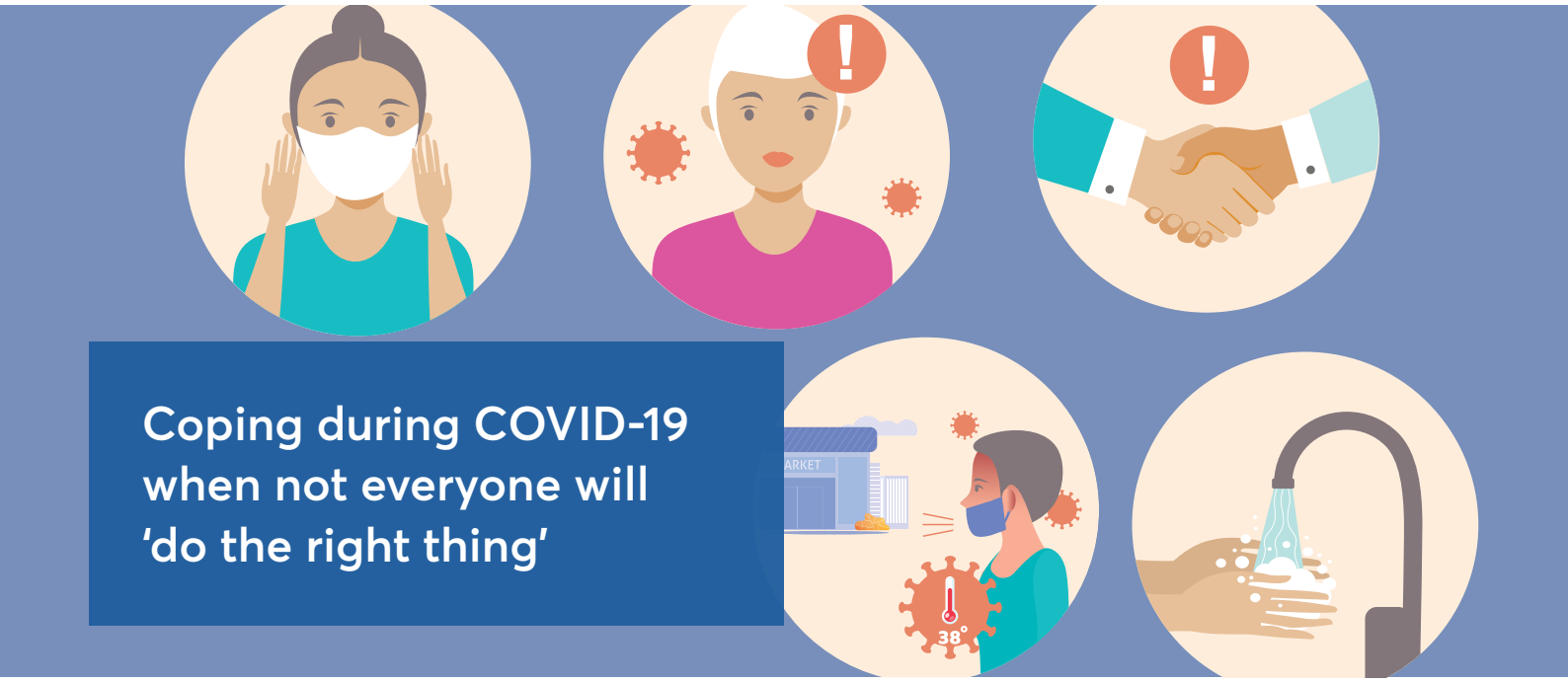

Coping during COVID-19 when not everyone will 'do the right thing'

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, safety measures and precautions are still required to protect against the spread of infection. As with earlier stages of the pandemic, there are times we may notice or hear of others not taking the appropriate steps or following the current health guidelines. It is common to react to these stories of people not following the rules with emotions such as frustration, anger, indignation, fear, or sadness. As these can be distressing, this information sheet highlights some suggestions and strategies to help you manage your negative reactions and emotions to these stories.

Months into living with COVID-19, the challenges of facing life with the pandemic have resulted in increased rates of depression, anxiety, and frustration for many Australians. This has led to a huge increase in demand for mental health services.

Apart from the length of time the pandemic is going on, another aspect of the virus is also upsetting. Despite significant research being conducted, there are still unknowns about the virus - the range of symptoms experienced, whether people can be reinfected, whether there are long term health impacts, and whether a new variant may emerge that could evade vaccine immunity.

'Do the right thing' and reduce the chance of transmitting or catching the virus

Given that we are faced with learning to live with the virus, the health experts continue to remind us that to reduce the risks of catching or transmitting the virus we need to do 'the right thing', including:

- Practice good hygiene (wash your hands frequently; avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth).
- Get tested and seek medical care early if you have a fever, cough or experience breathing difficulties.
- Stay at home if you begin to feel unwell until you fully recover.
- Practice physical distancing.
- Follow any mandatory restrictions imposed by the government – e.g., complete a period of self-isolation if you have received a positive test result, wear a mask on public transport and in vulnerable settings such as aged care or hospitals.

Are people doing 'the right thing'?

Australians have generally shown a high degree of compliance – more than 90% of respondents to a University of NSW survey reported having actively changed their behaviour to stop the spread of the virus to others, despite only 20% perceiving a high risk to their health and 50% not being too worried about the threat of the virus to their personal health. This indicates that most people have put aside their individual rights and are being socially responsible and doing the right thing.

However, the longer the virus continues with its flare-ups and waves, the more frustrated and exhausted people risk becoming. Small numbers of people are not complying with the prevention strategies recommended by health experts, and it is common to experience negative emotions such as frustration, anger, indignation, fear, disappointment or sadness in response to this.

Managing your negative emotions during COVID-19

You have no direct control over other people's behaviour, but you do have control over your own behaviours and emotions. Some ideas for how you can focus on what is within your control include:

- Remind yourself that people have a right to make their own decisions and choices, even when they are not in the best interests of the rest of society.
- Try not to express your frustration and anger in a non-respectful, blaming, or humiliating way.
- Find ways to express your emotions in a constructive way, so that they don't build up and interfere in your everyday relationships – eg., keep a journal, do an extra hard/fast walk or jog, listen to some calming music, try to understand what is triggering your emotions, or share your frustrations with someone who you trust and is a good listener.
- Focus on looking after yourself during this stressful time by developing a stress management plan. The stress caused by your reactions to other people not doing the right thing may just be one source of stress, and you may be experiencing many other demands that are also adding to your stress. A stress management plan will help you to address all your sources of stress. This **stress bucket YouTube video** provides an understanding of the various sources and impacts of stress and suggests coping skills to manage the stress.
- Model 'doing the right thing'. We know that 'walking the talk' is a good way to influence positive behaviour change, and is often more effective than telling people what they should do, or threatening them or using fear to motivate them.
- Try to understand the reasons why some people refuse to comply with the restrictions. These may include conspiracy theories that the government wants to dominate and control the Australian people, a belief that they know the best way to manage the virus, their opinion that the restrictions are an over-reaction to the virus, and/or a distrust of the government and other institutions, such as the media.
- Limit your exposure to social media or the news so that you are not confronted by any stories of those people who are not complying.
- Remember that we are all in this together, and that most people are doing what they can to avoid catching or transmitting the virus.

More information

Australian Government Department of Health

The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the public, health professionals and industry about coronavirus (COVID-19), including translated resources.

National Coronavirus Helpline

Call this line if you are seeking information on coronavirus (COVID-19) or help with the COVIDSafe app. The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Phone: 1800 020 080

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about the coronavirus such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected.

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization provides information and guidance regarding the current outbreak of coronavirus disease.

Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that you are struggling to cope with any aspects of COVID-19, including your reactions to examples of people's non-compliant behaviour, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

Visit psychology.org.au for more.

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