



Potential signs of deteriorating mental health

Not an exhaustive list and not necessarily a confirmation. Remember, we are not psychiatrists or psychologists. Professional help should be sought for any significant worries.

One widely recognised visualisation is the concept of the stress container. Everyone has one and stresses flow into it. If the container overflows then problems can develop. People with a low vulnerability to stress have a larger container and vice versa. It isn't possible to prevent stresses flowing into the container as this happens via life events. But it is possible to let the stresses out of the container by learning and adopting helpful coping methods. The following are among the signs that the stresses in the container may be building up to unhealthy levels.

In the interests of time I will focus on the more common mental health problems of depression and anxiety. In practice it is often seen that both conditions present at the same time. These are some of the potential warning signs of depression:

- An unusually sad mood that does not go away. Sadness and depression are often used interchangeably as if they were the same thing. They are not. The key element to watch out for is how long the feeling persists. Feelings which last for more than 2 weeks are something to watch out for
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Lack of energy and tiredness. This in itself can lead to loss of enjoyment of activities
- Poor self-esteem or a loss of confidence
- Feeling guilty about situations which a reasonable observer would not fault you for
- Difficulty in concentrating or making decisions
- Having difficulty in getting to sleep, staying asleep or sleeping too much
- Loss of interest in food or eating too much
- Bleak and pessimistic views of the future
- Having suicidal thoughts or thinking the world would be better off without you
- Feeling emotionally blunted
- Feeling anxious, irritable, angry or over-reacting to situations
- A perception of loss of control over emotions.

People with depression may look and act depressed or anxious or they may not. Particularly with milder cases the person will often attempt to hide the depression from others and may be successful at that. The signs and symptoms can also vary between men and women. For example men are more likely to try to hide the condition with overuse of alcohol which

shows up as a dependency. On further diagnosis the true problem then emerges. The list I have outlined today clearly has a lot of potential signals on it but the key thing to remember is to seek professional help if you are identifying with more of them than you would like. A negative thought system links many of them.

Anxiety and depression are very different mental health conditions, but they can often occur together. One key difference between the two is that symptoms of anxiety can be much more physical in nature. They can include:

- Palpitations, chest pain, rapid heartbeat or flushing
- Hyperventilation
- Dizziness, sweating, headache, tingling or numbness
- Choking, dry mouth, nausea, more frequent trips to the bathroom
- Muscle aches and pains especially neck, shoulders and lower back
- Restlessness, tremor or shaking.

However, anxiety also has psychological and behavioural effects. These can include:

- Excessive fear or worry about past and future events
- Mind racing or going blank
- Decreased concentration and memory
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Irritability, impatience or anger
- Confusion
- Restlessness or feeling on edge
- Tiredness, sleep disturbances and vivid dreams
- Unwanted, unpleasant and repetitive thoughts.

Clearly some of these overlap with symptoms of depression but since the two conditions are different it is important not to make assumptions about one or the other without seeking medical help. Anxiety can be socially debilitating. It can make people avoid situations, experience distress in them or have an urge to escape situations that cause discomfort. It can also lead to repetitive compulsive behaviour. There are many types of anxiety disorder but Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive disorder are among the more common.

The NHS has an online Mood Self-Assessment tool which can be found on their website and which we will post a link to on our upcoming Mental Health page on the DP Covid-19 response webpage. By all means take the test but please remember there is no substitute for professional medical advice if it is required.

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mood-self-assessment/>

Good and bad habits to maintain Mental Health

Good habits (not an exhaustive list)

Good mental health habits are habits and routines you can implement to maintain and improve your mental health. Remember the stress container. Examples include:

- Eat a balanced diet. It is well known our gut bacteria synthesise around 95% of the serotonin the brain uses to regulate mood and activity
- Exercise regularly
- Go outside – sunlight and fresh air are mood enhancers and also help with vitamin D production
- Stay hydrated
- Laugh more – it doesn't really matter what you are laughing at – within reason!
- Sleep well – the brain actually repairs itself during sleep
- Practice meditation
- Maintain good posture – another example of the physical linking with mental
- Take a break from technology. All technology!
- Keep a journal of your thoughts to help identify triggers and behaviour patterns
- Talk about it with people who care for you
- Get a pet. Not suitable for everyone but a possibility for some. Even a goldfish will do!
- Stop multi-tasking – it is exhausting and over-rated
- Consult a doctor and get a professional opinion. This is incredibly important as early intervention can dramatically shorten recovery times and improve outcomes.

Bad habits (not an exhaustive list)

Bad mental health habits are behaviours that have a negative effect on the way we think or the way we feel about ourselves. Examples include:

- Perfectionism
- Lack of exercise
- Excess and uncontrolled stress
- Anger
- Overuse of a smartphone
- Overuse of social media
- Procrastination, which can lead to 'last minute' behaviour and more stress
- Co-dependency and maintaining toxic relationships
- Poor sleep
- Poor or unbalanced diet
- Overuse of alcohol or other substances
- Buying things you don't need.

It stands to reason that it can sometimes be harder to break a bad habit than start or maintain a good one. Some of the examples I have listed may even seem strange or counterintuitive, such as shopping less. But knowing what the unhelpful behaviours are and working towards eradicating them will have a beneficial impact on mental health.

How do I seek advice from a professional?

- Check whether your benefits have an Employee Assistance Program, some of these can provide access to counselling services.
- There are tools available via the NHS mental health and wellbeing advice website including a self-assessment that can be accessed [here](#). Every Mind Matters also provides tips and advice. [Every Mind Matters](#)
- Further assistance can be sought through [NHS 111 Online](#)
- Access to counselling can also be sought through therapist directories accessible through counselling professional organisations websites [BACP](#) and [NCS](#)
- Charities also offering support are [Anxiety UK](#) and [Mind](#)

How can I come to terms with the current crisis and how it is making me feel?

- What I can tell you is that what ever you're feeling, you're okay to feel it. It doesn't mean you are weak, it doesn't make you less, if anything it makes you more human.
- Turia is an Australian athlete and now motivational speaker who sadly got caught in a bushfire and suffered burns to 65 percent of her body. She shared a powerful quote on when she faces negative thoughts and how she deals with it, she says:
“Be kind to yourself, be easy on yourself. You are a human, and it’s okay to have feelings, and if you’re going through adversity, just take the pressure off and just take it really slowly, day by day or even hour by hour. So today, please don’t judge yourself for feeling a negative emotion. Allow the emotion to happen and be kind to yourself when it does. Say to yourself yeah you’re right this is overwhelming but whatever happens I have the inner resources to deal with any situation that comes my way. I am going to be okay.”
- If you're feeling down and unable to motivate yourself, try doing what I did, I found that reading quotes from inspirational leaders and inspirational people helped me come to terms with the current crisis and how I was feeling.
- A coping strategy I've found incredibly useful is talking. I work in financial services recruitment so I interact daily with clients and candidates and with every conversation I have with someone I always ask if they are safe and if they are well. All of a sudden people drop their professional persona and become human, they share intel around their current situation, their thoughts on the virus and how they're coping and it's a great way to have a normal conversation with someone who's probably thinking the same as you or feeling the same so I can't stress enough the power of talking.