

# Coping Strategies: Dealing with Fears of Recurrence and COVID-19

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**Inspired** by research.

**Driven** by compassion.

**Inspiré** par la recherche.

**Guidé** par la compassion.

# Fear of Recurrence (FCR)

*“fear, worry, or concern relating to the possibility that cancer will come back or progress”*

- Normal, common emotional reaction to completing treatment
- Continuum of severity
- If intense and enduring, individuals may benefit from counselling and/or therapy

# Coronavirus disease (COVID 19)

- Infectious disease caused by a *newly* discovered coronavirus
- Pandemics can be stressful (“it’s ok to not be ok”)
  - it’s new, so ++unknowns
  - fear/worry about own health and loved ones
  - Public Health interventions (e.g. social distancing) can increase vulnerability

**Be COVID Wise**  
OttawaPublicHealth.ca/COVIDWise

-  **W**ear a mask
-  **I**solate yourself when you're sick
-  **S**tay two metres (six feet) apart from others
-  **E**xercise proper hand hygiene

#COVIDWise 



Cartoon by Rick McKee

# What do they have in common? Fear

- “**Fear** is a natural, powerful, and primitive human emotion. ... **Fear** alerts us to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, whether that danger is physical or psychological. Sometimes **fear** stems from real threats, but it can also originate from imagined dangers.” ([www.verywellmind.com](http://www.verywellmind.com))
- One of six basic emotions:  
happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise and anger  
(Paul Eckman)

# What do they have in common? Worry

- Type of fear
- Anxiety follows from an unknown, expected, or poorly defined threat
- Worry can be
  - productive (e.g. can lead to a “to do list”)
  - unproductive(e.g. what if’s)



Image from Peanuts cartoon strip created by **Charles M. Schulz**, quote source is unknown, found on [pinterest.ca](https://www.pinterest.ca)

# Being human: full range of emotions

- Tune in as they arise
- Not constant (*this too shall pass*)
- Neither good or bad
- Messengers about what we need, what matters to us



# Tips for Managing FCR

1. Identify triggers and coping strategies
2. Tune into your feelings
3. Be informed and proactive
4. Incorporate Wellness
5. Talk with Supportive Others

*Dr. Cheryl Harris, PSOP Psychologist*

# 1. Identify triggers and coping strategies

- Notice Trigger(s):
  - Internal (e.g. pain)
  - External (e.g. upcoming medical appointment)
- Take things one step at a time
- Don't jump to worse case scenarios
- If you do, come back to today, to what is realistic, and practice reassuring thoughts
  - I'll deal with whatever comes up when I get there
  - Going to appointments means I am taking care of myself.
  - I have a team that helps me.



## 2. Tune into feelings

- Ignoring or avoiding fear tends to make it worse
- Just breathe.
- I see you fear. It's ok. I wouldn't want to go through cancer, again. I wouldn't want my loved ones impacted, again. I care so I feel.

### 3. Be informed and proactive

- Talk to your medical team about:
  - What follow up is required? When? Who will arrange?
  - Signs/Symptoms that may signal recurrence (What? How long?)
    - to help you distinguish between minor concerns and those that need medical attention
    - If you experience one of these get it checked out

## 4. Incorporate Wellness

- What is in my control?
  - Exercise
  - Diet
  - Adequate sleep
  - Relaxation
  - Meaningful activities
  - Self compassion (*What would I say to a friend experiencing this?*)

## 5. Social Support

- Talk to supportive others
- Talk to someone who doesn't shrug off your feelings but who can validate and empathize
- Tell your loved ones what helps you
- If your fear is intense/enduring, talk to a health care professional with expertise in this area

# Coping ...

- By being mindful, **present in the moment**
- Adopting a **non judgmental** approach
- Focusing on the Present: what happens when I feel scared?
  - Physically (in your body)
  - Cognitively (in your thoughts)
  - Emotionally (in how you feel)

## Examples of Coping Strategies:

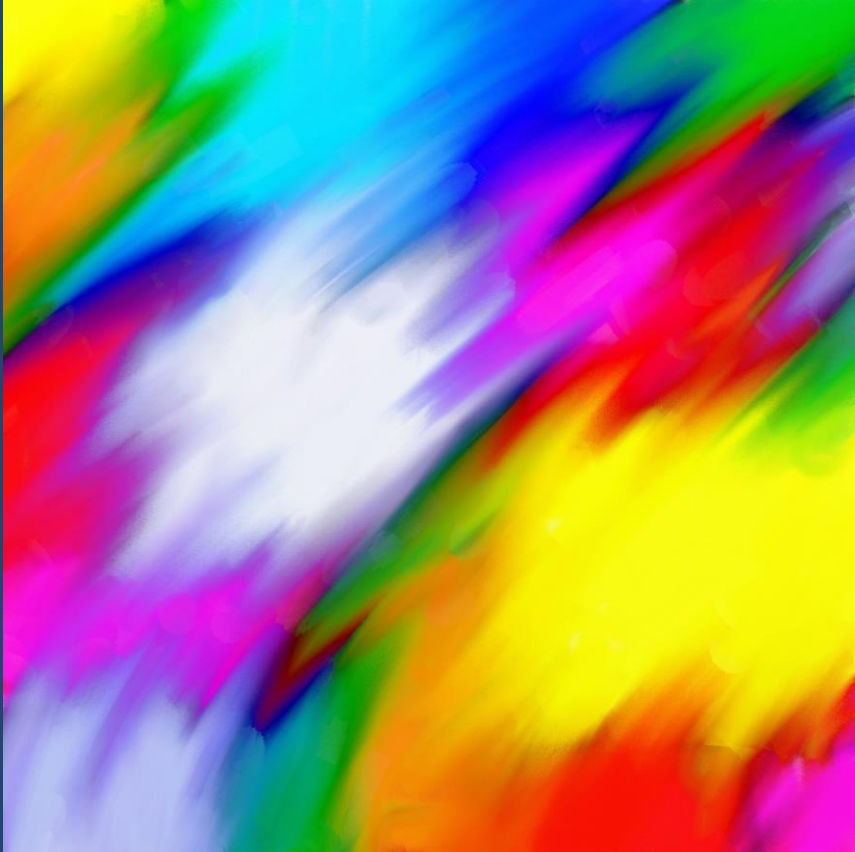
Breathing

Worry Tree

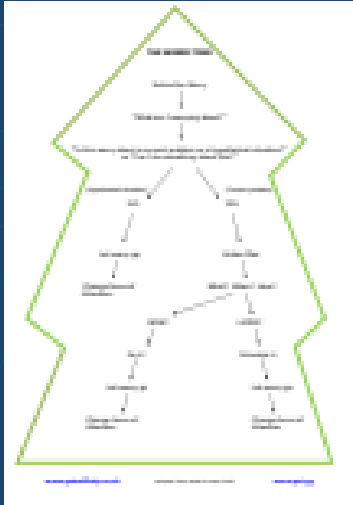
STOPP

Thought Record

Personal Mantra



# Colour breathing exercise



# Worry Tree

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/worrytree.pdf>



Worry Tree idea credited to Butler & Hope, Managing Your Mind, The Mental Fitness Guide

- **Stop/Pause**
- **Take a Breath**
- **Observe**
- **Pull Back/Put in Perspective**
- **Practice what works/helpful**

**STOPP**

**TAKE A BREATH**

**OBSERVE:** What am I thinking?  
What am I reacting to?  
What am I feeling in my body?

**PULL BACK:** Put in some perspective. See the bigger picture. Is this fact or opinion? How would someone else see this?

**PRACTISE WHAT WORKS:** What's the best thing to do for me, for others, for this situation?



# STOPP

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stopp.htm>



# Thought Record

- Noticing the **Situation/Trigger**
- **Emotions/Body Sensations**
- **Unhelpful thoughts**
- Exploring facts that **support unhelpful thought** and
- Facts that **provide evidence against** the unhelpful thought
- Write an **alternate more realistic thought**
- Check **outcome** (eg. Improved emotion )

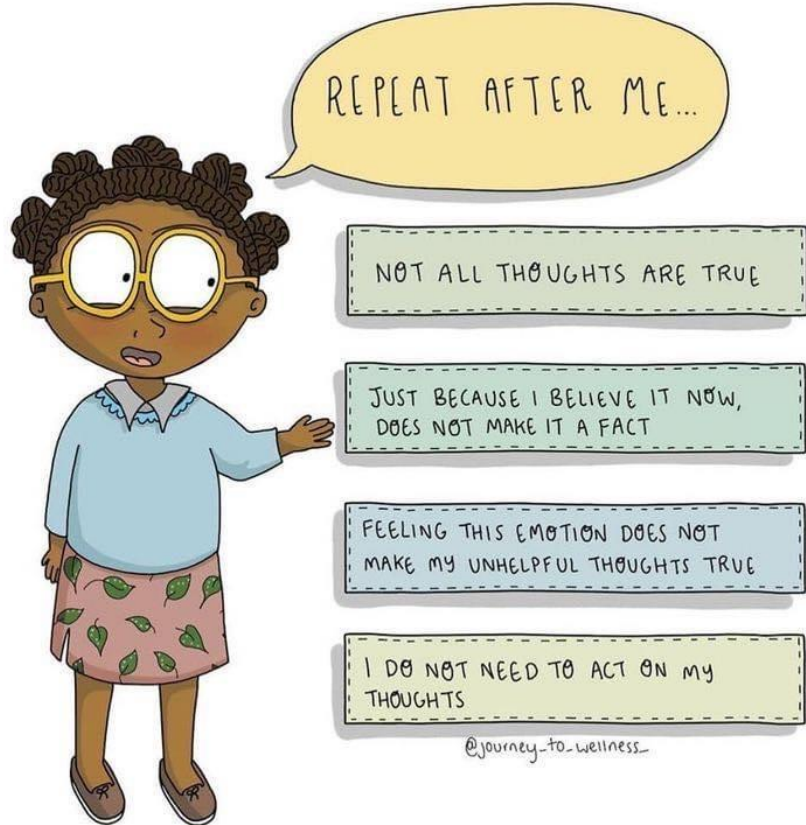
Thought Record Sheet - 7 column

Situation/Trigger	Feelings (Anxiety, Sadness, Anger, Frustration, etc.) Body sensations	Unhelpful Thoughts (Thoughts)	Facts that support the unhelpful thought	Facts that provide evidence against the unhelpful thought	Alternate more realistic thought	Outcome (How do you feel now?)

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# Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

- Our thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and behaviour are all connected
- Change in one area creates change in other areas
  - Empowering: I can change how I feel if I change how I think
- Not all thoughts are facts



# Fear of Recurrence example

## First increase awareness:

Trigger: medical appointment (external), thinking about secondary cancers after reading about a celebrity (internal)

Emotion: fear, dread, worry

Thought: *“What if the cancer is back?”* (a.k.a *“I’m scared that the cancer has relapsed!”*) *“I don’t know how I would handle it”*

Body sensation: gastrointestinal distress, sweating, dizziness, dry mouth, rapid breathing

Behaviour: google stats of cancer recurrence

# Second, check the evidence:

- Facts that support unhelpful thought: WHAT IS TRUE?
  - *My cancer diagnosis was a shock and treatment was difficult. I'm allowed to feel scared.*
  - *It's true that I don't know the future or how I would handle a relapse.*
- Evidence against the unhelpful thought: WHAT IS NOT TRUE?
  - *This is a thought not a fact. There is no evidence of relapse right now.*
  - *I didn't know how I would handle lymphoma initially but I did. Looking back I can see my resiliency and here I am enjoying skiing!*
  - *I trust my Hematologist when they told me that the rate of recurrence was low and that my illness responded well to treatment.*

# Third, proceed with what is helpful

- Alternative more realistic thought:
  - *No one knows the future, cancer can recur but that doesn't mean that it will. I will deal with whatever comes one step at a time. In the meantime, I will focus on what matters to me. After all, I worked hard for this!*
  - *It's ok. Most people feel FCR. I will remember that these medical appointments are a part of my continuity of care. I will have a loved one drive me and we will go for doughnuts after!*

# Fear of COVID 19 example

(time permitting  
during question  
period, if desired)

**Trigger:** hearing about patients in hospitals on ventilators

**Emotion:** fear, anger, frustration, sadness

**Thought:** *“I’m not safe,” “I won’t get the care I need if I go to hospital.” “I can’t see my social supports, I can’t do this alone!”*

**Body sensation:** headaches, changes in appetite, difficult sleeping

**Behaviour:** increased use of alcohol



# Any tools to add to your toolbox?

Identify triggers, identify coping strategies, give permission for all emotions, tune in to feelings, be informed and proactive, talk to your medical team, write your questions in advance for the doctors and nurses, incorporate wellness, exercise, eat a healthy diet, get adequate sleep, allow time for relaxation, participate in meaningful activities, practice self compassion, reach out for social connections, seek counselling, change unhelpful thoughts, develop a personal mantra, just breathe, STOPP, Worry Tree, change what is in your control, let go of what you cannot control, shift your attention to something that matters to you, thoughts are thoughts and not facts, live fully for today



# Building resiliency: adapting

- Build your connections/prioritize relationships
- Foster wellness
  - Take care of your body
  - Practice mindfulness
  - Avoid negative outlets (addiction)
- Find purpose
- Embrace healthy thoughts
- Seek help



**TODAY ME WILL LIVE  
IN THE MOMENT UNLESS  
IT'S UNPLEASANT IN  
WHICH CASE ME WILL  
EAT A COOKIE.**

**COOKIE MONSTER**



**It's okay; you can notice  
the unpleasant, find  
what is in your control,  
what is helpful AND  
enjoy the cookie.**