



Memorandum

To **All AFL Queensland Clubs**

cc

From **Barry Gibson**

Date **25 March 2020**

Re **Industry Psychological Impacts Re COVID19**

Dear All,

The following is a summary of our current recommendations for psychological support and maintaining wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that those in leadership roles actively manage stress and worry to reduce collective anxiety.

Accurate information about COVID-19 is necessary to ensure your staff, players and their families understand and trust the information given to them by medical professionals and club leaders. Consistent communication to all of these people will reduce anxiety and undue stress.

This advice has been endorsed by Dr Peter Harcourt (AFL Medical Director) and Dr Ranjit Menon (AFL Chief Psychiatrist).

Summary

A pandemic is a widespread health crisis and may lead to individual distress and collective anxiety (the spread and amplification of anxiety amongst a group of people). Measures such as self-isolation or disrupted routine may also cause distress. Financial or job insecurity will further contribute to collective anxiety.

Club leaders can take steps to reduce collective anxiety and manage individuals who are distressed by:

1. Modelling self-management of anxiety
2. Actively endorsing medical advice from club doctors
3. Being consistent and transparent in communications
4. Intervening where appropriate to break cycles of anxiety in groups
5. Limiting media exposure to reliable sources
6. Connecting people to mental health support and EAP
7. Reducing stigma if a player or staff member becomes a Confirmed Case
8. Taking reasonable environmental and personal precautions

AFL Queensland

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What to Expect

Pandemics are a widespread health crisis and may lead to individual distress and collective anxiety. A crisis is a situation that overwhelms the ordinary capacity to process information, cope with strong emotions and make decisions. All individuals react to and are impacted differently by crises. Some people may experience increased stress, anxiety or panic. Some groups may experience and perpetuate collective anxiety.

Who may be Affected

- Those who are directly exposed (e.g. confirmed cases, or who have family who become ill)
- Those who are indirectly exposed to the upheaval of a widespread health crisis (e.g. reduced working capacity of parents and/or self, financial stress, school closures).
- People with pre-existing mental health conditions.

What to Look Out For

- Fear and anxiety about contracting COVID-19 or spreading it to others.
- Worry about obtaining food and personal supplies, fulfilling work or playing obligations.
- Panic leading to impulsive behaviours
- Trouble sleeping or focusing on daily tasks
- Increased fatigue due to chronic impact of stress
- Boredom or loneliness if in isolation or quarantine
- Lowered mood if meaningful activities are interrupted
- Distress and anxiety due to interruption to daily routine
- Anger, frustration or irritability due to loss of freedom and personal agency
- Anger or resentment toward those who have issued quarantine or isolation orders
- Anger if exposed to COVID-19 because of another person's negligence.
- Stigmatization if a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19

What can we do? Advice to share with your players and staff to reduce individual stress

Communication

Consistent and repeated communication to all staff and players will reduce collective anxiety and undue stress. The AFL will assist in streamlining the communication process for your players over the coming weeks.

Practise and Model Self-Management of Stress

- Engage in breathing exercises throughout the day to maintain a calm state
- Establish a calm ritual: every time you wash hands for 20 seconds, count 5 calming breaths
- Rest regularly (both mentally and physically), and maintain good sleep hygiene
- Maintain good social connections and communicate openly with family and friends
- Continue enjoyable activities and hobbies, including exercise (especially if in isolation)

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- Balance time spent on reading or listening to news on COVID-19 with other activities such as listening to music, reading, watching TV
- Get quality sleep and avoiding the use of alcohol or other vices to cope with stress
- Practice relaxation, meditation and mindfulness every day to settle the body and readjust to a calm state.

Suggested apps to try:



Limit Media Exposure to reliable sources

Constant media coverage about the coronavirus can keep us in a heightened state of anxiety. Try to limit related media exposure and instead seek out factual information from reliable sources such as the Australian Government's health alert or other trusted organisations such as the World Health Organization. <https://bit.ly/3cQUwCw>.

Remind your players that social media, whilst it may be the most up-to-date news it may not be the most factual information source.

Keep things in perspective

When we are stressed, our tendency is to have anxious cycles of thinking that overestimate how bad the consequences will be and underestimate our ability to cope. Break the cycle of anxious thinking by shifting attention to something else.

- Distract when notice catastrophising (blowing things out of proportion)
- Distract when notice personalising the situation (blaming yourself for things outside your control)
- Take a problem-solving stance regularly i.e. don't make a judgment without supporting information
- Take different perspectives (view your situation from other people's point of view)
- Focus on what you can do (hand hygiene, practicing wellbeing strategies) and accept the things you can't change (global responses)
- Focus on facts - illness due to COVID-19 infection is usually mild and most people recover without needing specialised treatment
- Impacts of COVID-19 are time limited
- Take a compassionate stance: we all have a role to play to reduce transmission to protect the vulnerable in our community and our healthcare workers.

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Take reasonable precautions

Being proactive by following basic hygiene principles can keep anxiety at bay.

- Environmental measures: frequent cleaning of surfaces and objects, minimise sharing objects (i.e.. drink bottles), ensuring ventilation of club spaces
- Personal protective measures: hand hygiene, coughing and sneezing into elbow, minimising touching face

Advice for Club Leaders to Reduce Collective Anxiety

In psychology, the spread of emotion from one person to another is called social contagion. Our own anxiety can be cued or triggered simply by talking to someone else who is anxious.

1. Self-manage to stay calm
2. Be mindful of communicating calm through posture, facial and vocal expression
3. Break cycles of anxiety between individuals and family members early
4. Communicate regularly and repeat information
5. Plan for known future steps
6. Reiterate this is time limited
7. Draw on skills you have used in the past that have helped you to get through difficult times
8. Model calm acceptance of uncertainty

Additional Information

Please see below some contact numbers for services that you or people at your club may like to access through this unprecedented time:

Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14

Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

Kids Helpline: 1800 551 80

Emergency: 000

Confidential Helpline: 1800 737 732

Mensline: 1300 78 99 78

Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277

We understand that we are moving into unprecedented times and AFL is hurting as a sport, but it will recover. We want to ensure everyone that the health and wellbeing of all our people at clubland is our first priority.

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