

Our Kirst-Aid Kit- Coping during this difficult time!

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Hi Everyone!!

My name is Marina Lynch and I have been in CDYS in Macroom for 2 years now. I work as a psychotherapist here, helping to support adults and teenagers with everyday challenges. My main area of speciality is trauma so I work a lot with people who have experienced very difficult times in their childhood or as an adult.

I do believe that the current situation with the Covid-19 virus is proving to be very difficult for us all - I myself had a proper freak out last Saturday after the last announcement!

For some people though the current situation is going to be more difficult than others. It is a traumatising time and so if you have survived very difficult experiences in the past, this time might raise very serious anxiety, panic or depression. Your brain, body and nervous system are more vigilant than others' and most probably always on the look out for danger. If so please remember that there is nothing abnormal about that or you! What is happening now is that your mind and body are doing an amazing thing- they are jumping into action to protect you! So try to see it that way, be proud that your nervous system is working exactly as it should- you are having a very normal response to an abnormal situation...and you will be ok, you will get through this as you've gotten through other difficult times!

Having said that I can understand how difficult it is for you to feel overwhelmed, to feel constant anxiety, and/or panic and depression. So we're going to work together to help calm your brain, body and nervous system, to tell it that you're not actually in immediate danger (if we stay inside and take precautions :))

Over the next week or so I will try to give you a few tips to help you get through this very strange and often difficult time. Everything I suggest to you is has been really helpful to me in my own personal life when I have

struggled, it has helped the clients I work with everyday, it has been proven by research and as such been suggested by top international psychologists and psychotherapists. I have put a little number next to different topics and at the end of this there will be a corresponding name which you can look up if you want to find out more about any of the topics.

So first of all we're going to look at thoughts and how they can be a friend or foe.

Dealing with Thoughts and Worry

- **Keep an eye on your thoughts-** remember you do have some control over your thoughts and with practice you can get full control over them.

If your thoughts are negative they will frighten the Amygdala! ^{1 & 2}

Little neurobiology lesson- don't be scared!!

The amygdala is part of the limbic part of our brain, which is often called the emotional brain. This part of the brain is very important in setting about the fight or flight response- which is now known as fight, flight, freeze, feign death or faint reaction ². When our senses- our eyes, ears, touch, smell, detect danger in our environment a signal goes to the brain. If it seems very dangerous the signal by-passes the rational, thinking part of our brain called the neo-cortex, and goes straight to the amygdala which helps set a chain of reactions, leading eventually to hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline being sent around our bodies to help us to fight or flee etc. When signals by-pass the neo-cortex we don't always act rationally, we act quickly without thinking, we act on emotions, not necessarily on good sense.

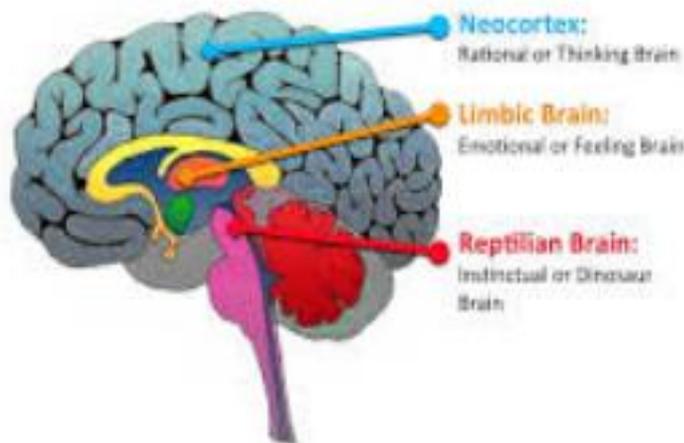


Figure 1

This is very beneficial if we really are in danger and need to act quickly, like being chased by an angry dog or jumping out of the way of an on-coming car, but often our bodies go into this response when there may not be any need. As useful as these hormones are, they can cause us to feel stressed when they hang around too long- up to 2 hours in fact! They cause bodily reactions like heart beating faster, breathing faster or maybe struggling for breath in panic, muscles tight, body clenched. This is great in danger but not so much when it keeps happening without danger!

Where thoughts come in!

As well as the signal that comes to our amygdala (little guy shaped like an almond, in the limbic system or our brain) through our senses, another important signal comes to the amygdala through our thoughts. So if we have a thought and it's a negative one, one which concentrates on danger, that thought will be sent as a message to the amygdala and cause a similar response which seeing a lion would- a reaction takes place for adrenaline and cortisol to be sent out around our bodies to help us fight, flight etc. *Because the body is reacting in fight or flight or faint, a signal will then go back to your brain through the vagus nerve³ telling the brain that there is danger and the whole thing will begin again and continue like a loop!*

So its really important to grab a hold of those thoughts and avoid the body going into this reaction needlessly!

When you're struggling to control the thoughts, because your head feels like a washing machine, a good idea is to just allow yourself come back to the present moment, because the present moment is so often more safe than the scenarios we create in our thoughts. Mindfulness Meditation can be extremely helpful here! ⁴

Bringing ourselves back to the present moment-

- 1- *Look around you and notice things that you see- name 5 things you see*
- 2- *Pause and listen- name 4 things you can hear*
- 3- *Reach out and touch something- name 3 things you can touch- what do they feel like??*
- 4- *Taste- name 2 things you can taste- toothpaste, chocolate, fruit maybe*
- 5- *Eat something and focus on the taste, the texture*
- 6- *Drink something nourishing, notice what it tastes like, its temperature, hot or cold etc.*
- 7- *Do maths in your head! - it engages the neo-cortex*
- 8- *Focus on a part of your body which feels safe, place your hand there and focus your breath there*
- 9- *Look to find someone you care about, in your house or on the phone*

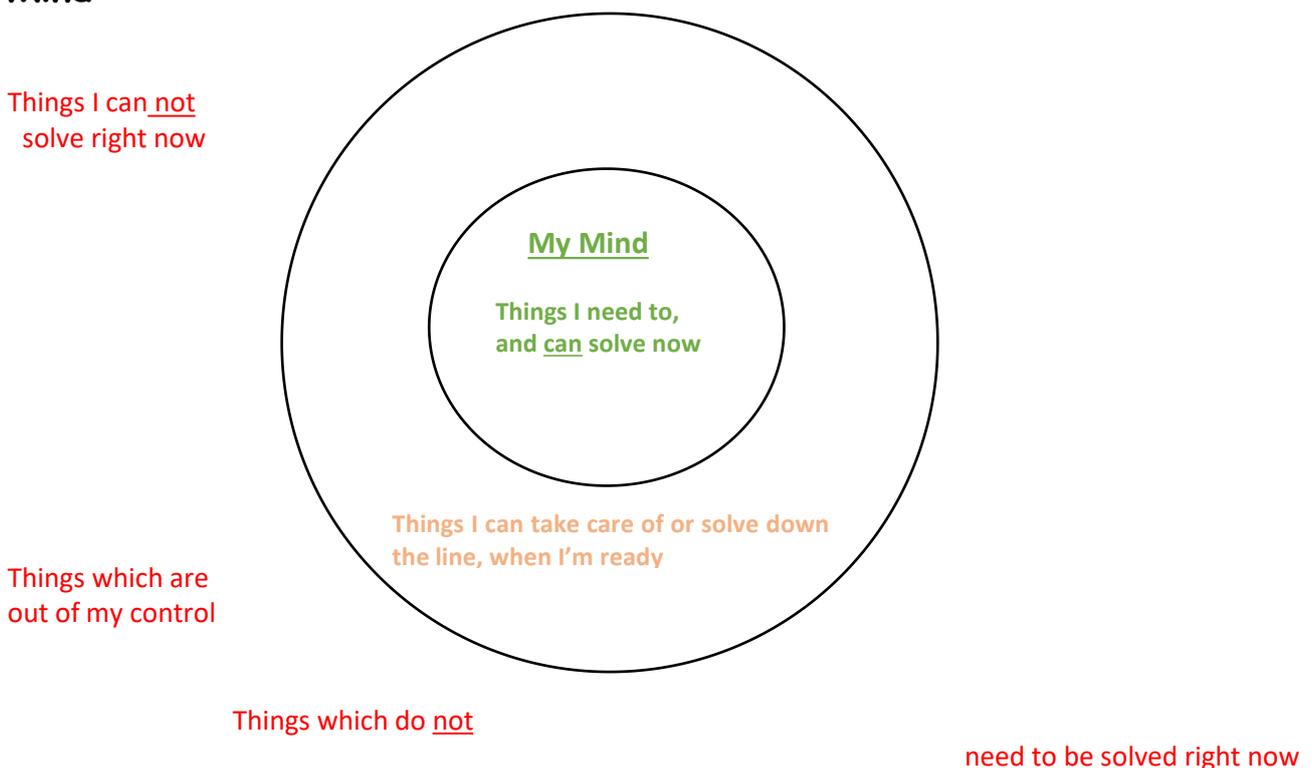
➤ Finding the positives

Remember- as humans we have a negative bias ⁵- that means our brain will often focus on the negative or on the worst case scenario- it has been doing this since we lived in caves and were prey to bigger animals- it does this to allow us to always spot the danger and keep us safe. Unfortunately our brains haven't caught up with the fact that we are much safer now than when huge sabre tooth tigers were chasing us. For those of us who have experienced trauma our brains and nervous systems are even more vigilant and really look out for danger- sometimes when there is no real danger.

So, especially at a scary time like this, we have to make an effort to notice and focus on the positives ⁶. I promise you that we get better at this with practice, so keep practising! It doesn't have to be huge, just something small to make us feel a little lighter, to help us smile a little, to give us hope in a time that feels a bit hopeless.

Did you hear about someone on the radio helping someone, did your child say something silly or funny? Did someone in your life show or say that they cared about you? Is there some blue in the sky today? All these things we will miss if we're not looking to find them, so lets start looking!

Another way to help us with our thoughts is an exercise I call 'Mind your Mind'



As you can see from the diagram 'Minding your Mind' simply means being very careful about what we allow into our mind at any given time, especially right now when things are so difficult. If we have a worry which is about something in the distant future we choose to allow that worry float away (don't push it out as pushing it away only makes it stronger!) and instead we focus on what is important in our lives right now. Then we ask - does thinking about this situation help me, is it...

'Helpful worry'?

Or is it 'Unhelpful worry'?

If thinking about the situation helps us find a solution then that's great, we can allow that into our mind, but if it is just an unhelpful worry that goes around and around without finding a solution then we allow that thought or worry just float away like a cloud, or a twig passing us in a stream.

The aim is to allow our minds be as free as possible, not carrying extra baggage that is not important right now, because right now we have enough baggage to carry.

➤ **'Worrying well' ⁷**

This means turning worry into a positive thing.

Imagine, using all your senses, when you come out of this- how good it is going to be. Imagine yourself smiling and happy. This is quite difficult to do when something is so worrying (it feels counter-intuitive) but again with practise it gets easier. The logic is: if you can't change a situation anyway then at least with positive imagery you allow positive and happy hormones go around around your body which calm us instead of the stress, fight or flight ones like adrenaline.

Look forward to coming our the other side but all the while reassure yourself that you are doing really well right now and you are capable of handling this situation while it lasts..

➤ **This is a very difficult time- Interpretation of this time**

The most scary and traumatising thing for human beings, and all mammals in fact, is restraint, (which means being held down against our will) and also isolation (being on our own, without other humans) ^{3 & 8}. So this time of social isolation could be a

very difficult and scary time for all of us. We need freedom to feel safe and we need contact with others to feel safe, cared for and not alone.

So- tips for coping to help us feel safe-

Interpretation of our current situation-

How we interpret what we are being told to do at the moment will have a huge impact on our minds and bodies and can be the difference between being very stressed or coping well. Remember to keep a positive outlook and interpretation of our situation.

For example the government is 'urging' us to stay home and they are doing this to keep us safe. It would be very easy to interpret the government and the Gardaí as oppressing us and restraining us but the truth and the safer version is that they are advising us to stay in the safety of our own homes for a period of time until it is safe to go back out. We are making a choice to comply and go along with this so we are still very much in control- we are choosing to do this to keep ourselves and our families safe. We will look soon at how movement & exercise can help us feel less restrained! ⁸

-To keep us from feeling isolated

Yes it is difficult not being able to see and be close to some of our loved ones at the moment but let's try to enjoy the contact we are able to have with them, while keeping them and ourselves safe. There are so many ways to have contact, by phone, Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp video call- so let's get creative.

We do need our own time at home at the moment and the house may feel very small with a lot of people in it but do try to make time for each other and support each other in your home.

All these things might seem too difficult to do but just try to make a start on any one of them whenever you feel you can. Try to have one positive thought among all the negatives- and then build on it. I promise you that with practice this becomes much easier. When your body calms and your brain feels it, then the rational, intelligent part of the brain (neo-cortex) kicks in and make it much easier to think more clearly and positively ^{1 & 2}

Next time we'll do some things to help calm ourselves when we feel overwhelmed by emotions, we'll start calming our bodies and in turn our minds... and create a calm, happier loop!

If you need support with this, ask your project worker and if you're still struggling tell your project worker and maybe we can organise for me to give you a call at some stage to help you along.

Good luck and kind wishes, Marina :)

References

Figure 1- Look up Paul MacLean Triune Brain Theory-(criticised for its simplicity but very useful to undertand basics of stress cycle)

- 1- Look up Dan Siegal,
- 2- Janina Fisher
- 3- Look up Stephen Porges
- 4- Look up Jon Kabat-Zinn, Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield- at the moment these three people have put free meditations on YouTube to specifically help us through the difficulty of Covid-19 Virus

Jon Kabat- Zinn- https://youtu.be/r2efOoRF_pw

Tara Brach- https://youtu.be/M7A2UZ_6T_8 Brach

Jack Kornfield- <https://youtu.be/5W74o1p8Nmc>

There are lots of free Mindfulness and other meditation videos and supports on YouTube as well as free apps to download.

5- Look up Ron Hanson

6- Look up Christine Padesky

7- Look up Martin L. Rossman

8- Look up Bessel van der Kolk