. You could also explore local online neighbourhood groups, and see if there are ways to be involved in helping your local community.

An imbalance of pleasure, achievement, and closeness can affect our mood. For example if you spend most of your time working with no time for pleasure or socialising, then you may start to feel low and isolated. Conversely, if you spend most of your time relaxing for pleasure and not doing other things that are important to you then this can also impact your mood.

At the end of each day could you check in with yourself and reflect on 'what did I do today that gave me a sense of achievement? Pleasure? Closeness with others?' Did I get a good balance, or what can I do differently tomorrow?

## Use An Activity Menu To Give You Some Ideas To Stay Occupied



### Animals

- Pet an animal
- Walk a dog
- Listen to the birds



### Be active

- Go for a walk
- Go for a run
- Go for a swim
- Go cycling
- Use an exercise video at home



### Clean

- Clean the house
- Clean the yard
- Clean the bathroom
- Clean the toilet
- Clean your bedroom
- Clean the fridge
- Clean the oven
- Clean your shoes
- Do the washing up
- Fill / empty the dishwasher
- Do laundry
- Do some chores
- Organise your workspace
- Clean a cupboard



### Connect with people

- Contact a friend
- Join a new group
- Join a political party
- Join a dating website
- Send a message to a friend
- Write a letter to a friend
- Reconnect with an old friend



### Cook

- Cook a meal for yourself
- Cook a meal for someone else
- Bake a cake / cookies
- Roast marshmallows
- Find a new recipe



### Create

- Draw a picture
- Paint a portrait
- Take a photograph
- Doodle / sketch
- Organise photographs
- Make a photograph album
- Start a scrapbook
- Finish a project
- Do some sewing / knitting



### Expression

- Laugh
- Cry
- Sing
- Shout
- Scream



### Kindness

- Help a friend / neighbour / stranger
- Make a gift for someone
- Try a random act of kindness
- Do someone a favour
- Teach somebody a skill
- Do something nice for someone
- Plan a surprise for someone
- Make a list of your good points
- Make a list of things or people you are grateful for



### Learn

- Learn something new
- Learn a new skill
- Learn a new fact
- Watch a tutorial video



### Mend

- Repair something in the house
- Repair your bike / car / scooter
- Make something new
- Change a lightbulb
- Decorate a room



### Mind

- Daydream
- Meditate
- Pray
- Reflect
- Think
- Try relaxation exercises
- Practise yoga



### Music

- Listen to music you like
- Find some new music to listen to
- Turn on the radio
- Make some music
- Sing a song
- Play an instrument
- Listen to a podcast



### Nature

- Try some gardening
- Plant something
- Do some pruning
- Mow the lawn
- Pick flowers
- Buy flowers
- Go for a walk in nature
- Sit in the sun



### Plan

- Set a goal
- Create a budget
- Make a 5 year plan
- Make a 'to do' list
- Make a 'bucket list'
- Make a shopping list



### Read

- Read a favourite book
- Read a new book
- Read the newspaper
- Read your favourite website



### Schedule

- Get up extra early
- Stay up late
- Sleep in late
- Tick something off your 'to do' list



### Self care

- Take a bath
- Take a shower
- Wash your hair
- Give yourself a facial
- Trim your nails
- Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!)
- Take a nap



### Try something new

- Try a new food
- Listen to some new music
- Watch a new TV show or movie
- Wear some new clothes
- Read a new book
- Do something spontaneous
- Express yourself



### Watch

- Watch a movie
- Watch a TV show
- Watch a YouTube video

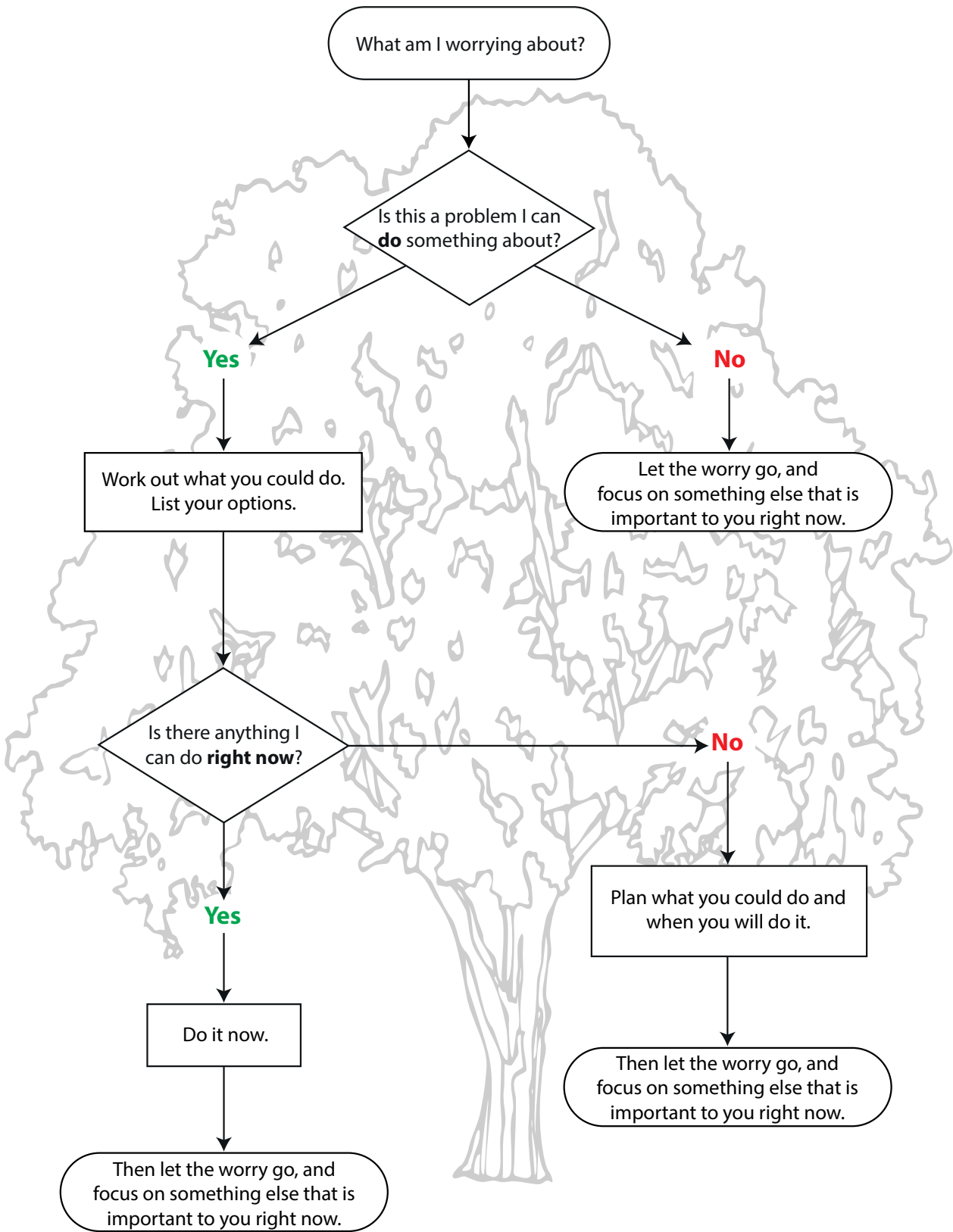


### Write

- Write a letter with compliments
- Write a letter to your politician
- Write an angry letter
- Write a grateful letter
- Write a 'thank you' card
- Write a journal / diary
- Write your CV
- Start writing a book



### Use This Decision Tree To Help You Notice 'Real Problem' Vs. 'Hypothetical Worry'



## Worry Postponement For Uncertain Times

Psychologists think that there are two types of worry:

- 1. Real problem worries** are about actual problems affecting you right now and which you can act on now.  
"My hands are dirty from gardening, I need to wash them", "I need to call my friend or she will think I have forgotten her birthday"  
"I can't find my keys", "I can't afford to pay this electricity bill", "My boyfriend isn't speaking to me".
- 2. Hypothetical worries** are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.  
"What if I die?", "What if everyone I know dies?", "Maybe this worrying is making me crazy"

People who are bothered by worry often experience it as *uncontrollable*, time consuming, and sometimes believe that it is beneficial to engage in worry when it occurs. Experimenting with postponing your worries – deliberately setting aside some time in your day to do nothing but worry and limiting the time you spend worrying – is a helpful way of exploring your relationship with worry. Follow the steps below for *at least* one week.

### Step 1: Preparation

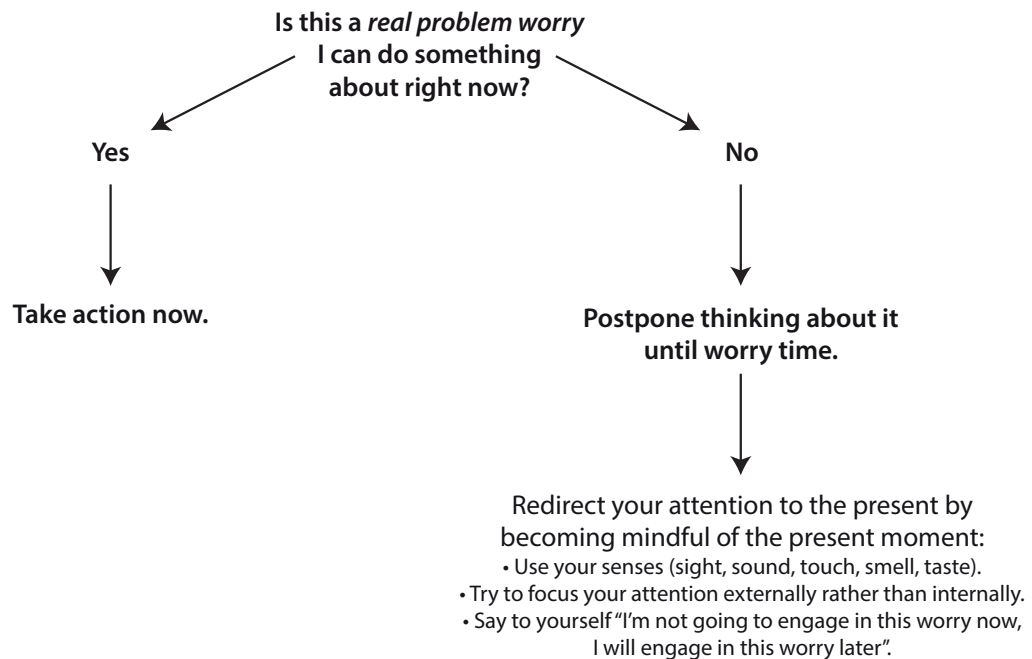
Decide **when** your worry time will be, and for **how long** it will be for.

- 'Worry time' is time you set aside every day for the specific purpose of worrying.
- What time of day do you think you will be in the best frame of mind to attend to your worries?
- When are you unlikely to be disturbed?
- If you are unsure, 15 to 30 minutes every day at 7:00pm is often a good starting point.



### Step 2: Worry postponement

During the day, decide whether worries that surface are 'real problem' worries you can act on now, or whether they are hypothetical worries that need to be postponed.



### Step 3: Worry time

Use your dedicated worry time for worrying. Consider writing down any of the hypothetical worries that you remember having had throughout the day. How concerning are they to you now? Are any of them the kinds of worries that can lead you to take practical actions?

- Try to use all of your allocated worry time, even if you do not feel that you have much to worry about, or even if worries do not seem as pressing at this time.
- Reflect upon your worries now – do they give you the same emotional 'kick' when you think about them now as they did when you first thought of them?
- Can any of your worries be converted into a practical problem to which you can look for a solution?



## Challenging Your Thoughts Compassionately During A Global Health Crisis

<p><b>Situation</b> Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?</p>	<p><b>Emotions &amp; body sensations</b> What did you feel? (Rate intensity 0–100%)</p>	<p><b>Automatic thought</b> What went through your mind? (Thoughts, images, or memories)</p>	<p><b>Compassionate response</b> What would a truly self-compassionate response be to your negative thought?</p>
		<p>If you had an image or memory, what did it mean to you?</p>	<p>Try to respond to yourself with the compassionate qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth, kindness, and non-judgement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would my best friend say to me?</li> <li>• What would a truly compassionate being say to me?</li> <li>• What tone of voice would I need to be talked to in order to feel reassured?</li> </ul>

## Some final tips

- **Set a routine.** If you are spending more time at home it is important to continue with a regular routine. Maintain a regular time for waking up and going to bed, eating at regular times, and getting ready and dressed each morning. You could use a timetable to give structure to your day.
- **Stay mentally and physically active.** When you plan your daily timetable, have a go at including activities that keep both your mind and body active. For example, you could try learning something new with an online course, or challenge yourself to learn a new language. It's also important to keep physically active. For example doing rigorous housework for 30 minutes, or an online exercise video.
- **Practice gratitude.** At times of uncertainty, developing a gratitude practice can help you to connect with moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure. At the end of each day, take time to reflect on what you are thankful for today. Try and be specific and notice new things each day, for example 'I am grateful that it was sunny at lunchtime so I could sit in the garden'. You could start a gratitude journal, or keep notes in a gratitude jar. Encourage other people in your home to get involved too.
- **Notice and limit worry triggers.** As the health situation develops it can feel like we need to constantly follow the news or check social media for updates. However, you might notice this also triggers your worry and anxiety. Try to notice what triggers your worry. For example, is it watching the news for more than 30 minutes? Checking social media every hour? Try to limit the time that you are exposed to worry triggers each day. You might choose to listen to the news at a set time each day, or you could limit the amount of time you spend on social media for news checking.
- **Rely on reputable news sources.** It can also help to be mindful of where you are obtaining news and information. Be careful to choose reputable sources. The World Health Organization provides excellent information here:  
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>