

A close-up photograph of a hand reaching up towards a light switch on a wall. The hand is dark-skinned and is positioned as if about to flip the switch. The wall is a light, textured color. The light switch is a standard toggle switch with a white cover. The image has a slightly grainy, artistic quality.

# **HOW TO HELP PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC COVID-19**

**- AND STAY WELL OURSELVES**

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HELP GUIDELINES  
FOR PERSONS WITH  
MENTAL HEALTH  
DISORDERS  
AND THEIR  
CAREGIVERS  
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This Handbook is created by a psychotherapist, supported by visual artists, in order to help the vulnerable and spread the sense of community in the world affected by pandemic.

Illustrations are purely artistic visualisation of the topic and have no gender or race connotations.

Text is informative with the purpose to help those in need. For further information contact your psychotherapist or psychiatrist.

Psychotherapy is recommended to those affected by mental issues and their families.

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In the time of pandemic and constant inflow of new information about the number of people infected and precautionary measures, the overall level of anxiety (disturbance and fear) in the society is significantly raised. And this is indeed expected given the circumstances. Besides the fear of the infection itself, a vast number of people feel threatened by the upcoming existential problems, loss of their jobs, self-isolation or quarantine. There is an increased concern and worry in daily lives of people due to difficulty of getting basic groceries and protective equipment.

Meanwhile, despite the world's battle with pandemic, other battles have not ceased to exist. Persons with mental illnesses are still facing their anxiety, panic attacks or psychotic outbreaks. We must not forget about them and the battles they have led even before the pandemic started. Emotions and feelings are our response to both internal and external events. Therefore, the question is: What kind of emotions are being provoked in persons with mental difficulties in the times like these.

Heightened stress situations, be it wars or natural disasters, such as pandemic, a large world health crisis, can cause deterioration in persons with mental conditions even if they have been stable prior to it.

Exposure to a multitude of information that is constantly changing, information on number of critically ill, or deceased people can have very negative impact on persons with mental health issues.

It is primarily about the feeling of a loss of control over their own life which persons with mental health issues already struggle with and fear. Under these circumstances their problems can double-up while their capacity to overcome challenges can decrease even more than usual.

In order to truly understand the world of persons with mental issues, one needs to leave the criticism behind, as well as labelling and judgemental approach, and invite empathy and compassion in.

Their problem is real, and not the matter of being spoiled, overreacting or lacking discipline.



## Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is an attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity or impulsiveness that stands in the way of everyday functioning. Imagine how the person who is struggling with attention issues feels when listening to the information they can not focus on. That person is scatterbrained, tends to lose things, seems absentminded, forgets about their duties, has difficulties waiting for their turn, and acts inappropriately in situations where they are expected to be calm and quiet.

They can feel restless and suffer from high levels of anxiety, fear and low self-esteem which is a common phenomenon that appears in mental problems. Before directing them how to behave due to pandemic, try standing in their shoes for ten seconds at least.

### How to Help?

Be aware of the fact that they are in a very challenging state they are facing daily while solving the puzzle of life.

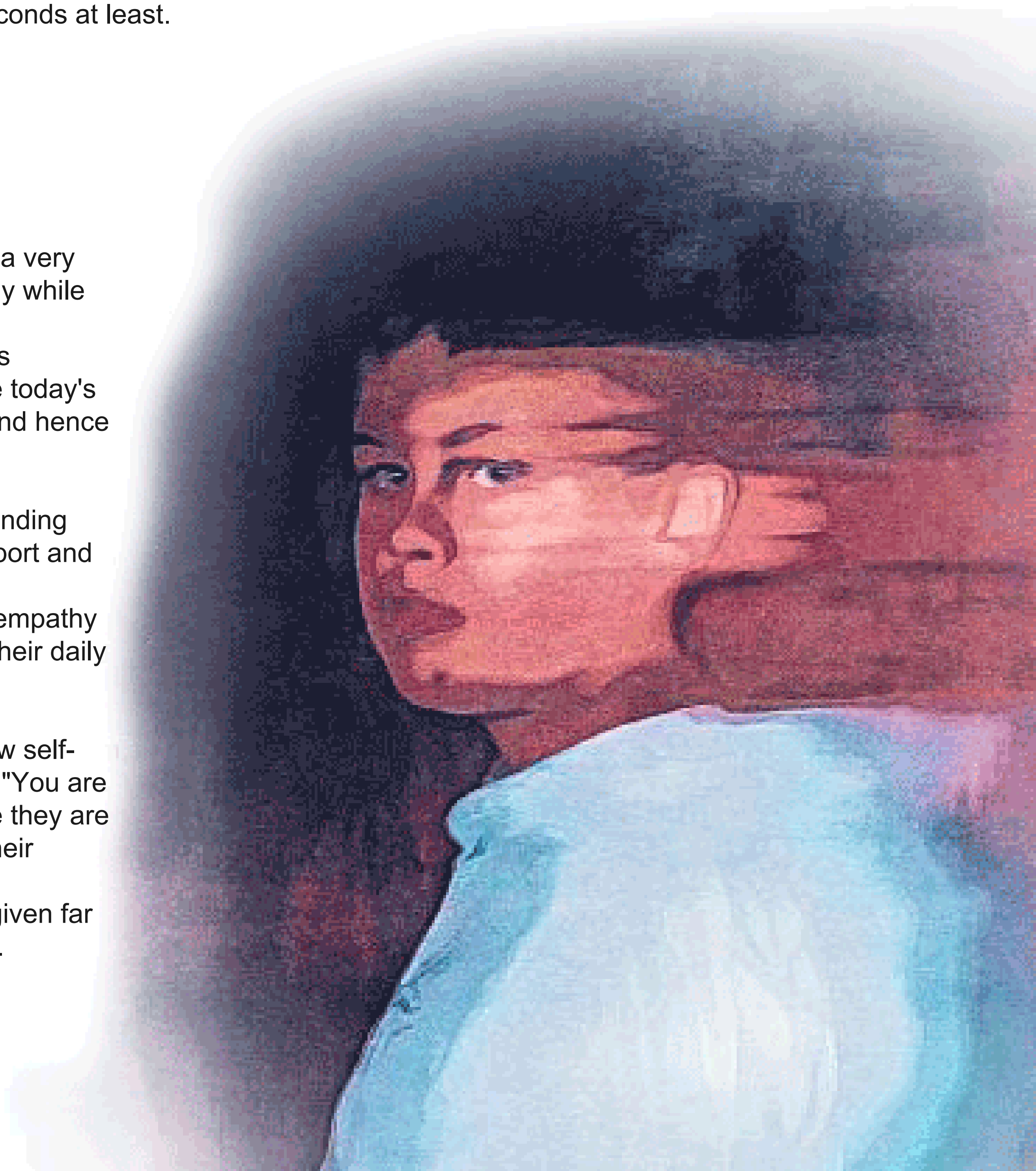
Try to understand that this moment is particularly difficult for them because today's life challenge is new and unknown and hence frightening.

Do not use judgemental and commanding tones of voice, try offering them support and a shoulder lean on.

Ask them what their needs are with empathy and ask how can you help them do their daily tasks.

Remember that they often have a low self-esteem, so point out their strengths: "You are so good at ... ." Stay with them while they are completing tasks such as washing their hands or putting a face mask on.

They will appreciate all the support given far more than you may think. Be patient.



## Anxiety Disorder

Persons with Anxiety Disorder can feel debilitating fear and disturbance, anxiety, increased muscle tension, and extreme caution in future planning.

They can show avoidant behaviours, experience frustration, panic and feel that they are dying. They have so called thought errors, thoughts that starts with: what if...I lose control, embarrass myself or lose my mind. They have physical sensations such as elevated heart-rate, difficulty breathing, muscle tension, and nausea.



## How to Help?

Talk about their feelings, breathe together, practice abdominal breathing (slow and deep breathing by taking even breaths) which is extremely efficient in calming the body and mind. Encourage them to focus on breathing, to slow down the breathing pace, to inhale deeply, hold their breath while counting to three before exhaling, and to focus on their breath circulating through their body.

This way, the mind is focused on the breath, disturbing thoughts are minimized and body is calming down. You can also practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises together, and you will feel its benefits too.

Be there with them until they calm down, and then introduce a plan of activities you can do together. Do not say things like: "You are overreacting; it's nothing" , etc., as in their mind everything looks terrifying and catastrophic even though they are often logically aware that is not the case. Thoughts can be overcome by thoughts and emotions by emotions.

Do not say you understand if you have not experienced anxiety or panic attacks yourself. Act with empathy, say although you know you can't understand the experience, it seems terrifying, and that you are there for them. Refer to it as a wave of feelings and you will wait together for it to pass.

Create the sense of security through structure based little things that you can control (such as precautionary measures).

Respect their daily plan and approach with kindness some of their activities that may seem extreme (like excessive cleaning). Perhaps the activity can help them release some of their built up anxiety.



## Bipolar Disorder

A person with Bipolar Disorder is going through dramatic mood changes, from deep depression to manic phase, which is a phase of extreme upswing and energy increase.

In the depressive phase, a person may feel helpless and sad, hopeless and angry and suffer from low self-esteem. In the manic phase euphoria and delusions of grandeur are present; they feel almighty, have poor risk evaluation and may engage in risky behaviours.

They may have difficulties understanding their own feelings and controlling their actions.

### How to Help?

Try to be there for them when they lose their mental balance. What they need the most is empathy and compassion. Understanding their life and their reactions to life, challenges them. Knowing that you are there for them is helpful. Their inner battle with their feelings, thoughts and guilt will not be diminished by the present pandemic, quite the contrary.

Avoid saying: "Calm down, it will go away". They know it will pass, but in that moment it feels so overwhelming to them it's as if the feelings will never stop. Above all, they do not want to have those depressive or disturbing feelings either. So breathe deeply with them if they are upset, hold their hand, suggest an activity you can do together. When they calm down, talk to them about how they felt, make a plan together to prepare for the crisis situation next time it occurs. Show understanding when they can't respond equally to your need for support.

Remember that the state they are in is only one side of them and that as a person they are so much more than their illness. Listen, stay connected, do not dismiss or give up on them. Bear in mind that they need much bigger capacity to overcome their struggles than they currently have.



## Depressive Disorder

A person with Depressive Disorder feels sadness, emptiness and irritability, followed by physical and cognitive changes that significantly affect person's functioning in all areas of their life.

They can lose their interest in activities they have previously enjoyed in, experience appetite changes, sleep deprivation or excessive sleeping, feel worthless and guilty, have difficulties focusing and making decisions. Thoughts of death and suicide are common in this state, as well as overall anxiety.



### How to help?

Ask questions rather than making assumptions.

Respect their feelings even when they seem inappropriate or out of proportion. Remember that no one can really know what the other person actually feels. Hear them out and step in their shoes for ten seconds and then let them how that feeling seems to you.

Do not identify the person with their mental health problem.

Help them accomplish their daily plans. Remember that they will feel guilty if they do not join the planned activity. Their refusal to participate should not be perceived as laziness, in fact their illness reflects in the lack of motivation to execute the plan. Help them give their contribution to their daily lives.

Do not try to fix them or change them and do not forget that the state they are in is not their choice.

## Feeding and Eating Disorder

A person with a Feeding and Eating Disorder has a difficult relationship with food which greatly affects their psychosocial and physical well-being. They have a distorted, negative picture of their own body, and are preoccupied with thoughts of food, calorie counting and exercising. They are finding ways to purify their body or to resolve their emotions with food, using it as a shield from emotional hurt. Increased anxiety is commonly present.

Worrying about food and getting groceries, unavailability of gyms and limited sport activities can cause an increase in the disturbed state of mind in persons who suffer from eating disorder and therefore provoke even more drastic measures in their food intake control.

### How to Help?

Make a plan of light exercises and diet together. Demonstrate healthy ways of taking care of your body.

Talk honestly and openly about your concerns. Ignoring the problem due to new situation will not make it go away, in fact, it can only make it worse.

Pointing out that the situation in the world is tough will not help. Try being nurturing instead and remind them of their part in being responsible for their health.

Do not tell them to just drop it and start eating or to cut down the exercises. Remember that they are in a vicious cycle of their own thought and can't see the way out.

Embrace them even if they reject themselves and speak your mind and express feelings about them and their body.

Food is a body fuel and immune system protection, just as a mask is to the face and gloves to the hands. Try to represent it this way and avoid any connections between food and emotions.





## Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

A person with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is struggling with obsessive, recurrent and persistent thoughts or images that they experience as intrusive and unwanted and over which they have no control. While attempting to establish that control, compulsions appear as another symptom. Compulsions are actions, repeated behaviours guided by obsessive thoughts that have to be done in a rigid manner and follow the strict rules.

Persons with OCD can be troubled by the overwhelming feeling of responsibility, exaggerated existing threats, intolerance and struggle dealing with the unknown.

### How to Help?

Try to understand the heightened tension and disturbance they may feel in this situation when uncertainty is everywhere, because to them it seems that the threat has at least doubled in intensity.

Try to accept that their tension increases when they do not perform the activity that they feel they are forced to perform.

Do not do those activities with them, do not support them, try talking about how they feel instead. Talk about their feelings, ask them what disturbs them the most in this situation and what makes their OCD worse.

Feel free to analyse those thoughts together. Do not criticise, do not judge and do not compare their inner world with a state the world is in at this moment.

Try to keep their daily routine unchanged, daily planning can help.





# Personality Disorder

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## How to Help?

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## Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorder

Persons with Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorder have abnormalities in one or several of the following domains: delusions, unrealistic beliefs, hallucinations, disorganised thinking (speech), disorganised or abnormal motor behaviour. They feel excessive anxiety and need for social isolation even in times when that is not a necessary precaution. They often carry the weight of stigma (judging, misunderstanding, fear) that is imposed on them by society. Their inner world can be as tense, chaotic and frightening as if there were a constantly present crisis situation similar to the one that is happening now.

Presence of hallucinations, whether they be visual, auditory or tactile, causes tremendous fear. Other symptoms can cause an extreme decrease in motivation such as lack of will for basic grooming. Symptoms also make it difficult to accept and understand new information.

The fact that they are in a state that triggers specific emotional processes does not mean that they don't have the ability to feel just as intensely as everyone else. They also have difficulties with anticipation of pleasure, or rather with expecting future positive events or experiences to occur, and with taking pleasure in imagining future pleasures.

### How to Help?

Make a precise structure of the day, daily errands and activities.

Make an effort to create a supportive and stable environment in order to reduce the feeling of stress.

Establish realistic expectations, but do not do things on their behalf. Let them do their tasks themselves, stay with them as a support only.

Track their regular medicine intake. Prepare for the crisis situation to happen. Be aware that you cannot do everything alone, have all the emergency contacts handy.

Do not express anger or fury, remember that your loved ones can be terrified of their own symptoms and of the pandemic as well. Sit down, talk in calming voice and ask for a permission if you want to touch or hug them.

Remove all the distractions, such as TV and radio, and choose the time to get informed yourself, while away from the person you are taking care of. Try to process your own emotional reaction first, before you inform the person with a mental disorder of the new precautionary measures.

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## Sleep-Wake Disorders

A person with Sleep-Wake Disorders is deeply dissatisfied with quality, time and duration of their sleep. This leads to heightened stress levels and affects the person's general skillset negatively. During daytime, person can feel anxious, have difficulty focusing and have an increased self-criticism as they are failing to fulfil their daily tasks.

### How to help?

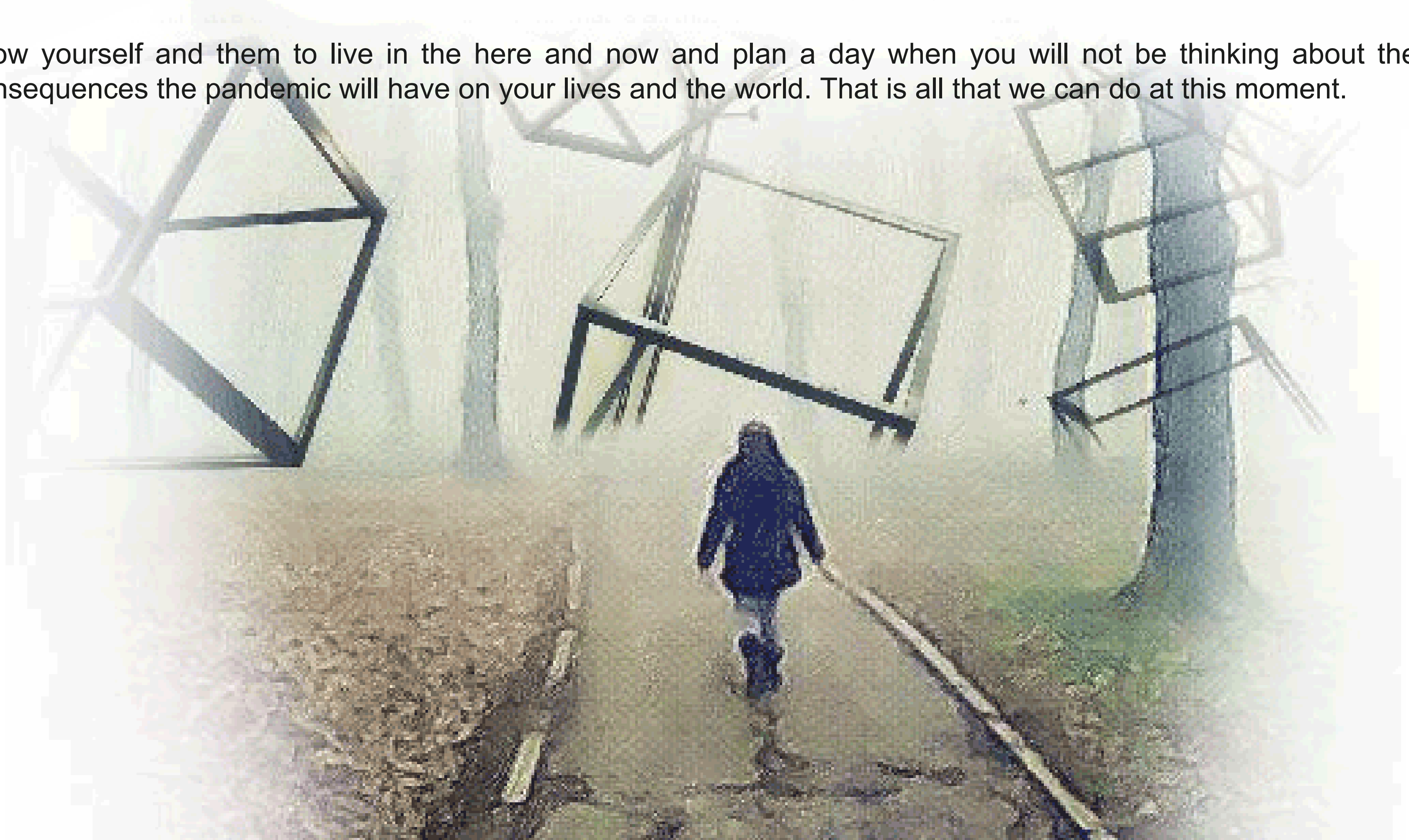
Make a sleep diary and search together for potential causes of the condition. Establish what was different in days when the person slept well and try repeating the same activities typical for good days.

Introduce daily activities and tasks routine and particularly make sure there are enough exercises, physical activities, breathing exercising and regular healthy meals.

Make sure their evenings are peaceful. If you can, during isolation and quarantine, do not use the same space for daily activities and sleeping.

Avoid news and information after 8 pm. Choose a room where they can go if they can not fall asleep so that their mind makes a connection between bed and sleep. Do not disturb their sleep additionally by criticising, but rather encourage them to play quiet music or read a book while falling asleep. Talk about the feelings daily as suppressed feelings and unresolved issues can be a reason for racing thoughts that disturb the sleep.

Allow yourself and them to live in the here and now and plan a day when you will not be thinking about the consequences the pandemic will have on your lives and the world. That is all that we can do at this moment.





## Addictive Disorders

A person with one of the Substance Related and Addictive Disorders lives in a vicious cycle of addiction where the priority is to satisfy the urge for a substance, to gamble, internet addiction or similar addictive behaviours.

They manifest unhealthy egocentrism, selfishness (everything serves the addiction), irresponsibility, lack of concern for both themselves and their loved ones.



### How to help?

Be aware that addiction is an illness rather than a fad, whim or a vice. Unhealthy egocentrism and maintaining the relationship with addiction puts even their own lives in the shadow of addiction. Regardless of the current situation in the world, their condition will not go away without adequate professional help.

Do not attach their provocations, impulsiveness, lies and irresponsibility to yourself or your relationship. They are all part of the illness.

Regardless of the pandemic, if you are in any way in danger or exposed to abuse, get professional help (protection services are still available). Danger for you and your loved one is significantly higher if you remain in the addiction situation.



## Trauma and Stress Related Disorders

The person with Trauma and Stress Related Disorders (such as PTSD) may feel shame, guilt and anger, they can experience panic, anxiety, depression and have suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Situations where the danger is present can trigger stressful memories and increase old fears. That way, a person experiences double stress, the one coming from the present danger and the other through reliving the danger the person used to be exposed to.

### How to help?

Remember that the triggers can come from both outside (news, constant new information on the number of deceased, etc.) and inside (hunger, pain, any physical sensation, feeling of being trapped and vulnerability).

If person is taking medications, make sure it is done regularly.





## Universal Help Guidelines

Get information about your loved one's issues. Knowledge will help you understand a person with a disorder better. Avoid identifying them with the problem and find the appropriate way to help and protect yourself.

Seek professional help. The pandemic should not be a reason not to ask for a psychiatrist's or therapist's help. Many issues will be more visible now when members of the family spend more time with each other and share the common space. Use this opportunity to find the adequate help for your loved one.

Mental health issues are not a reason to condemn, label or identify a person through a problem.

Try approaching it as you would with any other physical disease. Seeking professional help is always a sign of inner strength, courage and wisdom rather than weakness or powerlessness.

Remember that you are not their therapist and that you cannot and need not fulfill that role. Your emotional involvement is naturally standing in the way of it. Neither you, nor your loved one can make it on your own. There is no reason for someone to struggle and bear the consequences when there are possible solutions. If your close one is already part of the therapeutic process and has regular check-ups, do not avoid seeing a psychiatrist or psychotherapist due to pandemic specifically. Even if they cannot go in person, visits can be arranged by the phone or online.

Do not neglect tasks for recovery that they have already started. Make a strategy for their fulfilment and evaluate achievements once a week. By doing so they will feel pleasure and sense of regaining control.

Make daily and weekly routines, follow a plan and motivate the person with a mental disorder to participate in making these. Establish plan writing as a family norm by making one for yourself or together with the whole family. Repeat calmly multiple times what the precautionary measures are. Do not expect their focus and attention span to suddenly become better just because the situation is serious.

Remember that persons with mental health problems often have a constant feeling of doom in their inner world as well as in their social circles. Stand by them.

Normalise the quarantine and self-isolation and point out that in the moment like this, it is the least everyone can do for themselves and others. Pandemic is the world's issue, hence try to stress the universality of this problem. Try to mention positive stories too, for example those of people who recovered from the virus successfully.



Do not neglect regularity of pharmaceutical therapy.

In the case you fall ill, inform your nearest medical centre or service that your close one needs psychiatric support and that you can't be there for them temporarily. If available, try engaging someone from the family, friends or neighbours into taking care of your loved one.

Do not overwhelm yourself or anyone around you with information on pandemic. You can stay well-informed even if you don't listen to news or read website contents multiple times a day. Avoid starting and ending your day with information, except in the case of emergency. Dedicate one hour in your day to getting informed. Find one close friend, for example, that is reliable, mature and reasonable and let them be your source of information. Persons with anxiety disorder symptoms can drastically worsen with exposure to large quantities of information.

If a person has suicidal thoughts or behaviours, contact the nearest mental health help service immediately. Do not underestimate importance of these thoughts just because it's a pandemic. Even if it seems unrealistic in this moment, don't forget that this is a person who fights with similarly hard and high-risk situations in their minds daily. Perhaps the anticipation of the future pleasures are not going to be possible or comforting for the person. Do not insist on them if your close one doesn't react positively to them. Draw their attention to other daily activities; talk in a calming voice.

Maybe you will have to set stricter boundaries in order to protect the person from exposure to risky behaviours (particularly in addiction and bipolar disorder). Try not to do it in a rough or dismissive manner.

Do not undermine the power of a soothing voice, hug and touch. Physical contact has a calming effect. Express your feelings so that they understand that it is a desirable thing to do. Organise virtual dinners or tea parties and include the person with mental health issues too. Seek professional help if you are struggling yourself.

If you are exposed to violence or threat of violence, seek immediate help. Do not evaluate whether the risk of virus or violence is more damaging. Keep your help line numbers in a visible spot. Take care of yourself and rely on other people too as much as you can. Whenever you can, find the time for your own relaxation, eat well, try to get regular sleep and exercise.

Professional help is available for you too as a support. If you feel exhausted and overwhelmed or have increased anxiety, seek a therapist for yourself because you deserve it and it is your right.



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