

A Guide to
Self-Care *for*
Practitioners
in Times of Uncertainty

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The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Self-Esteem

1 Our Stories

Helena

16 March

We are all under the threat of something unknown, a relentless virus, a pandemic. Things are getting serious in Europe. I have decided to self-isolate and work from my London apartment. Everything is starting to look like a dystopia to me, I've never lived anything like this before. My mind needs to know "what's next" and to have control, but I can hardly come up with any answer about how life is going to be during the next few days. I can't stop watching the news and listening to the radio. All day. My thoughts today are with the most vulnerable ones.

18 March

I am really worried about work. I am lucky enough to work for a company that will arrange everything for me, and I will now see my clients online.

My clients seem good with the move online. But I can't seem to keep myself from worrying.

"Will I lose all my clients? Will I have enough money to pay my rent?"

"How am I going to work with this client on taking meaningful steps if they can't even get out of their houses?"

"How can we move forward under a lockdown?"

3 April

Almost three weeks in a lockdown. Life is like a rollercoaster. The days start to get monotonous, boring sometimes. I am busy, but often I can't get as much work done as I would like to. Other times, I feel satisfied with my sessions, content, and I think I could live like this for a good two more months. I reflect on the way this crisis is going to shape us as individuals and as a society. How is our work going to be from now on?

And in my head, I hear the nonstop original soundtrack of "you are not working enough." How old is this story of "you should be doing more; achieving more! You're lazy!"? Thanks, one more time, dear mind.

Joe

People ask me every day, "How are you doing?" I make an acknowledgment to whoever I'm talking to, something along the lines of "Strange times, huh?", and move on. Some days I think I'm managing well and I just about forget about what is going on. But every once in a while, I get gripped by the enormity of what is happening. A news headline grabs my attention. A friend tells me they've started to struggle to breathe. Or a client tells me how their world has fallen apart as they are stuck inside.

I watch my mind try and grapple with all this, trying to make sense of it. I notice my dreams filled with themes of stress and anxiety. I notice myself getting quickly frustrated when I make a mistake. I find myself close to tears having left a package of toilet paper behind at the store.

I also become aware of appreciating spending more time at home with my family. I'm enjoying messages from friends checking in with how I'm doing. I notice myself finishing work early than usual and enjoying going for a run in the late afternoon.

Being a practitioner during these times is a privilege and I deeply appreciate people trusting me with their hurt and pain. And I stand back in awe of what people are able to do in these times of crisis and the resources they are able to draw on. It reminds me that I needn't be a rock in these times, strong and certain—but more like a reed, strong in a different way: bending with flexibility to meet the demands of the situation and those placed on me.

2 Who Is This Book For?

This e-book is for you if:

- ✓ You are a practitioner.
- ✓ You are living through this global health crisis.
- ✓ You struggle with feelings and thoughts about you and your work.
- ✓ You don't know what to do with all of this.

This e-book is written for anyone who works as a therapist or clinical practitioner helping others through this time of huge uncertainty. It is aimed at those of us who find there are times when we struggle with painful thoughts and feelings in our work and our lives. *What is it my client needs at this moment? Can I provide it for her? How can I help her work with uncertainty when I also feel it? How can I possibly help someone when I feel so unsure what tomorrow will bring?* And we sometimes don't know what to do with this stuff.

It can be ever so easy for us practitioners to fall into the place where we feel we shouldn't be having difficult, scary or worrying thoughts or emotions. Or if we do have them, we should be able to use some snazzy technique to manage our thoughts and feelings.

This e-book is written by two practicing psychologists and therapists. We are also partners, parents, friends, sons and daughters. In our own humanity, there are times when each of us has struggled deeply with this situation and the uncertainty of the future. We struggle with it still. And we know we'll struggle with it in the future. We write from this perspective as we travel on this journey, together with you, in these times of uncertainty.

A key feature of this situation is that we are all in this together. As such, this e-book draws on our collective wisdom, and it pulls together thoughts, ideas, suggestions and perspectives we have gathered from our own lives, from our colleagues, from our clients, and our friends and family. These include:

- How to persist when things are uncertain
- How to deal with uncomfortable internal experience like uncertainty and fear
- How to care for ourselves and others in difficult moments

We hope that it is useful for you in some way.

3 What We're Facing

Although many of us have been through life changing, shattering events, such as the September 11th attacks or the 2008 financial crisis, this is the first truly global crisis most of us have experienced. Perhaps the only certainty is that the world, as we knew it, will change. But we don't know precisely when or how or the impact this is going to have in our lives.

And we still don't know what the psychological consequences of this crisis are going to be. Only time and careful research will show us. For now, what we know is that we all share the same fears, frustrations, and worries about the same sort of things. We worry about being good enough practitioners and if we can actually be helpful. We fear for our health and the health of our family and friends. We worry about money, our work, and if we will be able to make ends meet. Every crisis has its own scars.

Our clients remind us that we, as people, are all indeed in the same boat. We recognize ourselves also stuck and struggling with similar thoughts and behaviors as those our clients face. Confusion, fear, and worry can loom large these days.

Most of us have an aversion to things that are out of our control, especially when those things scare us and threaten our livelihoods, our families, and our very lives. As practitioners, we spend a lot of time working with our clients on what we can and can't control in life—but this situation is far beyond what any of us could imagine; we haven't faced anything like this before in our era.

But even in this unprecedented, uncertain time, which is proving so painful to so many, there may be small, unexpected joys. Such as the joy of finally finding eggs at the supermarket. Or an appreciation for the moments of stillness you might find in this time. Or a recognition of a deepened connection with those around you and in your community. Joy may also be found in the recognition of sources of strength and resilience that we hadn't acknowledged before: in ourselves, in the people we love, and in the clients we see and work with.

Of course, we want to be cautious of reaching too quickly for the "silver lining" in this situation. So much hurt, pain and grief has been caused and will still be caused by this situation. But perhaps both can sit side by side: what we appreciate and what gives us pain.

Lastly, we want to say that self-care is difficult. Not the listing of self-care actions; we're sure you could write a list of gold-standard, super useful self-care behaviors in your sleep. The hard thing is remembering to *do* self-care actions. We don't remember to consider our own needs. We forget because we are busy doing important things. Or maybe old stories bubble way in the background, telling us that self-care is selfish. Or we tell ourselves that other people's needs are more important than our own.

So, we will invite you to mindfully step out of your comfort zone as you consider this hard task of self-care. And we ask you to do it in conscious and deliberate ways that are true to the kind of person you choose to be.

4 Practicing Self-Care as Practitioners in Crisis

What is our role as practitioners now? How can we contribute? We recognize that there are no easy answers to these questions and any answer will be different from person to person. What we offer below are some thoughts, ideas and suggestions that we aspire to hold in mind during this period to help us to be effective practitioners: present, competent, empathic, and genuine.

We hope these recommendations will help you navigate the complex path of staying effective in your treatment of your clients *and* being compassionate with yourself, as both the world situation and the context of your client work keeps constantly changing. Sometimes these changes will support your work; other times they will deeply challenge your work. Either way, you can do your best to be as effective a practitioner as you can in these times of uncertainty and know that other practitioners share your struggle.

Shift from fixing to serving. Most of us naturally want to help our clients. It is hard to sit and observe others when they are hurting. It can be easy to slip too early into “fix-it” mode, especially when others are desperately looking to us for certainty. However, it’s unrealistic to expect to be the *hero* everybody is waiting to see in us at the moment. This attitude may lead to the building up of tricky narratives as “I know how to make you feel better—I am in a better position than you.” This can be draining for both client and practitioner.

See if you can rather just simply observe this urge to come up with answers for your client’s uncertainty. Be kind and understanding with this urge. See if you can foster a different idea: that a “serving” stance invites us to accept that our common humanity at this time may be more powerful than our expertise.

Remember to take time to look after yourself. This might mean reminding yourself to not jump too deeply into another’s pain. It could mean spending more time in supervision reflecting on your emotional experience at this time. It may mean remembering not to get too hooked by guilt for the things you’re feeling grateful for and allowing yourself to appreciate them.

It could also mean giving yourself permission to make your own needs more prominent or ask others to help you meet them. We recognize that this may not be easy, especially with old stories about this (“you’re being too demanding; you’re selfish!”). This may require deep mindful breaths to help us step out of our comfort zones and take valuable self-care actions.

Be open to sadness and grief that will arrive, either for the aspects of life that have changed or been lost or in response to losses and deaths of others. This is a journey that we are all on that is changing week by week. As we move from the initial adjustment stage, into an interim stage of waiting for the crisis to be over—and eventually, finally, a stage in which we re-emerge in the world—we are likely to have different emotional responses. As we move through the different stages, grief may be one we could benefit from giving breathing space.

Hold the future lightly. Remember that this situation will change and progress. And there will be light at the end of the tunnel, even if the world we wake up to is very different than it once was.

Be cautious of overly catastrophic or negative predictions for the future you hear from a client—as these may be pulls for certainty (and the comfort that comes with them) rather than a perspective that’s entirely accurate or entirely useful. It’s okay to want comfort from certainty—that’s of course human. See if you can warmly shine a light on that need and recognize it with honesty and compassion. And see if you can do this for yourself no less than for your clients. Finally, remember to allow optimism to sprout naturally and of its own accord. Don’t be afraid to point out what’s going well for your client; don’t be afraid to recognize what there is to feel joyful about in your own life.

Allow space for new, creative and flexible ways of working to emerge. This means flexibility to let new methods surface, and not being too rigid in holding on to old ways. You may not be abandoning old ways, just taking a temporary pause in practicing them. Being overly black and white in your thinking about your approach might stifle your openness to creative solutions. Just to give you a few ideas as a starting point, here are a few examples of possible new changes that you might choose to embrace:

- Experiment with new working routines or hours, for example starting earlier and finishing earlier.
- Try using some of the handy tools online platforms offer, like *screen share* functions, to be practical and engage.
- Consider new possibilities that emerge from clients being at home, for example their immediate availability and the close proximity of people and things they care about, to facilitate meaningful exposure or behavioural activation.
- Record both video and audio in sessions (with your client’s permission) for the client to take away and review.

Transfer face-to-face values to online sessions. You might be nervous about online therapy if you haven’t done much of it before. But delivering therapy online doesn’t have to decrease the quality of your sessions. Just choose a safe online program or app to deliver your sessions, and a quiet, comfortable, and neutral place in your home to work from. And ask your clients to do the same. It’s important to guarantee the same confidential and safe environment as before. From there, just do what you would do if you were sitting with your client face-to-face, as best you can. Consider key values as being present, focused on your session, empathic, understanding, and genuine. You can keep open to these prominent values even if the way you express them may be modified to some degree when you work online.

Dial down excessively high standards. If ever there was a time to check your perfectionistic streak, this is it. We’d invite you to consider moving to a “good enough” standard for now. This means that everything may not be up to your usual high standards as you recognize the extra demands that are being placed on you. The one thing we are hearing from everyone during this time is how tired they are after running an online clinic—what’s sometimes called “Zoom fatigue”—which is a result of getting used to the big changes in online working.

Your best is okay for now. Perhaps allow yourself to do what you can to make it through this next period of time. Your treatment probably won’t be, and doesn’t have to be, as good as you would normally do it. And it’s okay to take breaks;

it's okay to rest if you need to. Whether you are on the front line or not, it's okay not to be a superhero; you don't have to wear that suit every day.

Remember that we are all in this together. The current crisis affects everyone in some way. The “all in the same boat” aspect of this current situation is powerful and the sharedness of this experience can be incredibly warming. It's likely you will feel this in your client work as you both recognize you are going through a big, painful, and difficult experience. Acknowledging this with your clients is likely to be very validating and humanizing for both of you.

Of course, the dark side of “we are all in this together” is that it will pull on us to quickly identify people who are not “with us.” These could be people who hold different viewpoints than we do or who are approaching or coping with this situation in a different way. Some of your clients might even fall into this camp. Without letting go of your own principles, or necessarily agreeing with their approach, it may be worth at least acknowledging that it is up to them to choose how they respond to any given moment. And your own actions are where you have the most control.

Managing a real threat is a key theme for our clients and ourselves. We are now very familiar with the guidance our governments and experts have provided us. What is tricky is knowing how to implement this guidance without letting our anxiety and drive for certainty run the show. Which is to say, if we let anxiety run the show, we'd be stuck in a cupboard under the stairs for the next four months.

The key is to check in with your values as you are making decisions about safety and health. For example, when you're making decisions about leaving the house or picking up deliveries or interacting with people. Ask yourself: *If I were being the kind of person I want to be, what would I choose to do? And: What is anxiety trying to boss me into doing? Could this just be anxiety pushing me to certainty?*

Connect with values of health and well-being and let these be guides to behavior. These can inform your actions, rather than anxiety and a pull for certainty being the drivers.

Remember to set limits with anxiety. It's not reasonable that it should completely run everything. Our values about self-care and self-compassion are likely to be important. Rather than fighting with or giving in to anxiety, see if you can soothe it. Recognize it. Acknowledge that it is trying to do an important job.

Ultimately, remaining an effective practitioner, and one who practices self-care and care for those in need, requires you to hold a few dialectics in mind.

Physically isolated AND socially connected. Physical isolation doesn't have to be emotional disconnection. We want to be close to our family, friends, colleagues, and clients. To use technology to reach our loving ones and to host our sessions. To show support and love to family and loved ones every day. And the paradox is that sometimes we will have to do it when we're feeling low and apathetic. Those emotions are not going to magically disappear, are they?

Uncertain AND open. These are strange days for all of us. As practitioners, we should do our best to fully accept the range of experiences this is going to make us feel. And we want to do this in a flexible way, acknowledging that some days will just be about surviving and others will be more fulfilling. Ultimately, it'll help to surf the waves of feelings and

thoughts you'll have at any given moment, even as you choose to act as the practitioner you want to be: warm, focused, and present in each session.

Worried AND kind. It's okay to feel fear at a time like this; and it's an expression of kindness to yourself and others to remember that we can *choose* how we respond to this fear—which is fear that we are *all* feeling. This dialectic involves us accepting and allowing that our mind is bombarding us with thoughts of unproductiveness, failure, and emptiness several times each day, reminding ourselves that this is common humanity, we are all going through similar experiences, and the only thing we can do is just make room and sit with it.

Unmotivated AND active. The two of us have always romanticized this whole idea of being stuck at home, having time to eventually finish all the pending projects. Of course, the reality is very different. This may not be the time for setting huge goals and having the highest expectations. But it can be an opportunity to keep ourselves active towards the things we find important: like work—and the other things that keep us mentally and physically active and feeling calm and nourished. Try to develop and follow some sort of routine that serves all your mental and physical needs. Do some yoga or running, if that makes you feel good; garden or bake; schedule in time with those you love; and so on.

5 One Last Thing

We hope this has been useful for you to read. We also hope that, you along with us, can continue to take steps towards being the kind of practitioner you choose to be at this moment, acknowledging the huge pressures, limitations, and restrictions that are imposed upon us as this crisis unfolds around us. In such times of uncertainty, it remains important, as ever, to ask ourselves how we would choose to respond, while at the same time extending a hand of kindness and understanding to ourselves, no less than to our clients, as we make our journey through fear, uncertainty, and sadness whilst allowing for hope, growth, and newness to gently emerge along the way.

Stay safe and well.

With love,
Helena and Joe

Who Are We?

Helena Colodro is a qualified clinical psychologist working for the private sector in London, a psychology lecturer in a Spanish University and one of the founders of “Inspira Psychology,” a psychotherapy center in Granada, Spain. She likes getting involved in all kind of appealing projects and collaborating in cool things with other fellows as well as developing ideas in psychotherapy. She holds a master’s degree in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness, some of the approaches that made her recover her interest and trust on psychology and therapy.

She suffers from vestibular migraines, a rare health condition that has significantly changed her life within the last few years. This may be why, more than ever, she appreciates small pleasures like going to the Barbican Centre after work, candlelit live gigs at Union Chapel, or a good pale ale at her local pub in South London. Cheers.

Joe Oliver is a consultant clinical psychologist, originally from New Zealand, now a long way from home, living in London for the past 20 years. He is the director of Contextual Consulting, an ACT-based consultancy, and does things like ACT training, ACT research, seeing clients for ACT, providing ACT supervision, writing ACT books—you may see a pattern. Joe lives with his wife and son in South London.

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Resources

The American Psychological Association’s COVID-19 information and resources:

<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19>

The American Psychological Association’s guidelines for the practice of telepsychology:

<https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology>

The British Psychological Society’s guide to effective therapy via video:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Effective%20therapy%20via%20video%20-%20top%20tips.pdf>

The British Psychological Society’s guide to considerations for delivering therapy to children and young people via video:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Member%20Networks/Divisions/DCP/Considerations%20for%20psychologists%20working%20with%20children%20and%20young%20people%20using%20online%20video%20platforms.pdf>

The British Psychological Society’s guidance for professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/News/News%20-%20Files/Guidance%20for%20Psychological%20Professionals%20during%20Covid-19.pdf>

“How to Respond Effectively to the Corona Crisis,” by Russ Harris

<https://us4.campaign-archive.com/?u=bf4dd43c2180e916479d78df7&id=ea673bae90&e=>

“How to Shield Yourself Against COVID-19,” by Cynthia Li

https://www.newharbinger.com/sites/default/files/excerpts/BNV_COVID_FINAL_rev.pdf?icn=selfhelp-pro-spirit

The Wellness Society’s “Coronavirus Anxiety Workbook”

<https://thewellnessociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-Anxiety-Workbook.pdf>

Talks from the “Maintaining Health and Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic” virtual event held at King’s College London:

https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/maintaining-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-covid-19-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR3y-fW-bxFb7k1yiryWvdCnklBZqCdxibG-y9B0eWsBYi331W_72z9qXTUo#.Xox5vQXr2W0.facebook

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