



## COPING WITH COVID-19

A short guide on dealing with stress and anxiety for  
air traffic controllers

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## GUIDANCE MATERIAL

IFATCA is the recognised international organisation representing air traffic controller associations. It is a non-political, not-for-profit, professional body that has been representing air traffic controllers for more than 50 years, and has more than 50,000 members in over 120 countries.

# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has developed into an unprecedented time of uncertainty for our profession. This will naturally provoke a variety of feelings that we are not generally used to experiencing in such a dramatic way. These may be of loss (financial or routine), worry (about loved ones and the future) and upset (future plans).

We are used to living in an ordered world both professionally and at home. Whereas there are many questions that are work and contract related, we wanted to focus on some preoccupations related to the wellbeing of our members.

Some may seem outwardly to accept these unusual times and continue to go about the day as if nothing had changed. Others will openly find adapting to a new reality challenging. Both are normal reactions in an exceptional context, in fact both may be examples of stress, anxiety, low mood, sadness and even depression.

The following information is a compilation of things to look out for in yourself and those around you. It highlights several techniques that you can use to mitigate negative feelings that may restrict our ability to cope with any rapidly evolving situation. It is not designed as an official educational tool. It may help you try different things. Please do click on the links, there is so much information available out there, that it is impossible to publish it all here in a meaningful way.

As air traffic controllers, we are particularly good at acting in the present moment. Our tasks require an intense thoughtful assessment which focuses on the actions to be carried out.

It should be noted, however, that there is a difference between acting in the present moment and living consciously in the present moment. Our professional faculties are very cerebral, which is essential to overcome the short term varied and intense emotional states which we often encounter.

In order to overcome the different situations that we are currently going through and will experience in the coming weeks, we can transfer this professional competence to our daily life. Each skill, each resource that we use in a defined context can be transferred to a different one; it is sometimes necessary to do it consciously when it is not done instinctively, hence the importance of training mindfulness voluntarily and regularly, starting with easy everyday acts.





# RECOGNISING SYMPTOMS



## Stress

Stress may affect how you behave, how you feel physically and mentally. It can be difficult to recognise that stress is the cause.

### Possible symptoms

- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Stomach issues
- Chest pain
- Difficulty concentrating
- Finding it difficult to make decisions
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Forgetting things
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Eating too much or too little
- Increased alcohol consumption
- Avoiding people or places



## Anxiety

Anxiety is a distinct condition and may be experienced either together with stress or completely independent from it.

### Possible symptoms

- Racing or irregular heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy
- Headaches
- Chest pain
- Feeling tense or nervous and unable to relax
- Feeling tearful
- Worrying about the past or future
- Difficulty in looking after yourself
- Worried about trying new things, problems concentrating and not being able to enjoy free-time



## Low Mood

A low mood usually improves after a short time period. If it lasts more than 2 weeks, it may be a sign of depression or at least require particular attention.

### Possible symptoms

- Feeling sad, anxious or panicky
- Being more tired than usual or not being able to sleep
- Angry or frustrated
- Experiencing low confidence or self-esteem
- Not getting enjoyment out of life
- Feeling hopeless
- Not being able to concentrate on everyday activities
- Having suicidal thoughts or thoughts about harming yourself.

Physical Changes

Mental Changes

Behavioral Changes

Source: Adapted from NHS.co.uk

# MIND FULL, OR MINDFUL?

It can be easy to rush through life without stopping to notice much. Paying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, to what is physically happening to your body, and to the world around you – can help your mental and emotional wellbeing.

Some people call this school of thought “mindfulness”.

By becoming aware of the different dimensions of our Being (behaviours, thoughts and emotions), we can then act on positive behaviours and / or thoughts in order to promote our well-being; our emotions will then evolve accordingly. To experience this, you can experience making yourself laugh, for example, and then thinking of a rather sad event. Just compare how your body physically reacts to your thoughts and how it influences your inner feelings. Your body is a fabulous “machine” that conveys many truths about your state of being in the present moment.

Fears, negative feelings and stress are very often linked to the uncertainties of the future. By fully living in the present moment, which normally proves to be without immediate real risk, bad feelings disappear to make way for favorable feelings, calm and lucidity that will allow us to better live current events.

The present moment consists of a fraction of a second; our life is made up of a chain of present moments. Although we often act here and now for a future result, living the present moment allows us to be fully involved in the action to be carried out and to give it one's full potential / attention . High-level athletes train and experience, for example, this state of perfection and well-being; we then say that they are in a “state of flow”.

In summary, mindfulness makes it possible to carry out, instant after instant, the best possible acts in our daily life to regularly reach the objectives that we set and which really correspond to our values and our personal needs.

Just like a physical gesture or the acquisition of intellectual knowledge, mindfulness can be trained; it is not a hereditary attribute or a flaw that one has or does not have, it is within the reach of everyone. The more we are used to living at a sustained pace of life, the more likely it is that training in mindfulness will require some sustained effort.





# SIMPLE WAYS TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

## Accept yourself

Treat yourself the way you would treat a good friend. Speak to yourself with words of comfort, advice or encouragement.

## Focus on your breathing

When you have negative thoughts, try to sit down, take a deep breath and close your eyes. Focus on your breath as it moves in and out of your body. Sitting and breathing for even just a minute can help.

## Take a step back

If the term “take a step back” is often used, the dimension it should take is often left out. In front of a given situation, imagine yourself, physically, leaving your body and looking at what is happening as if you were an observer of the scene. You are no longer emotionally involved but you notice what is happening. You will then probably have more lucidity to imagine what would be the ideal and constructive reaction that you would have as an adviser rather than an actor. Being your own advisor or friend helps you to detach yourself emotionally from the event.

You can also imagine yourself watching a film in a cinema, etc.

## Pay attention

It's hard to slow down and notice things in a busy world. Try to take the time to experience your environment with all of your senses — touch, sound, sight, smell and taste. For example, when you eat a favorite food, take the time to smell, taste and truly enjoy it.

## Live in the moment

Try to intentionally bring an open, accepting and discerning attention to everything you do. Find joy in simple pleasures.



# RESILIENCE

Resilience is the human ability to overcome hardship and resume life development without remaining emotionally trapped in past events.

It is obvious that in life you cannot change the course of events that have happened to you. But life is made up of 20% of what happened to you, and 80% of the way you react to it.

The first step to resilience consists in an objective vision of events, not to deny them; accept them and see them as they are rather than hope that they will disappear on their own. To be resilient, it is essential to recognize that certain events constitute difficulties, but that we have the resources to put in place the mechanisms to overcome them.

It is therefore a question of not positioning oneself as a victim of a situation, but on the contrary of taking responsibility for what one experiences and especially for how one experiences it and how one chooses to answer to. For this, the following components are particularly helpful and can develop in particular through the practice of mindfulness:

- Confidence and self-esteem
- Our ability to regulate our emotions
- Have dreams and projects to achieve
- Be flexible in the face of changes
- Surround yourself with positive people who encourage and support you
- Have an activity that allows you to focus on you breathing and on your body (yoga, martial art, running, completing a puzzle etc)
- Be grateful for what you have and not focus on what you don't have or would like to have. It is not only a question of having material things, but of what you experience inside you.


If the awareness of one's own responsibility in what one experiences is essential, that of being able to let go of what one cannot control is just as important. Letting go is letting something be what is and that we cannot change because it does not depend on us, on our skills or on the role that we take on in a group of individuals for example.

It is not the situation which creates suffering, but it is the resistance which is opposed to it which is its generator.

To be resilient, it is essential to focus on what is going on in yourself (emotions, thoughts, etc.) and on what you can act accordingly to continue to advance in a fulfilled way in your life.

Source: Adapted from Conférence Caroline Codsi





# ANXIETY COPING MECHANISMS

## **Understand your anxiety**

For many of us, the uncertainty of how the situation will develop is the hardest thing to handle. Air Traffic Controllers are used to be in charged and this is a situation we have little to no control over. That makes it all too easy to catastrophize and spiral out into overwhelming dread and panic. But there are many things you can do—even in the face of this unique crisis—to manage your anxiety and fears.

## **Stay informed but don't obsess**

It's vital to stay informed, particularly about what is happening close to you and so you can follow the advice of local authorities to help slow the spread of coronavirus. But stick to trustworthy sources such as the World Health Organization and your local public health authorities. Limit how often you check for updates. Consider limiting yourself to a specific time (e.g. thirty minutes each evening). Ask someone reliable to share important updates, rather than trying to navigate the information yourself. And be careful what you share: try to verify information before passing it on.


## **Focus on the things you can control**

Many of us turn to searching the Internet for answers. With the amount of information however, it gets you nowhere other than feeling drained, anxious, and overwhelmed.

If you feel this is happening, try to shift your focus to things you can control. You can take steps to reduce your own personal risk (and the risk you'll unknowingly spread it to others) by following the recommendations given by local authorities.

## **Plan for what you can**

Being proactive can help relieve at least some of the anxiety. This pandemic has affected people's routines and it can help to try and re-establish as much of a routine as possible. Plan your day. Focus on concrete things you can problem solve or change, rather than circumstances beyond your control.



## ANXIETY COPING MECHANISMS

### How to stop “what-ifs” from spiraling

If you feel yourself start to spin out into negativity or panic, bring your attention to your breath and your body. Focus all of your attention on the here and now: noticing the sights, sounds, and smells around you and what you’re feeling in your body. Continue to breath slowly in and out—gently bringing your mind back to your body and breath every time it drifts—until you feel more calm.

### Stay connected

In many countries, people are told to stay indoors as much as possible. Such isolation can exacerbate anxiety and depression, and even impact our physical health. Make it a priority to stay in touch with friends and family. Think about scheduling regular (video) calls.

Social media can be a powerful tool for staying in touch with friends, family, and acquaintances but be aware of its pitfalls: do not hesitate to filter certain keywords or people that feed your anxiety. Log off if it’s making you feel worse.

In conversations, do not let coronavirus dominate. Take breaks from stressful thoughts about the pandemic to simply enjoy each other’s company—to laugh, share stories, and focus on other things going on in our lives.

### Emotions are contagious

Avoid talking about the virus with people who tend to be negative or who reinforce and ramp up your fears. Turn to the people in your life who are thoughtful, level-headed, and good listeners. If possible, check whether your CISM program can help or turn to a helpline in your country if you are more comfortable taking to an anonymous person.

### Take care of your body and spirit

The tried-and-true stress management strategies apply, such as eating healthy meals, getting plenty of sleep, and meditating.

Maintain a routine as best you can. Even if you’re stuck at home, try to stick to your regular sleep, school, meal, or work schedule. This can help you maintain a sense of normalcy.

Take time out for activities you enjoy. Read a good book, watch a comedy, play a fun board or video game, make something—whether it’s a new recipe, a craft, or a piece of art. It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as it takes you out of your worries.

Get out in nature, if possible. Sunshine and fresh air will do you good. Even a walk around your neighborhood can make you feel better. Just be sure to avoid crowds, keep your distance from people you encounter, and obey restrictions in your area.



Find ways to exercise. Staying active will help you release anxiety, relieve stress, and manage your mood. While the gym and group classes are out, you can still cycle, hike, or walk. Or if you're stuck at home, look online for exercise videos you can follow. There are many things you can do even without equipment, such as yoga and exercises that use your own bodyweight.

Avoid self-medicating. Be careful that you're not using alcohol or other substances to deal with anxiety or depression. If you tend to overdo it in the best of times, it may be a good idea to avoid for now.

Take up a relaxation practice. When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga can bring you back into a state of equilibrium. Regular practice delivers the greatest benefits, so see if you can set aside even a little time every day.


## **Help others**

Even when you're self-isolating or maintaining social distance, there's still plenty you can do to help others. It will make you feel better and will give you back a sense of control and purpose.

## **Be kind to others.**

An infectious disease is not connected to any racial or ethnic group, so speak up if you hear negative stereotypes that only promote prejudice. With the right outlook and intentions, we can all ensure that kindness and charity spread throughout our communities even faster than this virus.

Source: Adapted from [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)



**ANXIETY  
COPING  
MECHANISMS**

## About this guide

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