

coronavirus

uncertain

is a special way of feeling

Have you and yours caught the uncertainty bug – wishing you knew what to do in the face of COVID-19? You're not alone, it's a challenge facing many and this New Zealand publication looks straight at that fear

Here are some tips for the people who have been asking us for ways to see this uncertainty and to manage it, for:

- **Self and family**
- **Work teams near and far**
- **Whole organisations and communities.**

I'm sure the feeling of fear, as long as you can take advantage of it and not be rendered useless by it, can make you extend yourself beyond what you would regard as your capacity. If you're afraid, the blood seems to flow freely through the veins, and you really do feel a sense of stimulation. ~ Edmund Hillary

While we can't make the virus go away (yet), we can stop counting every infection as the end of the road. Inside, you'll find some suggestions. Some for you, some for your family and wider whānau. And some for your teams at work or your whole workplace. This publication doesn't address physical or medical concerns, but links on the last page will take you to good sources on that.

Nothing new in having to deal with the unknown. At many times in our lives we run into things we want to know (but don't or can't).

Feeling uncertain is something we often let go, but sometimes it sticks. How can we do what we need to do when we're trying not to worry? Maybe your people are feeling that panic is just around the corner? **Do what you're good at – take action with what works.**



Fear about coronavirus is normal – but don't let it control you

Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, epidemiologist working in chronic disease, in *The Guardian* 3 March 2020

While we may not have control over everything, there are evidence-based things you can do to help yourself

Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face.

The novel coronavirus, called Sars-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, Covid-19, are sweeping the globe. With thousands of deaths already, and many tens of thousands of people infected across the world, it's safe to say that the coronavirus has become one of the biggest events of the 21st century. It may only be a matter of time until we see outbreaks everywhere, with public health authorities warning that the disease will probably soon start spreading locally regardless of where you are on the planet.

If nothing else, the coronavirus is scary. And that is, in and of itself, an issue. Let me explain.

The problem with scary things is that we aren't very good at reacting to them. Humans are, when push comes to shove, awful at interpreting risk. We're much more freaked out over turbulence on a plane than a near-miss in traffic, even though of the two a car crash is far more likely to be a reality. We balk at the unknown dangers of illegal drugs with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

We fear what we don't understand. And what we fear, we seek to control.



In the case of the coronavirus, there are some pretty obvious examples. Reports are out that people are panic-buying everything from toilet paper to ibuprofen, even if there is no outbreak in their local area nor a strong likelihood of a shortage of either any time soon. People are taking to pharmacies in droves, buying up masks like there's no tomorrow, even though the evidence strongly suggests that masks are ineffective for most people. The main reason to buy a mask is if you are sick, because it stops your phlegm from getting on other people's faces.

There's no shortage of people selling supplements to cure this new infectious disease. There is, however, a distinct lack of evidence that any of that works.

Which brings us to one of the scariest parts of the coronavirus, which is, perhaps, what's really got people on edge. Most of the recommendations are things that other people have to do. Wearing masks when you're sick. Staying home if you feel unwell. Covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Seeking medical care early. And relying on other people – without having much control over your own fate – is something that none of us likes. Yes, you should wash your hands and stop touching your face, but neither of these feel like an intervention. They don't make us feel safe.

And really, that's what this panic is all about. Coping with the fear. Trying to find a small measure of control over a situation that seems to be made of pure chaos. Even though it's probably not going to work, we all really want to be able to do something to keep ourselves from getting sick.

So amid the scary stories it's worth remembering that, while we may not have control over everything, there are evidence-based things you can do to help yourself. The World Health Organization has a series of simple tips on its website that anyone can follow. Wash your hands more often, and practice not touching your face.

Ultimately, the most important thing to do is not to panic. Take a deep breath, remember that "pandemic" describes a disease's spread not its severity, and keep an eye on the news. Fear is OK. Fear is natural. We're all afraid, with even the experts admitting that there is a huge number of things about this outbreak that we just don't know yet.

Just don't let the fear control you. You'll probably have to live with it for a while yet.



How uncertainty looks in family and whānau

When we're unsure, our expectations of ourselves and others change a bit. The more uncertain we are, the more they change.

You might feel less confident. You might see your partner taking longer to decide things. The kids might argue over which programme to watch – more than usual. Your elders might not tell you what's bugging them, but might show it in more fussiness about how things happen, where things are put, even how their tea is made. Rising uncertainty washes over all of our lives.

At work, when people aren't sure what to do, they slow down and sometimes ask for help. If it's a big uncertainty, they sometimes distract themselves with other tasks, even ones that aren't all that important. If it's really big, they might not even tell someone what they're worried about – the usual level of gossip drops. This can affect whole organisations too – whether they are five people or five thousand.

There are two types of fears: rational and irrational – or in simpler terms, fears that make sense and fears that don't. ~ Lemony Snicket

What uncertainty does to people

We often talk about "traffic lights" in situations of rapidly growing uncertainty. How you're feeling over all moves from green to yellow with the first drop in confidence, and then holds at yellow with the second (rather than drifting naturally back to green). Another bad thing happening can take it from yellow to orange. Orange takes longer to escape from (floating gradually to yellow) but if a couple more bad things happen, orange can go down to red. One of the characteristics of red is that it feels like it won't change, which is partly because you haven't got the energy to keep trying to lift yourself up, and partly because the impact of the upsets is now disturbing sleep and everyday life.

Confident, not uncertain

Slightly uncertain

Moderately uncertain

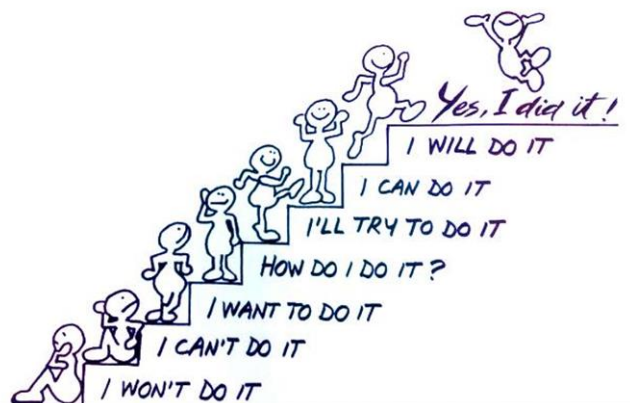
Severely uncertain



Some people will say there's a simple fix – all you have to do is cut yourself some slack, take some multivitamins, exercise more and you'll be feeling better soon. That's all well and good getting from yellow back to green, but orange and red are more complicated. It's still good advice, but getting started can be really difficult when you're in the red. There is often a sense of helplessness or hopelessness - and continual worry about not being able to do "normal stuff" anymore. So without meaning to, people in the red can run themselves further down. Gloom sets in and can smother everything and it's hard to lift.

You probably already know that a quick fix isn't going to work. Avoid the temptation of too much of a good thing, which might be shopping, drinking, driving too fast or partying all night (as if you had the energy). Don't beat yourself up if these distractions appeal - of course they do as they offer an escape from how you're feeling. But they don't address the cause and may make recovering your sense of confidence take more time or effort.

As a cure for worrying, work is better than whiskey ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson



What helps you?

A general introduction to dealing with upsetting effects of uncertainty.

If you're feeling really uncertain, can't stop worrying and don't know what to do to get yourself sorted:

- Spend time with people who accept you as you are - you don't have to explain yourself to them, you don't need to say what you are doing to "get better", but you can say you're finding life a challenge with things going wrong and you need to hang out with people who make it easy for a bit.
- If you have hobbies or work tasks that you find interesting and satisfying, try to do more of them - not to do them better than ever, but to give yourself the opportunity to regain the sense that you do (some) things well and that continues even though these bad things have been happening.
- Go to your GP, if s/he is someone you feel you can talk to about this stuff - you're not looking for medication necessarily but looking for someone to help keep an eye on you and keep you on the track that works for you to gradually climb back up.
- Find out about EAP - if there is some available, book yourself in (it's usually free for two or three sessions, as the employer pays to help people stay or recover fitness for work) and take some time with a counsellor to talk through your personal sense of loss, of disruption and of feeling the next bad thing will be along soon.
- With family, give support but also remember you can use some. Making simpler meals is one thing that often helps; letting yourself off the hook on your usual high standard of housekeeping is another; going out for a cheap and cheerful meal or outing that everyone likes is another - these things all take pressure off you for a little bit and let you catch your breath.
- Talk to your manager, your manager's manager or someone else at work that you already trust with personal stuff - you're looking for someone to help you see what you're doing well enough (to keep going) and what's not so good (to suggest a way of doing it differently).

Of all the liars in the world, the worst are your own fears ~ Rudyard Kipling

Can't keep going?

If your thoughts become dark, isolating or you think you can't keep going, say so to someone who can do something about it, whether that's at work,



Knock the "t" off the "can't"
~ Samuel Johnson

home, your GP or online. You may think that feels a bit much, but people in the red withdraw from others and sometimes lose their connections

All sorts of things can be done before it gets worse.

To reassure a child or elderly person...

Listening is key. Adults often instruct or advise kids, rather than listen. And it can be tempting to brush off or play down an older person's fears. But when we find ways to communicate openly, we give them a chance to say what they think, and to resolve some of their concerns for themselves. Then we can help them find the information that's most needed.



Feeling overwhelmed is fair enough. Small things the child or older person can do to make a difference are often helpful. When worry leads not to being unable to get out of bed, it's bad. When worry leads to taking some kind of effective action, then it is not so bad. Help them face their fear. Help them find something to do that helps, even in a small way.



Hutia te rito o te harakeke
Kei whea te kōmako e kō?
He aha te mea nui o te ao?
Māku e kī atu ki a koe,
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata
~ Te Wherowhero

What helps in family and whānau, at work and away?

A checklist to help you notice different levels of uncertainty, and look at some possible responses

On the left, signs you might see in you or others. In the middle, comparisons you can make with the past if you know it. At right, responses to consider, all by level. Sometimes people will show quite a mix across the colours.

Confident, not uncertain signs	Comparisons with past	Responses to consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Looks alert, gives prompt responses <input type="checkbox"/> Normal doubts are spoken and answered <input type="checkbox"/> Seeking information <input type="checkbox"/> Offers useful help to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Does usual things okay <input type="checkbox"/> Able to listen and cooperate <input type="checkbox"/> Upsets and bad moods fade <input type="checkbox"/> Puts up with others' differences <input type="checkbox"/> Works to solve problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Talk about things you'd like to know <input type="checkbox"/> Express confidence in things they do well (to do again) <input type="checkbox"/> Find ways that might work better when they're stuck
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Seems grumpy or upset <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of focus on task – may say thoughts are wandering <input type="checkbox"/> Keeps asking for confirmation of right thing to do <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently seeking more information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Making errors more often <input type="checkbox"/> Things done slowly or poorly <input type="checkbox"/> Works at but doesn't solve problems <input type="checkbox"/> More negative, impatient <input type="checkbox"/> Forgets or ducks responsibility <input type="checkbox"/> Distressed and moody <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict with others persists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Mental stimulation – turn on radio, chat to others <input type="checkbox"/> Change activity a bit more often <input type="checkbox"/> Get some air – open window, walk outside <input type="checkbox"/> Wash hands and face – warm water with soap <input type="checkbox"/> Drink more water – a straining brain needs water to take its rubbish out
<div style="border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 15px; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>Control your own destiny or someone else will ~ Jack Welch</p> </div>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Can't recall what they just did or said <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble using instructions <input type="checkbox"/> Quiet, withdrawn <input type="checkbox"/> More friction than usual with familiar people <input type="checkbox"/> Constant checking of "news" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Not doing usual things or not as well as usual <input type="checkbox"/> Puts off working on problems <input type="checkbox"/> Making poorer choices <input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive, critical <input type="checkbox"/> Arguing or sulking often <input type="checkbox"/> More illness than usual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Break up activities – maybe delay more difficult ones <input type="checkbox"/> Allow a nap and re-assess <input type="checkbox"/> Try stretching or walking <input type="checkbox"/> Check sleep is good quality and long enough <input type="checkbox"/> Take breaks from media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Stares into space <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't react to loud noises <input type="checkbox"/> Startles when talked to <input type="checkbox"/> Can't remember what's happened in the last few minutes <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't cope with anything out of the ordinary <input type="checkbox"/> Falling out with friends <input type="checkbox"/> Contradicts own decisions – may make the same decision over and over 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to do usual things <input type="checkbox"/> Can't get along with others – they withdraw <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't hold concentration <input type="checkbox"/> Not caring well for self <input type="checkbox"/> Hardly sees the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Time to get some help – this isn't a safe and happy place <input type="checkbox"/> If at work or driving, stop until rested <input type="checkbox"/> Take on less stressful or lower risk activities if possible <input type="checkbox"/> Consider both short recovery and longer term rehabilitation <input type="checkbox"/> Check on the people this person's looking after – they may not be so well either
	<div style="border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 15px; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>I've developed a new philosophy... I only dread one day at a time ~ Charlie Brown</p> </div>	

What helps my team and my organisation?

At work, it's a bit different. Here's what we've learned, and some ways to cope together are on the next page

On a construction site, I heard a group of workers, from several different countries, talking during a break.

"Have you heard about the coronavirus?"

"Yeah – that new flu from China."

"Many people died, eh. Like, thousands isn't it?"

"No-one knows what to do."

"It came from a wild bat."

"Don't see many of them around here."

"Are we safe then?"

"We are. Not you though - you eat weird food."

Others agreed that it was a lot of people and a bit of a worry, then they moved on to another topic.

I was interested. What would help them find out what they could do about coronavirus, and when they might need to do it? Which ones was it keeping awake at night? Would any of them be worrying about friends or family in other places already unable to move or to get help?

They hear and see the news. They use social media. They overhear conversations. And they talk, hearing other's experiences and fears. They pass all of this on.

Not knowing, and not being able to escape wanting to know brings us naturally to dread the topic of COVID-19. We don't want to know, but we can't escape the thoughts. Dread can also bring shame and embarrassment, so we don't ask the questions that would clear it up. A simple worry can become catastrophic, leading to avoidance, withholding information and withdrawal. It all happens faster if questions are dismissed or minimised – or even mocked.

The coronavirus is now spreading to every corner of the globe. There is constant media coverage on the people and places affected. Information from our health system leaders and government reassures us that lots is being done. Instructions tell us how to wash our hands. But how do we help people focus on what needs to be done and not get distracted by the unjustified reactions to people wearing masks, or who look like those in infected regions, and talking of friends in quarantine or lockdowns. Transport delays, school disruptions and deferred 'non-critical' health treatments may soon start in New Zealand. Family, friends, work mates, even workers themselves, may become sick.

It took me a long time, but I don't feel as anxious about stupid things anymore - or perhaps they've just been replaced by more complicated stupid things ~ Neil Finn

There is plenty of advice out there already on the importance of washing hands and not sharing tools. But how's that going to work when everyone in the gang has to use the same tools? When there is only one copier in the office? When we have to use the site phone? There will be suggestions coming on these things, but there is something else that matters already: We need to talk through how we'll cope now. That's *before* people at work have to stay home to look after someone else, or because they were exposed playing sport a week ago with someone who's now tested positive.

Repeated telling of the number of infections has the effect of watching the same footage of an event over and over. Every repeat adds a growing threat, with resolution unknown. We need to balance this with talk about how many people are coping well, working and recovering well.

People hear your fears — and can be infected by them. If you seem worried or preoccupied, they will pick up on that. They may then choose not to bring it up with you.

There are two kinds of worries - those you can do something about and those you can't. Don't spend any time on the latter. ~ Duke Ellington

What has to be done?

Your people really need to know how your team and organisation will handle self-isolation and quarantine.

How will your people keep productive at work and:

- recognise the main signs or symptoms of COVID-19 infection
- act when someone at work shows signs or describes feeling symptoms
- signal they have been exposed to coronavirus and need to self-isolate
- respond when someone goes into quarantine because they are infected
- confirm they have completed self-isolation and advise they are ready to return
- help others at work to keep getting work done and getting on with each other, regardless of others' culture, race or beliefs.

A systematic approach

Leaders and managers build a workplace response

Basic facts will reassure your people

- Good handwashing is the best defence
- Most COVID-19 infections cause a mild illness like a cold, with full recovery in a fortnight or so
- People we need to watch most have weaker lungs and hearts, as infection can be serious for them
- Children rarely get sick, and pets even less often
- People are working across the world to look after each other, to find vaccines and treatments
- Self-isolation might be needed more than once
- Caring for ill people in quarantine will affect us all.

Getting ready

- Start these conversations sooner rather than later, so that you are trusted as a source of information before gossip and “fake news” becomes the default source.
- Choose a place and time when you can give your team your full attention and (if possible), when no one is tired, stressed, hungry or rushed.
- Expect difficult questions but don't tell them what you think they should be asking – that can shut down questions they're still working up to asking.
- Use a calm, reassuring tone of voice. If you can't, maybe you need to rest a bit first.

Believe you can and you're halfway there ~ Roosevelt

Following up

- If you're concerned about someone, try chatting one-on-one – talking side-by-side can work better than face-to-face and fits while walking or driving.
- Be honest but keep your boundaries — if people ask whether you're okay, tell them you'll get help from others if you need it.
- Be honest: there will be disruption for at least some months, but there's enough food and water and medicine if we share it around.

Worrying is like a rocking chair.
It gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere.



Delivering

- Start by checking in with an open question about what they know and how they are feeling about the topic.
- Acknowledge fears and concerns, offer facts where you are sure of them, admit uncertainty where you don't know, focus on what we *can do* to keep work going.
- Talk plainly about the real risks and what you know will mitigate them – and explain where your information has come from.
- Describe the main signs (what others see) and symptoms (what they feel inside) and encourage them to let you know if they feel unwell or if they spend time with someone who is.
- Give useful, simple and factual information, but don't overload them.
- Get them involved in making sure supplies are kept up, in case the people who organise them aren't available for a while.
- Discuss roles that keep work safe and how these roles will be filled if those who do them now are in isolation for a fortnight or two.
- Assign them (or have them choose) tasks and roles in looking after themselves, others and the team's ability to get work done as people go into isolation and return.
- Encourage self-care and self-belief: talk about how they can help preparations and responses – let some fun come in as they consider what might happen in the place of hongi or handshakes.
- Don't make promises you can't keep; let them know that they can talk more later.

More help

Leading with the right stuff

At work or at home, starting on the right foot makes it easier for you all to end up somewhere more certain.

1. Focus on the situation, issue, or behaviour

The right stuff: clear-headed talk about what's needed, related to the bigger picture, acting on facts, keeping an open mind to help everyone solve problems more efficiently, make better decisions, and avoid emotional outbursts

The wrong stuff: Blaming, labelling, generalizing

2. Maintain self-confidence and mana

The right stuff: Contributing fully is easier if people feel safe and accepted; they're more willing to take risks and stretch their abilities

The wrong stuff: Demeaning, mocking, threatening

3. Maintain constructive relationships

The right stuff: Getting things done depends on cooperation among colleagues of different ages, background, education, origin, and perspective.

The wrong stuff: Withholding help, information, or resources

4. Take initiative to make things better

The right stuff: Focus on what can be done, on what's needed first, and on what keeps people able to do it again tomorrow – and owning up to mistakes

The wrong stuff: Complaining, waiting for others

5. Lead by example

The right stuff: Model dealing with setbacks, stress, and pressure to deliver what's needed when it's done well enough

The wrong stuff: Ignoring inadequate work

6. Think beyond the moment

The right stuff: Consider the impact of decisions and make considerate plans that recognise and foster trust

The wrong stuff: Pushing a private agenda

Drag your thoughts away from your troubles... by the ears, by the heels, or any other way you can manage it. ~ Mark Twain

Worried about someone?

Suspect you have the COVID-19 coronavirus? Call Healthline free on 0800 611 116. Phone ahead before you go to an emergency department or your GP.

EAP (Employee Assistance Programmes) at work are a great way to get a bit more help if you're struggling with work or personal worries that won't go away. If it's physical as well, consider your GP, and talk with your manager and HR if your work has these people.

Stress won't stop? Free resources on many topics at mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/

He waka eke noa

Good information, kept up to date

Ministry of Health has NZ-specific information on coronavirus protection and recovery at health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov. Information is also available from your DHB, and some schools and other workplaces. Try healthandsafety.govt.nz/news-and-events/news/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/

Employers have specific advice at employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/other-types-of-leave/coronavirus-workplace/ and on keeping staff safe and well at worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/work-related-health/workplace-preparedness-for-novel-coronavirus/. Government agency information for businesses is at business.govt.nz/news/coronavirus-information-for-businesses/

If travelling or you've New Zealanders abroad, see MFAT's Safe Travel at safetravel.govt.nz/news/novel-coronavirus-china-2019-ncov.

Global information is kept up to date by WHO, the World Health Organization. See also their Q&A and myth-busting information:

- who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019
- who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses
- who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters.

Research information at thelancet.com/coronavirus and ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/coronavirus-research