

COPING WITH CORONAVIRUS WHEN YOU HAVE AN EATING DISORDER



Managing life when you have an eating disorder can be a full-time job. Change, and high levels of anxiety can make it harder than ever to cope. On top of this, we are now in the middle of something that we could not have predicted a couple of months ago and feelings of being out of control, of fear or anxiety, and other difficult emotions can threaten to tip those struggling with food and eating, backwards, into unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Eating disorders can often be about controlling anxiety; eating or not eating can be thought of as a coping strategy. In a time when we don't know what might happen next, when we are instructed to stay in our home and when we fear ourselves or our loved-ones becoming ill, when we might not feel safe or when we are isolated from the world, feeling in control is not an easy state of mind to maintain.

These things may threaten many of us with anxiety issues but there is one, further, particular reason that people with eating disorders might be finding the coronavirus situation extremely difficult to manage. People with eating disorders can experience feelings of unworthiness or of thinking that they don't deserve food, or feelings of guilt around eating. While the Coronavirus crisis is causing some people to panic buy food and there are apparent shortages of some items in supermarkets, it can be very triggering.

People may feel that others deserve the available food more than they do and fall back into 'eating disorder' behaviours. The current media stories about stripped supermarket shelves and pictures of elderly people or NHS staff struggling to get what they need can make this worse. Other sufferers may feel fear that their 'safe' foods may not be available, and this too can feel very alarming. For people who binge eat, there may be feelings of panic or being out of control or, crucially, fear that food may be unavailable.

All of these factors might mean that people with eating disorders may be really struggling at the moment as they try to manage their illness in these difficult days and weeks ahead.

For those with eating disorders, the most important thing to remember is that your needs deserve to be met and that you will need to practice all the self-care actions that you have learned to help you cope during this difficult time.

SWEDA Tips for staying well

- * **Follow the governments advice for keeping physically well** especially if you have a significantly low or high BMI. Although having an eating disorder doesn't necessarily mean you have a weakened immune system, it is sensible to take the precautions asked of you.
- * **Avoid 'fake news'** – there is lots of it about. Get your information from trusted sites such as the NHS, Public Health England or news sites known to be reliable.
- * **Limit the time that you listen to news about Coronavirus.** Choose one trusted news programme or source and check it once per day. If social media is triggering your anxiety, consider limiting this too – see below about having a **routine**.
- * **Allow yourself some 'worry time' each day** – perhaps ask a trusted person to speak with you for half an hour or so each day so you can go through some of your concerns. If your worries or anxieties are rising up outside of this time, perhaps write them down ready to discuss later on.

- * **Remember that your concerns and your illness are still important during this time** – you are allowed to have worries, concerns and fears – this is not selfish; to acknowledge and accept how you feel is a great way of coming to terms with those feelings.
- * **Try to maintain a routine that works for you** – that includes some aspects of work or study, rest and enjoyment. If you feel it would help, write this down or draw a timetable
 - ♦ Think about the basic things you must do each day, then add in things you would like to do. Don't overload the plan and remember you are allowed to be flexible. Include time for relaxation and pleasure. These are important too.
 - ♦ Try to get up and go to bed at the same time that you usually would
 - ♦ If you struggle with over-exercising, build what you will do into your plan and acknowledge that this might be challenging for you.
 - ♦ Perhaps make a list of people you would like to speak to and set aside some time each day to talk to friends and family,
- * **Continue to work with a meal plan** – if this is your usual practice or consider going back to using one if you are struggling – it may be more important than ever to organise your mealtimes.
- * **Keep in touch with your healthcare team if at all possible.** You may be offered telephone or online replacement appointments. This might feel like it won't help in the same way, but you will likely benefit from using any help that is offered. Try to find out how your team plan to manage your care over the next few weeks and months. SWEDA is also open and can be contacted using the details below.
- * **Make a list of your own 'Red Flags'** that you know mean things are getting unmanageable and make a plan with a trusted person about what you will do if you need to take action – SWEDA are still open to support anyone affected by eating disorders and may be able to support you by phone or online. See our website for more details.
- * **Look for useful Apps** – such as Headspace, Calm or other mindfulness or mental health apps to add to your self-care routine.
- * **Above all practise self-compassion and be kind to yourself** – these are actions that can be very hard for people with eating disorders but try the skill of imagining what you might say to your most-loved person in the same situation. There is a part of you that will be able to hear these positive and loving messages.

Here at **SWEDA** we are doing our best to try and support anyone who needs it so please do get in touch in any of the following ways if you need help:

Phone: 01749 343344

Email: support@swedauk.org

Website: www.swedauk.org