



## Making calmness contagious

By Trevor Eddolls

**How many times have we asked our clients to imagine an ocean of calmness spreading through their whole body and helping them to relax? In days of lockdowns, social distancing, and self-isolation, it can sometimes be hard for people to feel calm and relaxed, let alone allow those feelings to spread out through their families, friends, and into the local community.**

Covid-19, the Coronavirus, has gone from a story on the news set in a distant country to our everyday living reality. Schools are closed so children are at home all day. Supermarkets are packed with people, while at the same time having empty shelves. And, while some families are finding themselves spending all day together – something that only happens at Christmas and on holiday – other people are finding themselves isolated and alone, fearing to step outside in case they become ill.

Some people are trying to be upbeat about it, but many others are finding themselves getting angry and frustrated. They're finding it difficult to keep their emotions under control – difficult to stay in their intellectual brain, difficult for their Executive Function to rein in the excesses of their primitive brains.

The outbreak of an infectious disease can lead to people (including therapists like us) to:

- Feel worried (and, perhaps, frightened) about their own health and the health of loved ones
- Experience changes in the sleep or eating patterns
- Have difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Find their chronic health problems worsening
- Increase their use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

In Buddhism, one of the four sublime attitudes is 'equanimity'. You can think of it as a state of psychological stability and composure that is undisturbed by experience of or exposure to emotions, pain, or other phenomena that may cause others to lose the balance of their mind. Basically, it's the ability to "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you" (taken from "If" by Rudyard Kipling).

**As experts on calmness and relaxation, what can we do to help ourselves and those around us?**

As Solution Focused Hypnotherapists, a key aspect of what we do involves the 3Ps, so let's look at those – positive thoughts, positive actions, and positive interactions – and start with positive thoughts. Probably, only Buddhist monks can manage positive thoughts all the time, but we can all recognize when we are being pulled into our right-prefrontal cortex and imaging everything as being bad. And that can be exacerbated by continually scouring the Internet for the latest news – not all of which will be genuine. I would suggest that we limit the amount of time each day spent watching, listening to, or reading the news. And stay within that sensible limit. That way, we're not focusing on the problem.

Being at home all day can lead to people getting very little exercise. You walk from the bedroom to the bathroom, into the kitchen and then sit down in the dining room or wherever you have your laptop set up. At the end of the day, you walk into the lounge to watch TV and then up to bed. So, for positive action, make sure you get some exercise. Walk around the garden. If you can, walk in the countryside (keeping well away from other people) – we know how

good that can be for us. If you live in a town, perhaps walk to the park and back. If you can, go for a jog. At the very least, try High-Intensity Training (HIT). You run on the spot for a minute (or more) but stop before you start to sweat. This makes exercising quite quick and can be very effective. Of course, everyone should use caution when exercising at home or doing DIY – we don't want the NHS to be even more stretched by people inflicting accidental harm on themselves!

The second positive action is to spend time with your children. Talk to them. Reassure them what will happen as the virus spreads. Explain to them the government's policies. And answer their questions. And let them tell you about other things that are important in their life. This could be a great opportunity to connect with people who, one day, will be choosing your care home!

When it comes to positive interaction, that can at first seem quite hard with everyone social distancing, if not self-isolating. One solution is your phone – actually use it to call people. How is granny or great aunt Betty? Give them a ring. In fact, you've got time to call everyone on your Christmas card list. Cheer them up. Tell them funny stories that have happened to you. It doesn't have to be a phone call. You can use your Alexa Show to video call people and see their faces. You can do the same with Skype, Facetime (if you both have Apple devices), or video call using WhatsApp. And there are many other apps offering these kinds of facility.

A new addition to the 3Ps is a fourth for 'Purpose'. Positive Psychology tells us that people are happier when they have a purpose. Your purpose is to get your business ready for its relaunch; keep your existing clients making positive changes; and spread calmness out amongst your relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues.

One of the best things that you can do in your new way of life is to create and keep to a new routine and encourage other to do so too. This means that you get up at the same time each day and go to bed at the same time. This will help your body know when it's time to sleep and when it's time to wake up. And, so, you'll find you sleep better. If you get enough sleep for you each night, it:

- Reduces stress
- Improves your memory
- Makes you more alert
- May reduce your risk of depression
- Heightens creativity
- Boosts your immune system
- Is good for your heart
- Helps the body repair itself
- Keeps you slimmer
- Helps you live longer
- And much more.

And routines are good for children as well as adults. It helps everyone to manage their days. And helping people with sleep is something we do in the normal course of events. You probably already have a list of advice for helping people get to sleep.

It is normal for people to feel overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, or upset, etc in the current situation. As well as the usual bucket emptying, there are a variety of other techniques you can use with clients to get them out of fight and flight mode into the more relaxed rest and digest mode.

These include:

- 7-11 breathing – breathing out for longer than breathing in.
- Anchoring – the NLP classic conditioning technique of associating an action (rubbing your ear or pressing your thumb and middle finger together, for example) with a feeling (e.g. being calm and in control). Whenever you begin to feel anxious or stressed, you perform the action and the conditioning makes you feel calm and in control again.
- Circle of excellence – again from NLP, you imagine a circle on the floor containing all the skills you need to feel calm and in control. You step into this invisible circle and enjoy the feelings. You can then step into the circle at any time in any situation.
- Allow time to notice and express feelings, e.g. by writing them down in a journal or talking to others.
- Do something creative.
- Practice meditation to connect to inner peace or try yoga.
- Identify automatic thoughts.

The last point is a CBT technique. Automatic thoughts are our internal dialogue that occurs rapidly and repeatedly. Uncovering the meaning of the automatic thought that a person may have can help them to begin to replace them with more positive thoughts.

In fact, CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) gives us another insight into people's thinking – what they call cognitive distortions. These are ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are then used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions. By learning to correctly identify this kind of thinking, a person can then refute it. And by refuting the negative thinking over-and-over again, those negative thoughts will get less-and-less over time. Cognitive distortions include things like 'black and white thinking', catastrophizing and overgeneralising.

These negative thoughts can be stopped by noticing what events trigger them and looking at what other ways of thinking might fit the situation better. I'm sure you'll meet a lot of catastrophizing. With the uncertainty around paid employment and whether you've come into contact with infected people, there are probably a lot of people spending a lot of time brooding.

***"Exercise reduces stress and boosts mood"***



But apart from filling up our stress buckets, brooding doesn't do any harm does it? Unfortunately, it does. The negativity we feel about that one thing can spread to negatively viewing other aspects of our lives. And that leads to depression and longer depressive episodes. Some people use alcohol as a way of stopping brooding. And, so, the tendency to brood is associated with a greater risk of alcoholism. Other people try to comfort eat as a way of cheering themselves up and stop brooding. So brooding is also associated with increased risk of developing an eating disorder. It's also linked to anxiety and substance abuse. Of course, the brain can't tell a real event from an imagined event (or a brooded over event), so it begins to think that your life is full of unpleasantness. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and passivity, which makes a person less likely to take remedial action. Brooding is also bad for our health and can lead to us developing cardiovascular disease.

How can you stop someone brooding? Distraction does work. Suggest people try a crossword puzzle or Sudoku. They could also watch an absorbing film or TV programme (as long as it isn't about Coronavirus) or do a quiz. They can do anything that requires concentration. Like with so many things, exercise can help. There's a theory that the more you're thinking about a problem, the slower you walk. So, if they run, then they can't really think at all.

You could reframe the event for them by looking upon it as a learning exercise so that they know how to respond/act another time. Or think of it as an experiment and observe the results when this particular set of circumstances occurred. They could take control of their life and only allow themselves to worry at a specific time of the day, say 20-30 minutes in the early evening. At other times, they must stop themselves brooding because it's the wrong time of day. Once people have stopped brooding, you can start really emptying their stress bucket (they won't be filling it up quite so quickly) and getting them to identify sparkling moments (good things that happen in their life) and things they are grateful for.

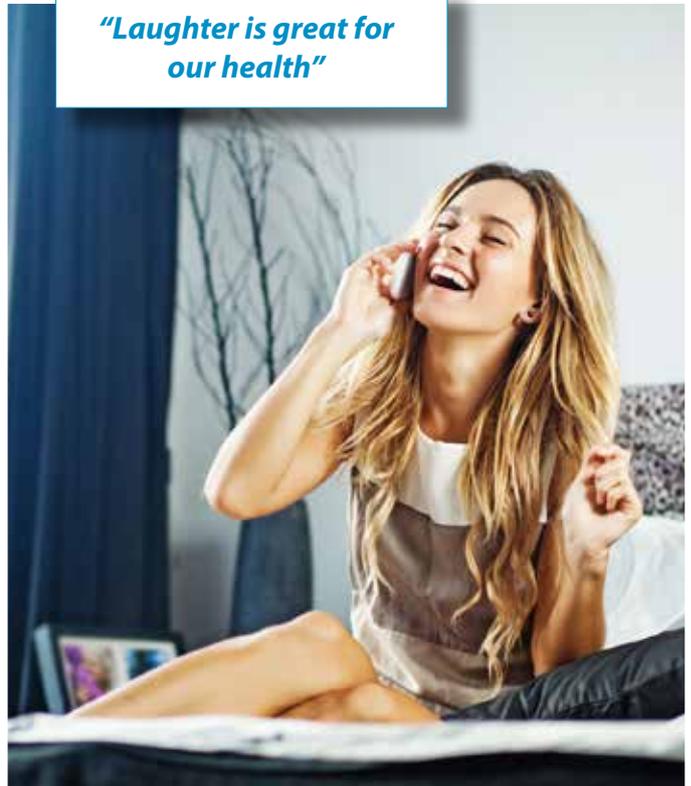
### What can people do to make themselves happy?

Back in 2005, the BBC produced a four-part observational documentary series called Making Slough Happy. Their experts produced a workable plan to make people feel more positive about things. Here's their list:

- **Get physical** – take half an hour exercise once a week.
- **Count your blessings** – at the end of each day reflect on one or two things you are grateful for.
- **Take time to talk** – have an uninterrupted conversation with your partner or closest friend each week.
- **Plant something** – even if it's just a window box or pot. Keep it alive!
- **Cut down your TV viewing.**
- **Phone a friend** – make contact with one friend or relative you have not spoken to for a while.
- **Have a good laugh** – at least once a week.
- **Give yourself a treat** – every day and take the time to enjoy it.
- **Spread some kindness** – do a good turn for someone whenever you can.

Taking 'have a good laugh' from the list, we find that laughter helps people view situations in a more realistic and less

*"Laughter is great for our health"*



threatening light. It can help people think 'outside of the box' and be more innovative and creative. Laughing also improves people's memories. The hormone cortisol, which is produced in moments of stress, can damage the neurons in a person's hippocampus and can even shrink the size of their brain. So, laughter reduces the amount of cortisol and helps with memory. In fact, one study found that people who laughed were able to learn and recall information in almost half the time of those people who didn't laugh!

Laughing relaxes a person's whole body. The act of laughing increases abdominal pressure and movements of the diaphragm. These movements massage the vagus nerve, causing it to send a signal telling the body to relax (using parasympathetic nerves). The body movements that go with laughing also act like a pump for a person's lymphatic circulation. This assists the lymphatic vessels in carrying fluid through that person's body and helps their lymph nodes to clean and filter this fluid, removing waste products, dead cells, and even unwanted microorganisms. An increased lymphatic flow improves their immune system. Laughter also increases the numbers of immune cells (lymphocytes) and infection-fighting cells (phagocytes), and so improves a person's resistance to disease and ability to fight infection. It also causes the body to release endorphins. These act as pain killers and promote an overall feeling of wellbeing.

A hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving a person's muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes afterwards. Also, when a person laughs, they stretch muscles throughout their face and body. This results in their pulse and blood pressure going up, and they breathe faster, sending more oxygen to their tissues. This can increase a person's energy levels. Laughter also, apparently, causes the release of nitric acid, which helps dilate blood vessels, which, in turn, protects your heart.

Laughter has been shown to help hospital patients with a range of illnesses, making them better able to cope with

their illness and their treatment. It's also very difficult to feel angry, anxious, or sad if we are laughing. Laughter helps us keep a positive, optimistic outlook when we're experiencing difficult situations, disappointments, and losses.

As well as helping us create endorphins, laughter affects our opioid system and both of those are associated with stress-induced emotional eating. Around 10-15 minutes of laughing burns 50 calories (according to a 2015 study conducted by Maciej Buchowski, a researcher from Vanderbilt University). So, laughter helps with emotional eating problems. Laughter can also reduce blood sugar levels. There was a study of 19 people, who ate a meal and then sat through a tedious lecture – after which they had their blood sugar levels measured. The next day, they ate the same meal and watched a comedy – and had lower blood sugar levels than the previous day.

Positive Psychology also has a number of techniques that can be used to help people to feel happier and better able to deal with the Covid-19 current crisis. These include:

- **Three good things** – consciously spending a few minutes each day focusing on some of the good things that have happened.
- **Gratitude journal** – simply write down each day what you are grateful for.
- **Best possible self** – write down, as vividly as possible, what the desired successful future version of you will be like. This enhances optimism and causes better integration between one's priorities and goals and this makes people feel happier.
- **Positive reminiscence** – for ten minutes, twice a day for a week, think about positive memories in great detail.
- **Cuddles** (with family members we are isolating with who aren't sick!) – Friedrickson (2009) came up with the idea of 'plugging in' when she needs a hug to recharge her batteries. The hug should be front-to-front and last closer to a minute than a second. Hugging increases levels of oxytocin, which may have beneficial effects on the health of your heart and more. A 20-second hug, along with 10 minutes of hand-holding, can reduce the harmful physical effects of stress, including its impact on your blood pressure and heart rate. This is probably because hugging lowers the levels of cortisol.
- **Time** – spend time with other people (an hour or a whole day) just chatting or gardening, or playing or whatever.
- **Worry time** – it's impossible to not worry. Set aside a time in the day (half an hour at 7:30pm) when you can worry. It must be the same time and in the same place. Don't allow yourself to worry at any other time.
- **Worry journal** – Erma Bombeck said that worry is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do but never gets you anywhere. According to *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* by Robert L Leahy, 85 percent of what subjects worried about never happened, and with the 15 percent that did happen, 79 percent of subjects discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected, or the difficulty taught them a lesson worth learning. This means that 97 percent of what people worry about is a waste of time!

- **Three-question process** – this idea is taken from Tal Ben-Shahar's book *Happier* (2007). Ask yourself the following questions:

- **What gives me meaning?**
- **What gives me pleasure?**
- **What are my strengths?**

And then do more of them to make you happier.

Using strategies from SFBT like solution focused questioning, we can ask ourselves and our neighbours coping questions: how have they managed so far? What strengths have helped them to cope so well? That helps people to see strengths they have that they might not have noticed. Then there's the exception questions – when doesn't it happen? When don't they feel desperate? This will help them to identify what they have done that has removed the problem. And then they can be encouraged to do more of it. Scaling questions give them a chance to assess and track how they feel. You can then ask them what's the worse it's ever been? How did you cope? And ask: "if you're a six today, what would have to happen for you to be a 7? What would be different?" And you might even try the miracle question with people you come in contact with. If they say: "well, there would be no Coronavirus", you can reply that that would be a 10 out of 10 result, but, for them, what would be a more realistic change?

### Moving forwards...

Armed with our usual SFH techniques, and making use of some of those from SFBT, CBT, NLP, and Positive Psychology, we can ensure that we stay calm and focused – and let those feelings of calmness and serenity spread out from us, just like that ocean of calmness, to our families, friends, neighbours and colleagues. And the disruption caused by the Coronavirus then becomes an opportunity to help ourselves and those around us.



### About the writer:

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