

COVID 19 anxiety and food

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Anxiety happens when we worry or feel uncertain about our future. And COVID 19 has certainly provided us with a lot of fuel for an uncertain future. That thinking of 'What if?' 'What if I get sick?' 'What if my friends or family or elderly loved ones or clients get sick?' 'Will I survive, will they survive?'

Financial uncertainty, 'Will I keep my job? Will clients keep coming to see me? What if I have no income?'

They are all very real concerns. But projecting our fear into the future can send us down a rabbit hole of anxiety and despair. What we can do is consider what is happening now. What can I do now, at this time? Sometimes we can't do anything except wait. And as health professionals that can feel challenging. We're very used to movement and action. Being able to sit with things that we can't control can be difficult. Sometimes there is just nothing to do and that's ok.

As health professionals we can lead by example. It seems counter-intuitive, but we really need to be looking after ourselves. But rather than being selfish, keeping well means we have the ability to care for others.

When we feel like we have little control, most advice suggests maintaining a routine. Routines provide structure, reliability and a sense of control. They provide something we can be in charge of. As we all know, the backbone of a solid routine is exercise, rest and eating regular meals. When we are fed and well rested our physical and mental stamina builds up.

Another thing we can control is the media we are viewing. Spending hours watching and listening to newsfeeds and social media can feel overwhelming. We need to limit our media time and use reliable sources.

Our clients may be in heightened states of anxiety. It can be easy to pick up on this and feel exhausted after spending time with them. Find someone you can debrief with regularly. Spend time with people who are calm themselves. Go easy on yourself, avoid harsh self-judgement.

If we are in good shape mentally and physically, then we'll be in the position to look out for our family, friends and community. As dietitians, we can be utilising the sense of kindness that sharing food can provide. Cooking and preparing food can be calming and give us a sense of purpose. Sharing food provides emotional as well as physical nourishment.

For some clients, visiting a supermarket with low stock levels or being unable to buy their usual foods may cause feelings of food insecurity. They may feel compelled to stockpile food, throwing random items in their trolley to feel more secure.

Alcohol is used to self-medicate when feeling distressed. Food too, is often used to sooth and distract from uncomfortable emotions. With the current extra stress, reduced or no income, food in low supply in supermarkets and not being able to purchase the foods they regularly do, clients may have triggers for disordered eating or excuses for disordered eating.

Emotional eating, comfort eating, over-eating and food cravings can all emerge during stressful times. Eating like this can provide an initial feeling of relief, a feeling of “time-out”, and a feeling of calm. Afterwards, the focus of worry can then be attributed to the worry of the eating behaviour and then a belief that the eating can be controlled so a sense of control is gained.

With our clients, we need to be able to stay calm and measured. Listen carefully and empathise. Try not to get trapped into discussing things which are out of your and their control. We should avoid keeping them talking about things which will increase their anxiety. Guide the conversation to things which they can do or which you can help them work out a plan of how to manage. “Let’s see if we can help you to manage some of this”. “What can we do today together to help you better manage your food and eating?”

Try not to repeat their negative comments, repeat positive comments. Let them lower their expectations of what they can achieve when just getting through each day is a big effort.

We can provide help to ourselves, our family, friends, community and our clients. We can lead by example, advise and care. Simple positive messages are soothing messages. Food routines help us keep stable and well.