

## **Facing the Covid-19 Outbreak with Mindfulness and Compassion**

*From Ollie Frame, retreat and workshop leader at The Sharpham Trust*

These are extraordinary times, and the need for mindfulness, compassion and wise action has never been greater. Below are some suggestions to help us navigate through this unprecedented situation, not only to help us deal with all the difficulties that it continues to throw at us, but also to use it as an opportunity to cultivate qualities, habits and skills that will continue to serve ourselves, each other and the planet as a whole for the rest of our lives.

- 1. Wash your hands mindfully.** Take the opportunity to slow down, washing your hands properly and thoroughly. With regular washing, this will repeatedly help you to come more fully into the present moment by focussing your attention on your immediate sensory experience – the water on your skin, the sounds, the smell of the soap, the contact between one hand and the other, etc.
- 2. Take time out.** Setting time aside for meditation practice is more important than ever at such times. Whichever particular practice that you choose, keep coming back again and again to the present moment whilst compassionately acknowledging difficult feelings and giving them space. You can rest your hand on your heart, or your belly, or wherever in your body you feel those emotions most strongly, and really feel into the warmth and gentleness of that touch. At times of upset and uncertainty, the thought stream can be very strong and emotions can be very turbulent, so in your meditations as well as in your daily life do your best to cultivate patience and acceptance for what you are going through.
- 3. Move with awareness.** Mindful movement practices, such as yoga, qi gong or walking meditation, can be very grounding and when emotions are strong some people may find these more helpful than practices where they are sitting or lying still. Movement also keeps you fit and healthy so that you can better resist and recover from the virus.
- 4. Recognise when your threat response has become engaged.** When this happens, your thoughts, emotions, and perceptions all become threat-focussed, meaning that you will perceive the world in a very distorted way, and act accordingly. At times like these it can be helpful to remind yourself that you can't completely trust your thoughts right now and things will probably seem very different when you have calmed yourself down.
- 5. Catch the catastrophising.** With even the slightest hint of danger, our minds can spin off multitudes of worst-case scenarios. It is our brain's attempt to keep us safe by preparing us for every imaginable eventuality. However, when this tendency is left unchecked we can lose touch with reality and find ourselves in the grip of fear and panic. Recognise and name these thoughts as catastrophic thinking, and let them pass. Acknowledge the fear and anxiety that is driving the catastrophising and hold these feelings with tenderness and patience. You can reassure yourself by silently saying something like “It is OK to feel this way”, or “Right now, I am OK”, or “I will deal with this one step at a time” etc.

**6. Keep a sense of balance.** We live in a world of stories – the incessant chatter and speculation of the media and the incessant chatter and speculation of our minds. It is important not to expose yourself to too much information if it is causing panic and despair, so consider what a good balance is when it comes to keeping yourself up to date with important information. When it comes to thoughts, it can be helpful to repeatedly ask yourself, “Is it helpful to be thinking about this right now?”. If the answer is no, then either drop beneath the thoughts and compassionately engage with the feelings (see above), or come back to the here and now – what you are experiencing through the senses.

**7. Calm yourself down with 'Soothing Rhythm Breath'.** When you notice yourself getting very anxious or unsettled, take a few minutes out to take some longer, slower breaths, perhaps breathing in for 4 or 5 seconds through the nose and then after a short pause breathing out for 4 or 5 seconds through a small hole in the mouth. Find a rhythm that is soothing and calming. This is not about pushing away feelings or emotions but about giving you more space around them so that you are able to manage them better. Do this as often in the day as needed, but particularly before bed or when feeling unsettled.

**8. Nurture, soothe, nourish.** Find ways to nurture and soothe yourself, and do these regularly and in a mindful way, so that you can really take the nourishment in. Examples might be taking a bath, self-massage, cooking a favourite healthy meal, hobbies, spending time in nature etc. Eat well, rest well and exercise well. Keep in touch with friends and loved ones so that you can express and receive support and love.

**9. Make the most of Self-Isolation.** In many cultures and traditions, people have taken time away from society to be alone in the service of personal and spiritual growth. If you are spending more time at home, try to use the time wisely so that this can be a time of growth and expansion. Rather than spending too much time plugged into electronic entertainment and distraction, use this as a time to meditate, to reflect, to write in your journal, to get creative, to learn new skills, to explore music, art, poetry and literature.

**10. Stay connected with your heart.** When in the threat response, we can get very fixated on our own and/ or our family's wellbeing and safety. At times this may be important and necessary, but whenever possible we can use this situation to cultivate the qualities of the heart, such as compassion, generosity, kindness and empathy. We can offer support to people that might need it, such as offering to shop or cook for the elderly, or phoning people who might be lonely. When we are having a hard time, we can remember others who are suffering too, not only from Coronavirus but from war, inequality, poverty, hunger and so on. We can cultivate the compassionate motivation to alleviate this suffering in the world, now and for the rest of our lives. In this way, as a society when we look back on this time from the future, we can see it not as a meaningless crisis but as a positive turning point in which we lay the foundations for a fairer, kinder and more respectful human culture.