

# Dealing with COVID19

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Written by:  
Rebekah Cooper – General Practitioner  
Samantha Harding - Physiotherapist  
Shelley Hall – Clinical Psychologist

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## **Disclaimer:**

Please note that information and protocols around COVID – 19 are rapidly evolving. The information in this booklet is accurate on 5 January 2021. Please always check with your doctor or on the NICD webpage for the latest guidelines.

## **Introduction**

Last year In July/August we had our first wave of Corona or COVID 19. Then things calmed down for a little while and now it is back. With a vengeance. So we have revised and updated this booklet to help you as we face a tsunami of a second wave.

And please do not think that things are not in a bad state. They are. The hospitals are full and the ICU's are full and healthcare workers are struggling to keep up.

### **Tribute to hospital workers**

When we think of healthcare workers who are fighting COVID 19 we often think of the doctors and nurses in casualty or the ward or ICU. And make no mistake, they have worked incredibly hard, they have sacrificed so much and are exposed all the time. They really are risking their health to help those who are ill and they can not be thanked enough.

But there are others who deserve recognition, who deserve thanks and praise. The physios, dietitians, pharmacists and social workers who go around the wards and treat the patients. The unit managers and matrons who work tirelessly sorting out beds; moving patients around and trying to spread the resources as far as they will go. They have a very tough job. Then there are the maintenance staff; security staff; cleaning staff; kitchen staff and laundry staff. All these people go about, quietly doing their jobs and they too are exposed to COVID, they too risk their health.

Lastly, our thanks to the family members of all who are involved in treating COVID patients. Thank you for your patience, thank you for looking after children or the home. Thank you for not minding the longer hours, the increased risk, the exhaustion and emotion we come home with.

# **New Developments**

## **1) New Strain**

A new strain or variant of the pathogen which causes COVID 19 has been discovered. The virus has mutated. We do not know much about it at the moment but it seems to have a higher viral load which means that it is more easily spread which could explain the rapid spread of this second wave.

We do not know if the new strain makes people sicker than the original virus or if people who have had COVID can be re infected with the new strain. We do know that the same prevention strategies will curb the spread. And we know that the same treatment is helping.

## **2) Vaccines**

There have been a few vaccines which have been developed over the last year. The most well known of which are the Oxford AstroZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccine work by injecting a small amount of synthesized corona mRNA into a person. This mRNA causes a few cells to make the spike protein, so our body reacts to those cells and cell memory is formed. Therefore our immune system can recognize and fight the virus if one is infected. This is a new way of vaccinating and before now, no other mRNA vaccine was on the market.

The Oxford Astrozeneca vaccine uses DNA of a chimpanzee adenovirus with the DNA for the spike protein added. This is injected into someone, it enters their cells but cannot replicate. The immune cells then recognize the virus DNA in these cells and respond to it and a cell memory is formed. DNA vaccines are also new and no others exist on the market.

All vaccines are showing good results in studies and seem to work very well. However it is worth noting that all the vaccines have been fast tracked for emergency registration. It usually takes 5 to 10 years for a vaccine to be developed, studied and registered.

Other practical factors are the cost of the vaccine and the storage and distribution – all the vaccines need to be kept at minus temperatures. As of 3 January 2021, no vaccine was registered with the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority.

## **3) Ivermectin**

Ivermectin is also the focus of many clinical trials. It is an anti worm medication which is used in many countries in the world. There have been studies on the use of ivermectin in the prevention and treatment of COVID 19. In South Africa, ivermectin is not registered with SAHPRA for human use at all. It is available and widely used to treat animals.

The studies so far have been very positive but there have only been a small number of small studies. By the end of January 2021 a few more studies will be completed and then there may be a big enough number for the WHO to make a decision on its use. At this time ivermectin is not recommended for the prevention or treatment of COVID 19 by any official regulatory bodies.

## The Virus

COVID is a respiratory illness. It is spread from person to person via **droplets**. These are transmitted either directly, if someone with the virus coughs or sneezes directly onto your skin. Or through contact – someone coughs, sneezes or breathes onto a surface, you touch the surface and then you touch your face and the virus enters your system.

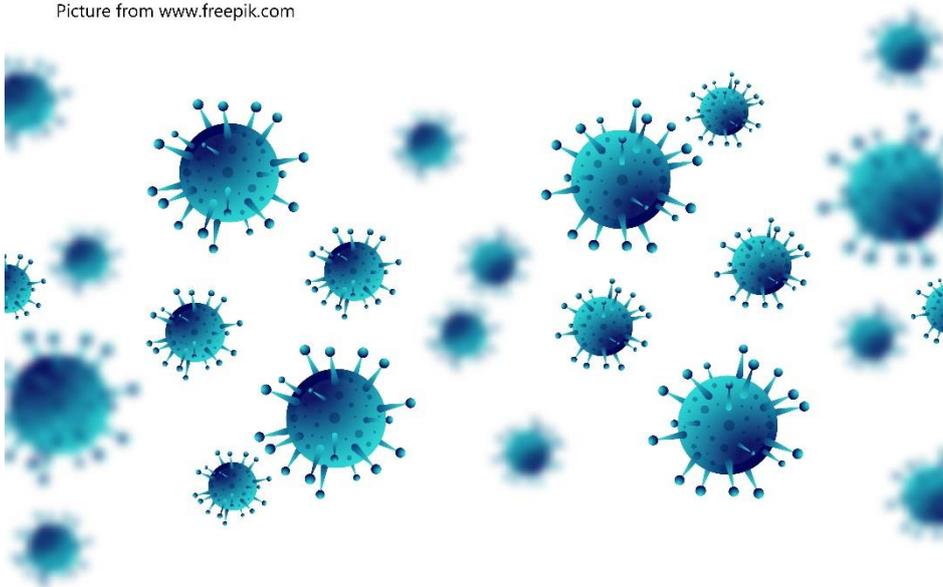
Once the virus is in your system it settles mainly in the lungs but also in the heart, oesophagus, kidney, bladder and gut. There is a specific receptor the virus binds to, called the ACE2 receptor and it causes it to stop working. The problem with that is that the role of ACE2 is to prevent inflammation. If it doesn't work properly it leads to the system having **no brakes** and this translates to inflammation and cell death.

The majority of people only develop a mild illness. They have respiratory symptoms but can be treated at home and do not need oxygen. Those who develop severe disease, it is the immune system response to the virus which causes the symptoms and the respiratory distress.

The symptoms are varied:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Dry cough
- Shortness of breath
- Body pain
- Fatigue
- Loss of smell or change in taste
- Diarrhoea or nausea
- Persistent headache

Picture from [www.freepik.com](http://www.freepik.com)



## Contacts

A contact is a person who has been with a person who has tested positive for COVID19. The department is trying to trace contacts of those who test positive. Being a contact does not automatically mean you will get COVID19 or even that you will get tested. There are degrees of risk.

A high risk contact is over 15 minutes of exposure, neither wearing a mask and less than a metre distance. Practically this includes people living in the same house and working in a close environment. The recommendations for a high risk exposure is to quarantine for 5 days and then test. If you still have no symptoms and you have a negative test, you can go back to work.

A medium risk contact is less than 15 minutes of exposure and one of you is wearing a mask. Medium risk contacts do not need to isolate but can self monitor for symptoms.

Low risk exposure is anyone else. You do not need to isolate or test at all.



## Testing

Currently, anyone with symptoms of COVID should be tested. Also, those who are close contacts of a known COVID positive.

If you are well but need to go for testing, the doctor will send you with a form to the nearest lab. If you have symptoms and go to your local hospital, the lab technicians may come and take a swab in the casualty department.

They will take a swab of your mouth or nose. After a test you should go home and isolate until you get your result. The results are taking 24 to 72 hours. You may also have some baseline bloods taken at the same time as the swab.

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## Isolating

If you have tested positive and are isolating at home, here is how it should be done:

Stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom if possible .

If a common bathroom is used, disinfect it wearing an apron and gloves before it is used by another family member.

Use separate linen and crockery

Utensils must be cleaned with warm water, soap and bleach and the washer should wear gloves.

Linen and clothes should be washed separately and in warm water of at least 60 degrees.

Room must be cleaned wearing a mask, apron and gloves.

All commonly used surfaces must be disinfected after use.

Wear a face mask if in a room with others and keep a 1m distance.

Wash your hands regularly.

## De-Isolating

If you do not ever have symptoms then you can de-isolate **10 days** after your positive test.

If you have mild symptoms then you de-isolate **10 days** after the onset of symptoms.

**You do NOT need to re test.**



## **At home treatment**

Currently the follow are recommended for everyone who tests positive for COVID 19:

Vitamin C 500mg twice a day

Vitamin D 50 000 IU once – one califerol tablet

Zinc 75mg daily

Panado 1g four times a day

Alprazolam 0.5mg at night

It is recommended that Brufen, Voltaren or other anti inflammatories are not taken unless you are chronically on them.

If you are asthmatic you can keep on taking your inhalers and may get a short course of prednisone. It is NOT recommended to nebulize.

If you are over 60 you may also be given some aspirin.

Alprazolam or Ativan are given to help with sleep and anxiety. This is a stressful time and waiting for results or being tested positive can cause much anxiety. This is normal. Unfortunately, the more anxious we are, the more short of breath we feel.

Not everyone will get an antibiotic as this is a virus not a bacteria. Those with severe chest symptoms will get an antibiotic to cover for a possible bacterial infection on top of the viral COVID.

Symptomatic relief may be offered by steam inhalations but please not the steam does not kill the virus. There is also no scientific evidence to suggest that specific foods help to prevent or treat COVID. All the treatment used at home for COVID is aimed at symptomatic relief.

While at home, monitor your symptoms daily. If you can, keep note of your oxygen levels and temperatures. If your oxygen drops below 90% or your shortness of breath worsens then go to the hospital.

After 10 days you are no longer considered infectious. The symptoms may linger, in particular cough, fatigue and headache but you are safe to return to work or see other people.

# **Breathing Exercises**

Active Cycle of Breathing Techniques (ACBT) is a breathing technique you can perform at home to:

- Loosen and clear secretions from the lungs
- Improve ventilation in the lungs.
- Improve the effectiveness of a cough

**ACBT consists of three main phases:**

1. Breathing Control
2. Deep Breathing Exercises or Thoracic Expansion Exercises
3. Huffing or Forced Expiratory Technique (FET)

## **1. Breathing control**

Breathing control is used to relax the airways and relieve the symptoms of wheezing and tightness which normally occur after coughing or breathlessness. I encourage you to close your eyes while performing breathing control – this can also be beneficial in helping to promote relaxation. It is very important to use breathing control in between the more active exercises of ACBT as it allows for relaxation of the airways.

Breathing Control can also help when one is experiencing shortness of breath, fear, signs of bronchospasm, anxiety or panic. The length of time spent performing breathing control may vary depending on how breathless you feel. With this virus lying on your stomach has been shown to be very helpful in getting more oxygen to the lower parts of the lungs. If you do find you are very short of breath you can do this breathing technique while lying on your stomach.

As part of the breathing cycle I want you to take **6 breaths**. If you are using this technique on it's own to relax then you can do it for a few minutes.

1. Breathe in through your nose. If you cannot, breathe through your mouth instead
2. Breathe out through your mouth
3. Try to let go of any tension in your body with each breath out and keep your shoulders relaxed.
4. Gradually try to make the breaths slower.
5. Try closing your eyes to help you to focus on your breathing and to relax.
6. Breathing control should continue until you feel ready to progress to the other stages in the cycle

## **2. Deep Breathing Exercises or Thoracic Expansion Exercises**

Deep breathing/thoracic expansion exercises are deep breathing exercises that focus on inspiration and helps to loosen secretions in the lungs

1. Try to keep your chest and shoulders relaxed.
2. Take a long, slow and deep breath in, through your nose if you can. Focus on abdomen and lower chest wall expanding
3. At the end of the breath in, hold the air in your lungs for 2-3 seconds before breathing out (this is known as an inspiratory hold)
4. Breathe out gently and relaxed, like a sigh. Don't force the air out.
5. Repeat 3 – 5 times. If you feel light-headed then it is important that you revert back to the breathing control phase of the cycle.

## **2. Huffing or Forced Expiratory Technique**

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This is a manoeuvre used to move secretions, mobilised by deep breathing/thoracic expansion exercises. A huff is exhaling through an open mouth and throat instead of coughing. Huffing helps move sputum from the small airways to the larger airways. From here they are removed by coughing as coughing alone cannot remove sputum from small airways.

There are two types of huff:

### **2. Medium Volume Huff**

This helps to move secretions that are lower down in your airways.

Take a normal-sized breath in and then an active, long breath out until your lungs feel quite empty. Imagine you are trying to steam up a mirror.

### **2. High Volume Huff**

This helps to move secretions in your upper airways.

Take a deep breath in, open your mouth wide and huff out quickly.

Only perform 1-2 huffs together, as repeatedly huffing can make your chest tight.

Listen for crackles when you huff, if you can hear these, you may now need to cough.

Repeat the whole cycle for about 5-10 minutes or until the chest feels clearer.

Small long huffs move sputum from low down in the chest whereas big short huffs moves sputum from higher up in the chest, so use this huff when it feels ready to come out, but not before.

## **Coughing**

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Coughing should be incorporated if huffing alone does not clear your sputum. However, if it does clear your sputum, then you may not need to cough.

It is very important to avoid long bouts of coughing as these can be very tiring and may make you feel breathless, or make your throat or chest sore or tight. You should only cough if the sputum can be cleared easily, if not, return to the beginning of the cycle.

## **Precaution**

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It is important to constantly assess for dizziness or increased shortness of breath throughout ACBT. If you feel dizzy during deep breathing, decrease the number of deep breaths taken during each cycle and return to breathing control to reduce dizziness.

## **Frequency**

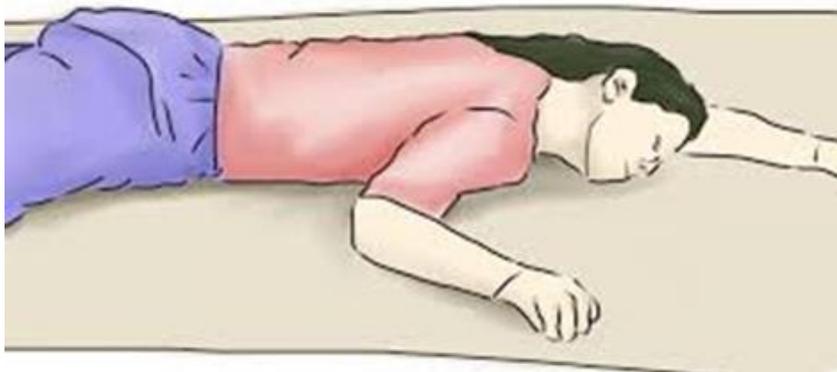
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You may need to do ACBT only once or twice a day when you do not have a lot of secretions.

When you have more sputum, you may need to do it more often, and you may need to do shorter and/ or more frequent sessions.

## Positioning

These are some positions that may reduce your breathlessness. Try each of them to see which one/s help you. You can also try the controlled breathing technique described above while in any of these positions to help ease your breathing.



## Exercise

Exercise is an important part of recovery after a severe COVID-19 illness.

Exercise can help to:

- Improve fitness
- Reduce breathlessness
- Increase muscle strength
- Improve balance and coordination
- Improve your thinking
- Reduce stress and improve mood
- Increase confidence
- Improve your energy

If you feel any of the following symptoms, do not exercise, or stop exercising, and contact your healthcare professional:

- Nausea or feeling sick
- Dizziness or light headedness
- Severe shortness of breath
- Clamminess or sweating
- Chest tightness
- Increased pain

### Exercising at the right level

To work out whether you are exercising at the right level, think about speaking a sentence:

If you can speak the whole sentence without stopping and are not feeling breathless, then you can exercise harder

If you cannot speak at all, or can only say a word at a time and are severely breathless, then you are exercising too hard

If you can speak a sentence, pausing once or twice to catch your breath, and are moderately to almost severely breathless, then you are exercising at the right level.

Remember that it is normal to feel breathless when you exercise, and it is not harmful or dangerous. Gradually building your fitness can help you become less breathless. In order to improve your fitness, you should feel moderately to almost severely breathless when you exercise.

If you do feel too breathless to speak, you should slow down or stop to rest until your breathing feels more controlled. You may find the positions to relieve breathlessness helpful.

Exercise while you are still infected can be as little as sitting in a chair or taking a small walk in your home or garden. Follow the guidelines for exercising at the right level to guide you. But staying in bed all day will only depress your mood and allow general deconditioning of the body and muscle wasting. This will prolong recovery and increase risk of complications.

Remember even in an ICU every patient will do some exercise daily. It could be moving the limbs in the bed, sitting up over the edge of the bed, sitting in a chair or going for a short walk but moving and challenging the body in some way to build strength and resilience to aid recovery is exceptionally important.

If you have recovered from the infection but are still weak- exercise is how you improve your strength and regain your previous level of function.

If you require guidance- contact a physiotherapist. We are experts at rehabilitation.

## Corona Coaster

COVID induced, emotional fluctuations might leave us questioning our sanity from time to time. Some days it appears as if the entire world has been forced onto a rollercoaster. Do try to keep calm and find meaning from a psychological point of view.

Some experts are using the grief cycle, originally created by Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, to make sense of our COVID tainted lives. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Despair and Acceptance are the well-known, basic stages of the grief cycle. Our emotional movements through these stages are perhaps comparable to that ride; a lot of unpredictable twisting, turning, ups, downs and looping at varying speeds. The bumpy Corona-coaster has indeed *spilt the milk*, that is interrupted daily living, on almost all levels of functioning.

Riding the Corona Coaster through the grief cycle ride will differ for everyone. Some may be so lucky as to not have even entered it as yet. Some may discover that they are stuck in the very beginning stages; a series of *would have/ could have/ should have* loop de loops. As if enduring ongoing loops of reflection will unspill the proverbial milk. Yet some people appear to have a quick ride to the 'acceptance stage' siding. They recognize the spillage, however manage to actively ignore the souring smell by balancing grief with focusing forward. Or, put more succinctly, being able to adapt quickly. It is indeed both necessary and healthy to mourn what is lost and what is missed. On the other hand, becoming entrenched in loop de loops of the COVID-19 stench, may lead to depression and anxiety.

5 steps to improve your 'ride':

1. **Identify triggers for unwanted reactions** and ask did my reactions do any good e.g. Masks-actively noting people wearing them incorrectly and then feeling angry so your shopping trip is ruined.
2. **Remedy or remove unnecessary triggers:** eliminate or reduce things that set off negative loop de loops. Challenge yourself to accept what you can control and let go of the rest. e.g. unfollow friends who share aggravating social media posts.
3. **Recall your best self and the strengths that underpinned it.** Those strengths still exist and just need re-igniting. Engage with people and things that inspire you.
4. **Decide and stick to it:** mindfully make the decision to hold this new space. Keep your focus cropped to reaching for your best self and what truly matters. As a wise Professor once shared: happiness is nowhere... look at those words again and add a space...  
...happiness is **now** and **here**...
5. **Focus Forward:** keep reminding yourself that all of this is temporary. History shows us things change; eventually COVID must too. Create a vivid future picture and enjoy visiting it often.

We know that sometimes a soured milk smell can be unrelenting! If your best self is not forth coming, Brain Working Recursive Therapy (BWRT) may fast track acceptance and adaptation.

# Mindfulness

## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness refers to a form of therapy in which you focus on what you are experiencing in the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your thoughts and feelings without judgement.

Being mindful can help you direct your attention away from negative or random and unnecessary thoughts that can be draining. It can also help you engage with and appreciate the world around you. So if you're looking for ways to more effectively deal with stress and anxiety, practicing mindfulness is a good start.

Many people diagnosed with COVID19 will have feelings of fear and anxiety. It is a very reasonable response. Using mindfulness/ breath work you can calm your thoughts, fears and anxiety. This often results in a general improved feeling of well being and an improved mood. Physiologically it can also cause bronchodilation (opening) of your lungs. This will help if you are struggling with any shortness of breath.

## How to practice mindfulness/ breath work:

Get comfortable in a seated or lying position. Close your eyes. Focus on breathing comfortably in & out. Like waves lapping slowly in and out. Breathe in filling your lungs with oxygen and breathe out gently like a sigh letting the air and tension leave your body.

It may be difficult to practice mindfulness if your mind feels overwhelmed, thoughts and worries constantly creeping in. Mindfulness isn't about making these thoughts go away, but instead just noticing them coming and going without analysis, interpretation or judgement. And then after you notice your thoughts, draw your attention back to your breathing. In and out...

Do this for a few minutes, and you have practiced mindfulness.

There are a few Apps you can download to help you practice mindfulness. Some that are recommended are: Calm, Insight timer, and Soultime Christian meditation.

Mindfulness can be practiced whenever you feel overwhelmed or stressed, and to help manage shortness of breath.



## **Dealing with COVID-related stress**

Like it or not, no matter how informed and logical you are, you're probably experiencing some moments of "is this really happening" accompanied by some bodily sensation of anxiety. Your brain is doing exactly what it is designed to do; responding to threat. A perceived threat places strain on your system and stresses your brain and body. No matter how strong and pragmatic you may try to be, the stress of COVID-19 and the accompanying global uncertainty is a threat to your health.

Here are five reasons why you should make a plan to deal with COVID worry now.

### **It lowers your immune response**

Ongoing stress is known to diminish immunity. In a stressful situation, your brain releases cortisol, adrenalin and other chemicals for the body to prepare you for those primitive survival responses of fight, flight or freeze. However you are not physically taking any of those actions, so the chemicals are not used up and remain in your body. This leaves you feeling keyed up and can interrupt sleep, affect appetite and mood. Over time these increased levels may also damage organs, causes cancer or even leads to medical conditions such as diabetes or a heart attack. What's more, ongoing stress interferes with the production of helper T-cells and other cells essential for a healthy immune response. If you do get COVID and are stressed out about it you may have less ability to fight it. We need to have a healthy, positive mind for a health body.

### **It disrupts and damages relationships**

Over time, the ongoing lack of sleep increases irritability can make people short tempered, irritable and sometimes even irrational. When you are living in close quarters with others for extended periods of time, such as lockdown, you have limited opportunity to leave the environment to unwind or decompress. This puts additional pressure on relationships and can add tension to an already uncomfortable situation.

### **It can bring old-ghosts/patterns of behaviour back to the fore**

There is a never-ending state of stress created by COVID. The risk here is that old issues or behaviours that may have been successfully alleviated through therapy in the past, can resurge as the brain battles to combat the concerns of our current, unprecedented day-to-day reality.

### **It increases the potential for substance abuse**

Using anti-histamines, cough medication and alcohol to facilitate a sense of calm and ease with your situation often increases. These are recognised pit-falls on the path to people self-medicating as a means to counter hyper-vigilance and 'de-stress' temporarily. The ban on alcohol and cigarettes during lockdown in South Africa has potentially also increased people's sense of a being distanced from normal habits and comforts, possibly leading to people with access to either, over-indulging in a reflex response.

### **In an unpredictable reality, the unknown can be more devastating than the known**

This virus creates pre-emptive trauma because there is so much still unknown – and the information seems to keep changing every day. This creates an ever-increasing level of stress and fear as we consider a future we can't adequately predict. We need to get ahead of the stress by putting coping and stress management strategies in place proactively; creating resilience for the weeks and months ahead. We need to accept at some point we may test positive for COVID. The calmer and more positive we can be about it, the better and more able our immune system is able to fight.

## Mental Resilience

The endlessness of day upon day of riding the 'corona-coaster' can result in stress symptoms and negative behavioural patterns. With the knowledge that COVID19 is no longer just numbers but those numbers represent family, friends, co-workers and perhaps even yourself, it's hard not to feel like you are going a little crazy... So, if you are feeling a little 'loco' right now, here are 6 tips to regain a sense of calm:

**Routine matters:** everyone talks about routine but no one explains why it's important. The rationale is that through routine and discipline, we feed the brain experiences of control – we create situations in which we consistently decide the when, what and how of our day. In these unprecedented times, uncertainty is one of our biggest enemies for mental wellbeing, creating certainties through routines is a critical strategy in your resilience journey.

**Manage your social media:** decide on one or two trusted and reliable sources and only look at those. Allowing the ongoing mass of Covid-19 related data to take over our mindspace is not healthy. No matter how many times we check the infection and fatality rates, we cannot change them. Also, educate yourself about credible information sources and do not pass on fake news.

**Connect regularly with your tribe:** Beyond connecting randomly, a useful strategy is to have a list of people who add value to your life for different reasons. Identify who you go to when you need a laugh, sound advice or a shoulder to cry on – then call them when in need. Encourage your friends to do the same too; in this way you form a resilience community for each other. Also important is knowing who to avoid because they feed your demons.

**Healthy body, healthy mind:** Don't underestimate the role that 'what you consume and how much you move', has on your state of mind. Even how hydrated you are will impact your ability to cope with the stress of self-isolation and social distancing. Equally, watching the growth of your girth as you munch your way to temporary solace is especially distressing when there is no certainty of an end in sight.

**Set aside time to fall apart:** It's ok to be scared and it's ok to cry. We are so often encouraged to hide our feelings or put away the inconvenient emotions of life. Give yourself permission to acknowledge what is worrying you – have that cry in the shower, it allows your body to physically release stress. What's more, when you acknowledge your fear, you understand what you are working with and gain insight into the tools you may need to cope.

**Practice peacefulness:** Developing and rehearsing calm-down strategies helps us to build in coping mechanisms for times of stress. There are some great apps -available, such as Headspace and Calm, that provide you with useful, daily 3minute meditations to de-stress your life. Brain Working Recursive Therapy is another effective tool to learn – it allows you to wire in responses so you can react to a stress situation healthily without having to reason it through. Sleep is part of peacefulness. Natural sleep, not medication induced, is essential for a sense of peacefulness and healthy body systems.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1) Should I test for COVID?

- Do you have any of the symptoms of COVID?
- Are you a close contact of someone with COVID?

If the answer to either of these questions is YES then YES you should test for COVID.

### 2) How do I test for COVID?

Go to your GP who will give you a letter or form to take to the pathology lab. The test will be conducted at the lab. It costs R850 at the moment. Some medical aids cover the test, others only pay if you are positive. When you test you will need to fill in a form listing the people you have close contact with.

### 3) How long do the results take?

The time for results varies as it depends on the numbers of tests which need to be done. At the moment it is 24 to 48 hours. You will be sent an sms to ask if you want to receive your results by sms. The doctor who sent you for the test will also receive the result. You should isolate while waiting for the result.

### 4) My test is positive, what now?

If your test is positive you need to go home and isolate for 10 days. Further instructions are in the isolating section of the booklet.

### 5) Do I need to go to hospital?

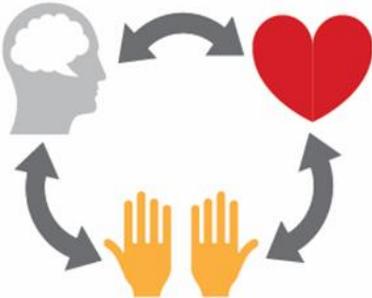
Most people do not need to go to hospital. If you are very short of breath or your oxygen is below 90% then you should go to hospital.

### 6) How can I treat myself at home?

There are a number of vitamins which help ease the symptoms. The best thing to do to help is to practice active cycles of breathing.

### 7) I am very worried about COVID, what can I do?

Practicing mindfulness, developing resilience and following the 5 steps to ease your ride can all help to lessen your anxiety.



**SHELLEY KIM HALL**  
**CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST**  
 MA{Clin. Psych}  
 Pr No.: 0179981, HPCSA No.: PS0085006

5 Addison Street - Emp.  
 Medicross - Meerensee  
 Dr Brits Practice - Eshowe

Mobile: 063 055 2172  
[shelleykimhall@icloud.com](mailto:shelleykimhall@icloud.com)

## SAMANTHA HARDING PHYSIOTHERAPIST (INC)



Bsc. Physiotherapy (UOVS), Pr Nr. 0515221  
**TEL: 035 772 1044 / CELL: 071 247 6120 / FAX: 086 534 4243**  
**EMAIL: [samjphysio@gmail.com](mailto:samjphysio@gmail.com)**  
 5 Addison street/ Empangeni / 3880



**Dr. Rebekah Cooper** MBChB, DA

Pr.No. 0715042 MP0765783 5 Addison Street, Empangeni 3880  
 Tel: 035 772 1044 email: [dr.rebekah@cooper.org.za](mailto:dr.rebekah@cooper.org.za)  
 Webpage: [www.cooper.org.za/doc](http://www.cooper.org.za/doc)