

# Achieving mental wellbeing during Covid-19

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As part of Saica's *Leadership in a time of crisis* webinar series, clinical psychologist Navlika Ratangee spoke about how to achieve mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 crisis.

The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica) understands that the outbreak of Covid-19 has brought on unprecedented fear and anxiety. Coping with this stress will make you, the people you care about and your community, stronger. As part of Saica's new webinar series, *Leadership in a time of crisis*, clinical psychologist and director at ICAS SA, Navlika Ratangee, spoke about the importance of managing one's personal mental health during a crisis.

"The truth is that there is so much to feel anxious about at the moment," says Ratangee. "Whether we're worried about falling ill, our loved ones contracting the disease, how we are going to survive this financially or how to homeschool our children, it is natural to feel overwhelmed, vulnerable and stressed right now."

## Dealing with your anxieties

When you consider that one in four people will struggle with a mental illness at some point in their lives and that infectious disease outbreaks can affect mental health, you'll see that it is imperative to be vigilant about our mental wellbeing. Fortunately, Ratangee has shared a wealth of practical advice to help reduce anxiety and manage stress levels:

**Stay connected:** If you are living on your own, make use of the wonder of technology and stay connected with colleagues, friends and family. Consider the positive of how fortunate we are to be able to do so.

**Manage information overflow:** The complete overflow of information and misinformation can induce major anxiety. In the media we see people in hazmat suits, hear about the shortage of supplies and hospital beds and the rising death toll. If the news is causing you anxiety or stress, focus on how you can better filter this information to strike a balance. Know when to switch off and avoid listening to rumours and fake news. Before you react to a disturbing story, be sure to check that it is true on a reliable news website. And if you notice that certain people or accounts are sharing news that makes you uncomfortable, consider unfollowing them, even temporarily, and rather seek out accounts that focus on the positive.

**Protect yourself:** Being nervous about exposure is a very real cause of anxiety. We are constantly stressed and even paranoid about touching things, washing our hands, being around others and so on. This may sound like a mixed message, as we do need to be obsessive about our hygiene, but it is important to note that we must not become preoccupied and should rather try to find a routine that speaks to the 'new normal'. Also, know that all this worrying is extremely tiring and that you will therefore need more sleep.



Navlika Ratangee

**Plan for the unexpected:** The reality is that, despite our best efforts to look after ourselves, we may still be exposed to the virus. Planning for this eventuality can help you and your family feel more prepared. Know who to phone and where to go if you need to be tested, have basic medication on hand and consider who will look after your children should you fall ill. Talk to your family about these strategies so you are all on the same page.

**Develop a flexible mindset:** Nobody knows how this disease will play out. Just like lockdown was extended, our lives may change in other ways. Open your mind to the unexpected so that you feel less anxiety if and when it arises.

**Create structure:** Another common anxiety is feeling confined. The key here is to stay productive, as you need structure and a new rhythm to get you and your kids through the day. A great way of doing this is called 'chunking'. For example, work for a maximum 'chunk' of 60-90 minutes then take a break. Put aside separate chunks for activities with the kids, making a meal and so on.

**Set boundaries:** It is extremely difficult for families to be together 24/7. In fact, studies in France have shown that since lockdown, domestic violence has increased by 30%. While not everyone may be going through such extreme difficulties, it is important to set ground rules. Make sure you are all helping each other out, that you schedule time alone and time as a family and have open discussions where everyone can share their feelings and thoughts.

**Talk to your children:** Understand what they already know so you can provide factual information and create a safe space where they can express their fears and feelings.

**Eat well and stay mobile:** This is as important for your mental health as it is for your immune system.

**Change your perspective:** Do you view this time as a comma or as a full stop? Try and see this as a different period of time in your life and not necessarily a bad one, even if you didn't choose it. For instance, can you use the time you used to commute in the car to do an online course and upskill yourself? Changing your perspective is an invaluable way to cope with a negative situation.

**Discover the positives:** To help to create an alternate perspective, consider writing down all the negatives you are experiencing – like being a full-time parent, technology issues with working from home, not having the ingredients you need to whip up the meal you want to make and so on. Then create a list of all the positives, a list of all the opportunities this creates for you. Spending more time with your children, doing a yoga class in the middle of the day, reading that book you never had time to read – and you will find that there are more positives than there are negatives. This gives us hope for the future and contributes to positive mental wellbeing.

**Be kind to yourself:** You don't have this all figured out. We are all learning. You can't be everything to your kids, they have to also experience boredom and use that to fuel experimentation and explore their own world. Don't put that additional pressure on yourself. These are uncharted territories, so be an explorer.

**Recognise when you need help:** If your company has an Employee Wellness Programme, reach out for the support you need.

*To help address the challenges faced by many, Saica hosted a complimentary virtual leadership series called Leadership in a time of crisis. This series focused on various elements affecting individuals, businesses and the profession as a whole during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sessions in this series have been recorded and can be viewed on [Saica's events page](#).*

## About Saica

The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica), South Africa's pre-eminent accountancy body, is widely recognised as one of the world's leading accounting institutes. The institute provides a wide range of support services to more than 50,000 members and associates who are chartered accountants [CAs(SA)], as well as associate general

accountants (AGAs(SA)) and accounting technicians (ATs(SA)), who hold positions as CEOs, MDs, board directors, business owners, chief financial officers, auditors and leaders in every sphere of commerce and industry and who play a significant role in the nation's highly dynamic business sector and economic development.

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