

HOW SETTING ASIDE SOME 'WORRY TIME' CAN HELP REDUCE ANXIETY OVER COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS



The Conversation

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It's no surprise that many New Zealanders are feeling anxious, disappointed and even angry about the return of COVID-19 in the community.

Many of us prefer to suppress these emotions because they are unpleasant or we may feel under-equipped to manage them. But if left unrecognised and unchecked, they will drive our behaviour.

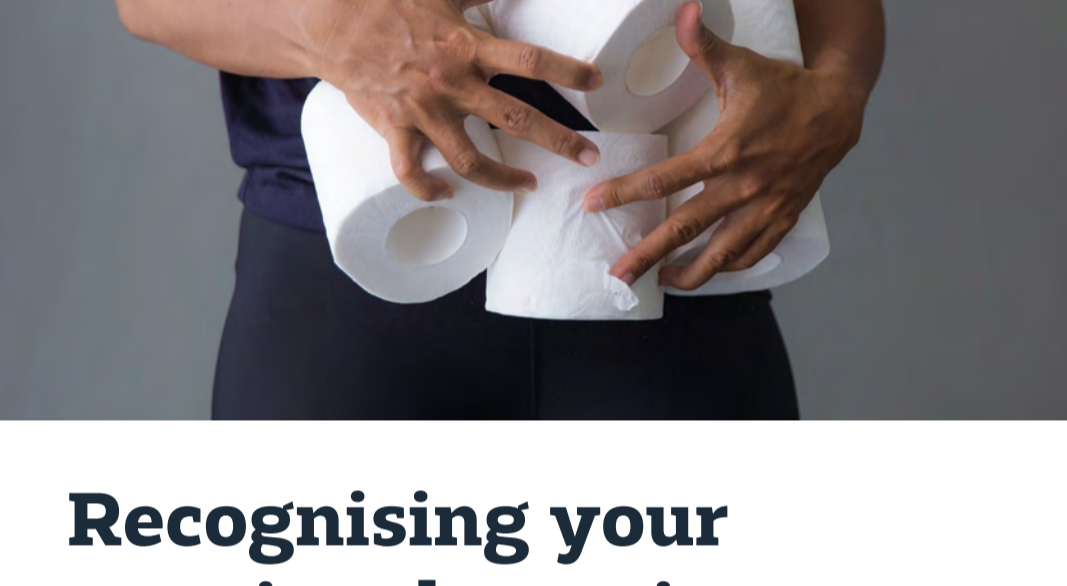


A heightened level of worry keeps us in a state of “flight or fight” — the evolutionary system that drives our response to fear.

We may act without thinking clearly and rush to the supermarket to stock up. We may lash out verbally or physically at those we see as threatening us. Or we may fall too easily for social media posts that give us a sense of relief, even if we're not sure about their accuracy.

Times of heightened anxiety are fertile breeding grounds for conspiracy theories, especially among those with low levels of trust in the government.

Anxiety and anger are normal reactions during uncertain times. We experience these emotions when we feel under threat, but the simple act of acknowledging them can ease their intensity.



Recognising your emotional reaction

Research New Zealand has been conducting regular polls of New Zealanders since the first lockdown in March and April. Results show heightened levels of concern about health, losing a job and the economy in general. The most recent poll also shows New Zealanders were worried about a new outbreak.

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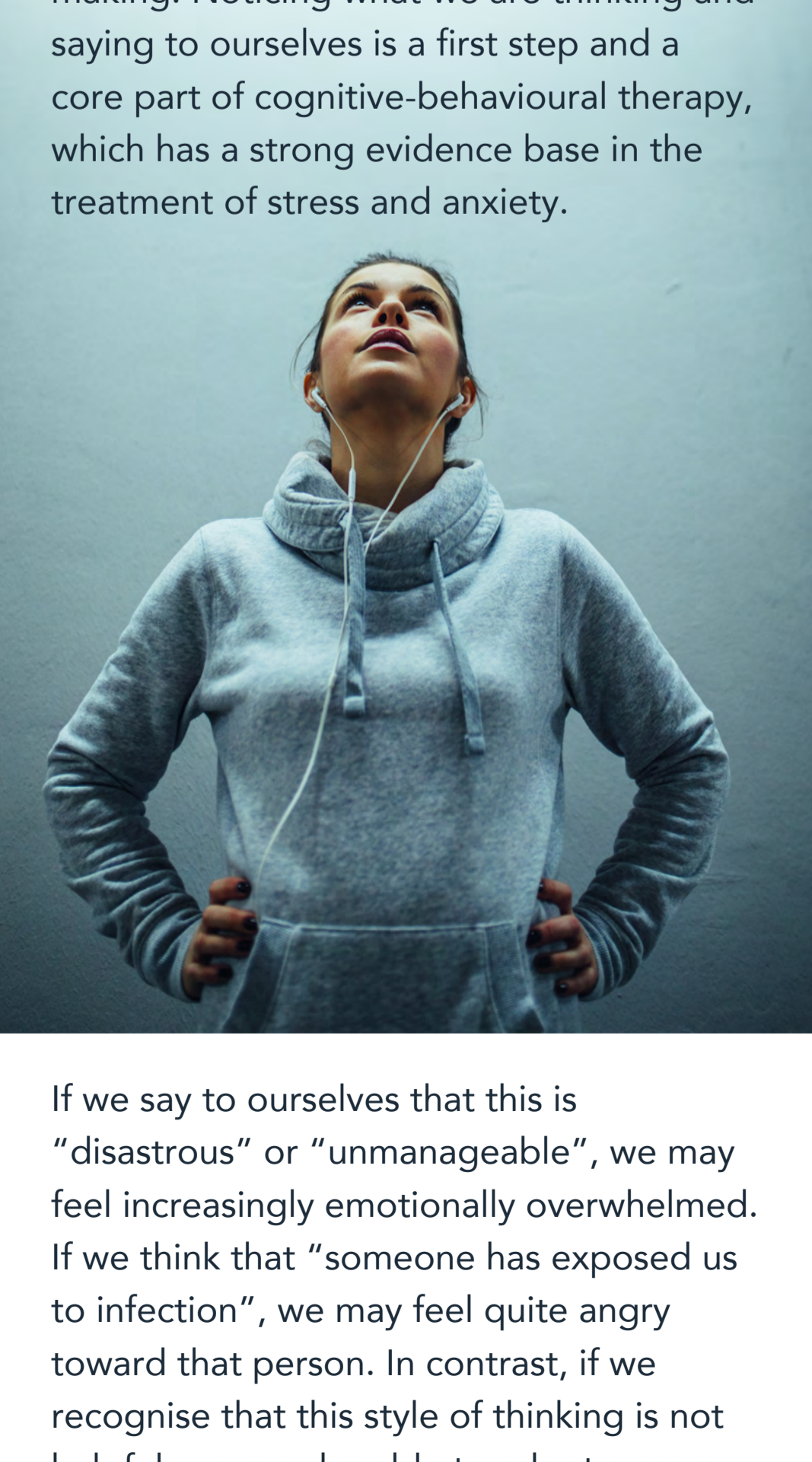
But if we pause to notice what we're feeling, even correctly labelling our emotional state can reduce the intensity of these feelings.



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The regular practice of mindfulness, best described as deliberately paying attention to the present moment, has been shown to help reduce the reactivity of our flight or fight system. Physical activity helps to dampen our physiological symptoms of anxiety, and diaphragmatic or belly breathing is a simple but effective means of doing this.

Once we've gained some measure of regulation of our emotional state, we are better able to engage our prefrontal cortex in planning, reasoning and decision making. Noticing what we are thinking and saying to ourselves is a first step and a core part of cognitive-behavioural therapy, which has a strong evidence base in the treatment of stress and anxiety.



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If we think that “someone has exposed us to infection”, we may feel quite angry toward that person. In contrast, if we recognise that this style of thinking is not helpful, we may be able to adopt a more balanced view of the situation.

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