

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Attending hospital appointments during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic: Managing anxiety

It is normal to be feeling worried, stressed and anxious right now.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything we have ever experienced before. We are all feeling anxious about our own health and the health of loved ones. It is understandable if you are feeling worried about an upcoming appointment at the hospital, e.g. attending for a scan, medical procedure or consultation with your medical team. You may be feeling frustrated if you have been waiting some time for your appointment (especially if it was delayed due to COVID-19), yet the worry about returning to hospital may also be playing on your mind. These feelings can be overwhelming.

One of the scariest aspects can be the uncertainty. It is common to have thoughts of:

- What will the hospital setting be like?
- Will clinicians be wearing the right protective equipment?
- What if I catch the virus by attending my appointment and pass it on to my family?

Our minds bombard us with lots of difficult thoughts and no matter how hard we try, none of us can actually stop these thoughts from showing up. Sometimes these thoughts can trigger the “fight or flight” response in our bodies. For example, you may feel physical sensations in your body such as heart racing, breathing faster, sweaty palms and butterflies in your stomach – these are common symptoms of anxiety.

One way to manage uncertainty is to become aware of the facts. **King’s Mill Hospital has worked hard to maximise safety for patients, staff and the community.** Here are some of the changes that have been made:

- A one-way system for entering and exiting the hospital at the main entrance.
- Floor markings as a reminder to keep 2 metres apart from each other.
- Notices/signs in public and clinical areas to remind people of social distancing.
- Patients, visitors and staff to wear a mask at all times unless told otherwise – this will be communicated to you.

Managing anxiety is important because it can sometimes get in the way of you attending essential face to face appointments. It can feel distressing if you are struggling to cope with symptoms of anxiety – both unwanted thoughts and physical sensations.

If you have already missed or cancelled an appointment because you have felt too anxious to leave your home, it is worthwhile remembering what matters to you the most. Asking yourself questions such as:

- How do I want my life to be in one year's time?
- What strengths do I have that can help me live my life to the full?
- If I did attend my appointment, what would some of the benefits be?

Additionally, the following exercises may help you to manage anxiety. The first one involves a relaxed breathing exercise to help you become attuned to your body and almost reverse the effects of anxiety i.e. slowing your body down. The second one involves noticing your five senses to gently bring your mind to the present moment.

Do not worry if you find these exercises difficult to do. They may take a huge effort at first, but with perseverance, the exercises will become easier and you should feel the benefits.

You can practice these exercises before coming to hospital and also use them while you are at the hospital e.g. waiting for your appointment, to help you feel calmer.

Exercise 1: Relaxed breathing

1. Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach just below your ribs.
2. Count “1000, 2000, 3000 in” as you breathe in through your nose. As you gently breathe in through your nose, allow your stomach to rise. Your chest will stay fairly still. Keep the movement gentle.
3. Count “1000, 2000, 3000, 4000 out”, as you breathe out through your mouth slowly and evenly. Feel your stomach sinking. As you breathe out, say a word or phrase to yourself which helps you to relax, for example “relax” or “let it go”.
4. Breathe at a pace which feels natural for you. Again, be aware of your hand on your stomach rising, while the hand on your upper chest hardly moves.
5. Once you have mastered the technique of relaxed breathing, you can continue without placing your hands on your chest and stomach.

The exercise should not hurt. If you find any aspect of this breathing technique uncomfortable, simply leave that part of the exercise out and concentrate on breathing as normal.

Exercise 2: Five, four, three, two, one

1. Take a moment to press pause and notice where you are right now. Remember that your mind may wander at times and that is okay. Give yourself permission to be non-judgemental of your thoughts.
2. Notice **FIVE** things you can see around you. Perhaps choose one item and focus on it closely – what colours can you see? What texture is it? Can you notice any patterns or fine detail?
3. Notice **FOUR** things you can feel around you. How does it feel against your hands? Rough or Smooth? What temperature is it?
4. Notice **THREE** things you can hear around you. You can close your eyes to help you tune into the sounds in your surroundings. If it is quiet, just notice that.
5. Notice **TWO** things you can smell around you. If you struggle to smell anything, perhaps consider two things you like the smell of.
6. Notice **ONE** thing you can taste. If you cannot taste anything, perhaps consider one thing you like the taste of.

Finally, if you have any specific worries about attending your hospital appointment, please do not hesitate to speak to a member of your medical team.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

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