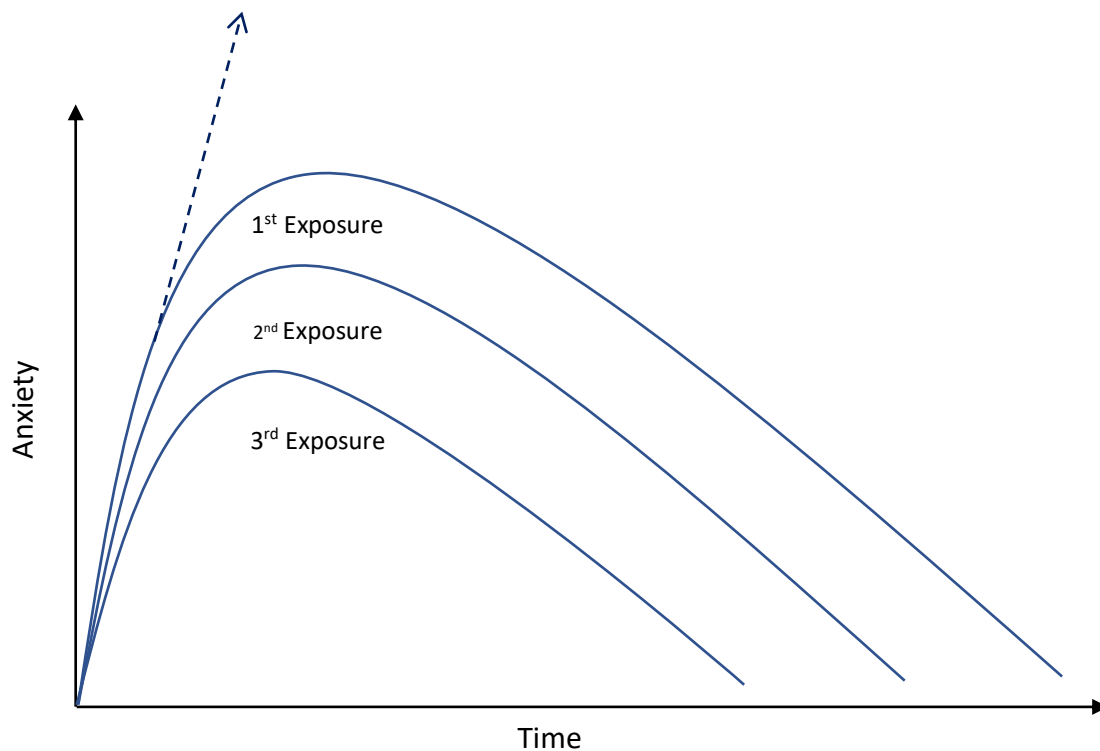


## Coping with anxiety about returning to the workplace

Many of us will be returning to the workplace in the coming weeks and we will need to adjust to a 'new normal'. Our work environment, our work routine and the way our teams are set-up are likely to look different.

It is normal to feel anxious about returning to the workplace. You may be concerned about the virus itself, specific work challenges or any ongoing stressors in your personal life. You may also be worrying about how you are feeling – and indeed worrying about the effect of all this worrying on you!

These are all completely normal responses to uncertainty and change, particularly when we may not have been at our workplace for several months.



People often expect that anxiety will continue to increase until something catastrophic happens and this is why we feel motivated to escape or avoid stressful situations. But this is an incorrect assumption – research shows us that when we face a situation, our anxiety is likely to gradually reduce.

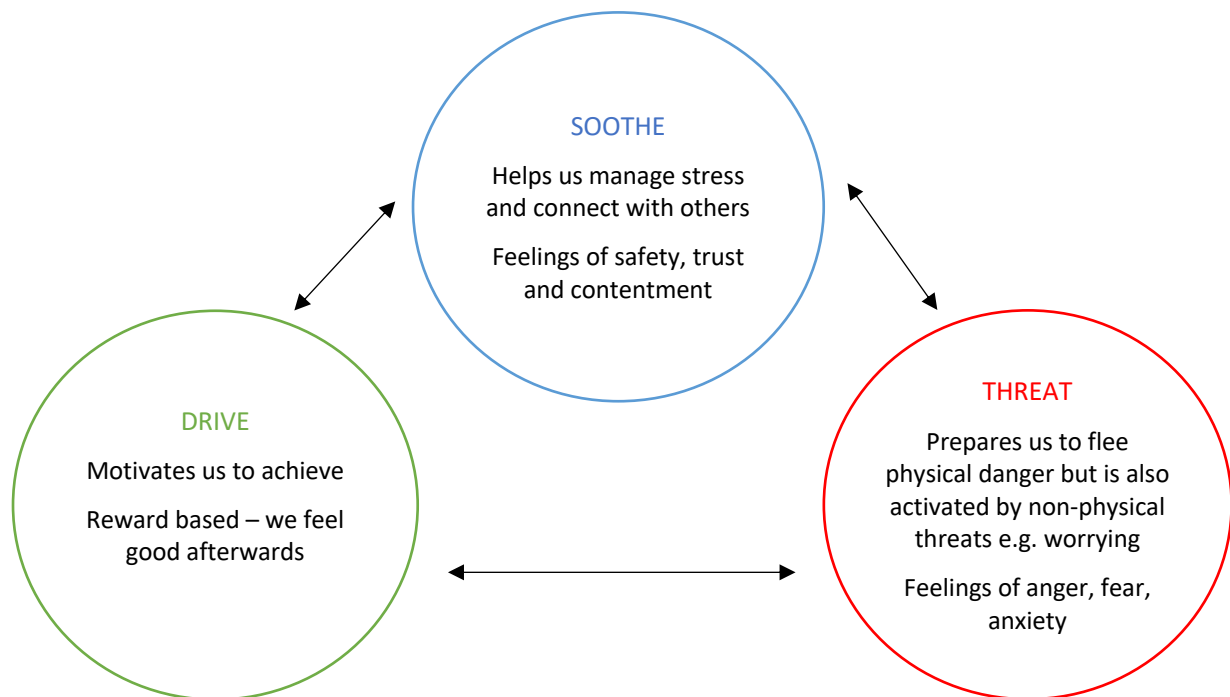
This means that returning to work may involve having to tolerate this anxiety for a while. Whilst this may be uncomfortable at first, this anxiety will always peak and pass. And every day we go into work, the anxiety will reduce more quickly each time.

## An understandable focus on threat

We are constantly receiving information that increases awareness of the threat we are facing – both in the workplace and at home. This focus on threat will inevitably affect how we are thinking and feeling.

The brain is designed to focus on threats more than neutral or positive information as this is helpful for survival. For example, we often notice/remember what went wrong in our day, not what went well.

Our brains and bodies are designed to deal with short-term, physical threats rather than ongoing or invisible threats. But even when the danger isn't present, our own thoughts and worries remind us of it. This means we spend too much time in the threat system. This is one of three systems we use to manage our emotions. If these systems are imbalanced, this causes stress and distress.



It is likely that most of us are spending much of our time in the threat system at the moment, meaning we often feel 'on guard', 'under threat' or constantly anxious. This can become a problem when anxiety is higher than it should be in that situation, lasts longer than it should or interferes with our ability to function in daily life. But neither fight or flight are adaptive responses to COVID-19 and may not help us respond in the most helpful way.

Instead we need to:

- Move out of the **threat** system – by finding strategies to reduce anxiety
- Invest more in our **soothing system** – by spending time on activities that make us feel contented, safe or cared for

## Coping with anxiety

We will all find our own way of coping with this uncertainty. Here are a few suggestions about how we can take care of ourselves (invest more in our soothing system) and others:

### Our thoughts

We may find ourselves overwhelmed with negative thoughts; how we think about a situation will affect how we feel.

Remember, thoughts are not facts, and it might be helpful to keep other perspectives in mind, such as:

- I am limited in what I can do, but I will do what I can
- I can't control many things, but I can look after myself
- This will end, we will get through this
- We are in this together/I'm not alone

This isn't about positive thinking. It's about holding a balanced perspective in mind.

Acknowledging and naming the emotion, either to ourselves or talking with someone else, can be helpful. e.g. you could say to yourself "I notice I am feeling overwhelmed"

### Establish a routine

Grow around the problem: build in a range of activities so your life is not entirely taken over by work & COVID-19.

Each day try to tick off some of these:

- Being active/exercise
- Contact with friends/family
- Pleasurable activity
- Time to relax
- Give yourself a challenge (e.g. puzzle)
- At the end of the day, see if you can think of 10 things you appreciate (e.g. the smile from a stranger)
- Do something kind for someone

### Team working

Listen to others and validate how they are feeling: in the current circumstances we might not be able to change how they feel but feeling heard and understood is extremely valuable in itself.

How we talk to others: be thoughtful about how you talk to others and remember what you say to others might affect how they are feeling.

Remind others (and yourself) of helpful perspectives: that this will end, that we will get through this.

Be flexible: how we have to work at this time may change but being flexible in this way is necessary to do a good enough job in the current circumstances.

### Look after your body and your sleep

- Try to eat healthily and regularly; if your appetite is low eat little and often, choose things you find easy to eat.
- Give yourself longer to wind down
- Avoid stimulants before bed (caffeine, alcohol, nicotine)
- Avoid screens for an hour before bed
- Do a relaxation or mindfulness exercise
- If you can't sleep, try not to worry about your sleep and see it as a time for rest – the more you worry, the less you will sleep! Try a relaxation exercise or mundane mental activity (e.g. counting down from 100 in 7's; remember the details of a walk you know well)

## Calming your breathing

### Breathing Pattern

- Sit/stand comfortably, without crossing your legs
- Relax your shoulders & upper chest
- With your jaw relaxed, draw air slowly in through your nose
- Breathe in by relaxing and expanding your waist so your stomach puffs up
- Do not take deep breaths just stick to your natural depth of breath

### Breathing Timing

- Aim for a 4-in, 2-hold, 6-out cycle – breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, then breathe out for 6 seconds
- If you have been breathing rapidly for some time, and this timing is difficult to start with, you might try a 3-in, 4-out cycle
- Start with what you can most comfortably slow down to

## Mindful breathing

- Focus on how the breath feels and use this as a way to ‘anchor’ your attention
- This can help you focus on the present moment, rather than being lost in overwhelming thoughts and body sensations
  - Focus anywhere: tip of nose, throat, chest abdomen
  - Don’t try and control your breath: allow the breath to breathe itself
  - Remind yourself, there is no right way to breathe
  - Pay full attention to how your breath feels in the body
- Can you notice when the breath starts and ends? the pauses between breaths?

## Grounding techniques

These techniques help you to focus on coming back into your senses.

Follow these steps:

- Stop, notice 5 things you can see
- Close your eyes
- Notice 5 things you can hear
- Notice 5 points of contact between your body and something else
- Breathe, then open your eyes
- Take 5 breaths, paying full attention to the sensations of the breath
- Focus on sensations in your feet as you walk from one place to another
- Go outside – notice nature around you if you can access this
- Feel the air on your skin