

The psychological impact of COVID-19 and your Unisa studies

Directorate:
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Introduction

As human beings, we cope better with:

- certainty
- familiar structure
- feeling in control
- dealing with expected changes
- having a sense of belonging
- feeling safe and secure

Where are we now

- The current COVID-19 crisis and the prevention measures such as lockdown and social distancing has consequences in terms of our mental health.
- As human beings, we worry and become anxious when confronted with changes. We suddenly feel like we have lost everything.
- We suddenly feel anxious, demotivated and sadness.
- We are constantly worried and uncertain about all aspects our life. For example you are uncertain if you and/or your partner will ever return to work; when your kids will return to school and what will happen when they return to school, and/or how you can cope with your studies and the added responsibilities and stressors.
- The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown also has a physical impact on us, and it is normal to feel more tired than usual.

Where are we now

- We still have life in the midst of the outbreak and the lockdown.
- There will also be life post the outbreak.
- Things are not the same and they will not be the same.
- We need to appreciate that we can't be same.
- If we want to remain the same, we will experience distress, anxiety and be demotivated about life.

Experiencing loss

- We have also experienced loss in the past weeks: we may have lost loved ones due to COVID-19 or other illness. We may have experienced loss of income, our identities, relationships, social, and professional networks
- We have lost our routine and our way of being. You suddenly can't hug or shake hands anymore, or visit friends for a braai. You had an established way of doing things, e.g. you had established a programme to study at the library, or attend discussion classes with fellow students. Apart from that, you cannot just go shopping like before: you need to be sanitised, make sure you follow the rules and you are protecting yourself. At times you may even feel anxious about the possibility that you could be infected. You may be working from home, looking after elderly parents, and home schooling.

Psychological impact

- The scenarios we have pointed out and many more have an impact on our mental health.
- We might not be consciously focused on all these changes, but we are confronted daily by the changes and these changes are unavoidable.
- Most people have realised in the past weeks that they have become quite demotivated, anxious, tired and restless. Some of us may be constantly worried if we are infected with the Corona virus or not – to the point of feeling like you have symptoms.
- Our lives has been drastically changed which impact on all spheres of our lives, which in turn impacts on our mental health.

How do we move on

- We need to normalise this feelings we are experiencing – it is a normal response to a situation that is abnormal.
- We suddenly have to live a new life, and establish new routines.
- Some of us are feeling stuck, struggling to establish new ways of doing things or of relating to our new realities.
- We are also stuck because we feel as if there is nothing and that everything has been taken away.

How do we move on

- We can move on in a way that is psychologically healthy to our mental health even if the situation has not changed.
- We need to reframe our current situation by:
 1. appreciating certain aspects of our current situation;
 2. thinking about our needs;
 3. acknowledging what we feel worried about; and
 4. Identifying our resources

Appreciating the current situation

- What are things you have managed to do during this difficult time?
- E.g. I can do my work at my own pace; I can spend more time with my family.

My current needs

- Write down your current needs
- E.g. I need to study

What am I worried about?

- What are you worried about? It's important to list all the things you are worried about.
- Once you have done this, also label each either as something you can control or have resources to control or something that you cannot control or do not have resources to control.
- This is important because during this time most of us we are overwhelmed because we think we do not have control over all aspects of our lives.
- We want to assure you that there are some aspects of our lives we are in control of – we just need to start paying attention

What resources do I have?

- You need to be aware of what you have and use what you have (your resources).
- Your feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed might be compounded by your perception that no one understands what you are going through. It also feels like what you are expected from you is too much and unrealistic.
- It is important to let people know where you are and what you are struggling with – if others do not know that you need support, they are not able to support you..
- **Make a list of your resources.**
- E.g. support from a partner; having a device to access myUnisa

Some practical things we can start doing ...

- In establishing new routines, we need to start somewhere. It will not be easy but with practice we will succeed.
- Wake up with a programme – e.g. start with getting up, washing and dressing.
- Appreciate small moments and be mindful when you are doing something. For example, when you are eating - chew slowly and allow yourself to feel the texture of what you are eating and experience the flavours. Eat as well as you can given your current resources.
- Think about things you need to start doing to achieve your needs. For example, your need is to study. Can you start planning your study time each day?
- Maybe you do not have all the resources for all the modules. You will then need to decide which modules you have all the resources for in order to then focus on these in terms of preparing for and writing the exams.

Some practical things we can start doing ...

- Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from difficult circumstances or events.
- You can choose to build your resilience during this time by
 - reflecting on the positive things to have come from the COVID-19 crisis and how you are managing your response to it
 - being kind to yourself – remind yourself that you have managed challenges before and that you can use those principles to respond to your current circumstances
 - taking care of yourself – create space for yourself in a day to be mindful about what you are doing, e.g. appreciate what you are eating, take a few minutes to appreciate small things that you are managing during this time

Some practical things we can start doing ...

- Reach out for support – talk to someone about your feelings.
- You need to be aware of what you have and use what you have (your resources).
- Think about other things you can do to replace your old routines.
- Exercise to help your body mentally and physically.

Some practical coping strategies

- Focus on what you can manage.
- Do not overwhelm yourself with things that do not involve you.
- Preserve your emotional resources.
- Its important to reflect and focus on what sustains you during this time.
- Be authentic and honest.

Some practical coping strategies

- Be active: exercise inside or outside (being mindful of lockdown rules) to help you focus your mind on what you feel grateful for. Some example activities are running, walking, yoga, and meditation.
- Take advantage of the time you have now to buy and read the books you always wanted to, or complete that online course you registered for some time ago but did not get around to.
- Spend time outdoors in the garden or backyard.
- Think of innovative ways to manage your challenges: e.g. many of us may live in households with other family members including children. When you have multiple children with different school activities and you need to cook and clean and work from home, it is hard to find time and energy for studies. Finding time to study may mean putting kids to bed earlier or waking up before they do!

Some practical coping strategies

- How are you managing a busy schedule during lockdown? Are you finding innovative ways to manage your life roles?
- If you have a story to share with others, please send us an e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za.

Change as an opportunity

- How we respond to our current situation can even present opportunities in our personal lives and change our perceptions about our careers as well as our relationships.
- Think about how you can change your perspective and focus
- This will help us to manage the anxiety and the feeling of being demotivated.
- For example, let us focus on our exams. We have certainty that we will write exams even though we cannot be certain about the results.

- During this time, you can focus on one aspect of your life that can provide meaning:
 - maybe the lockdown gave you an opportunity to just focus on your studies
 - You may have the opportunity to deal with issues in your life that you have been avoiding. Maybe this is time to deal with them without being distracted
- Even though we have a perception that our lives are certain, nothing is certain in life. We need to use this opportunity to appreciate the uncertainty. We can still plan for uncertainty.
- Start thinking differently about your challenges – we must not amplify the challenge at hand. We can choose to amplify human and non human resources that we have.

Further resources

- Unisa Covid-19 resources and messages: [https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/Announcements/Coronavirus-\(COVID%E2%80%9319\)-update](https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/Announcements/Coronavirus-(COVID%E2%80%9319)-update)
- Emergency Hotline: 0800 029 999
- WhatsApp Support Line: 0600 123 456
- COVID-19 Corona Virus South African Resource Portal: <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/>
- The *SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)* offers online resources related to your mental health and COVID-19. Learn more about managing stress and anxiety as well as living with a mental illness on their website at <http://www.sadag.org/>.
- The Psychological Society of South Africa General Public Information Resource contains useful links related to COVID-19 and working from home: <http://psytalk.psyssa.com/general-public/>.
- Find information about reporting and receiving assistance related to gender-based violence here: <http://gbv.org.za/>.

Contact us

We are available by e-mail:

- Send an e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za should you need to discuss any needs you may have in terms of further support.
- Contact Counselling and Career Development at a [regional centre closest to you](#).