



Recovering from Coronavirus

A Long and Unclear Road to Recovery

The coronavirus is certainly scary, but despite the constant reporting on total cases and a climbing death toll, the reality is that the vast majority of people who come down with Covid-19 survive it. Just as the number of cases grows, so does another number: those who have recovered.

WHEN WILL I BE BETTER?

Medically, a person must be fever-free without fever-reducing medications for three consecutive days. They must show an improvement in their other symptoms, including reduced coughing and shortness of breath. And it must be at least seven full days since the symptoms began. In addition to those requirements, the United States CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines say that a person must test negative for the coronavirus twice, with the tests taken at least 24 hours apart. But is that really recovery? Can you say then that you have recovered from Covid-19? We think not, surviving the virus may take you to this point but recovering from it may still be a much longer and more complex process.

Recovery time will depend on how ill you became in the first place. Some people will shrug off the disease quickly, but for others it could leave lasting problems. The more invasive the treatment you receive, and the longer it is performed, the longer recovery is likely to take.

WHY DON'T I FEEL 'RIGHT'?

Many patients report waves of symptoms over a period of weeks following recovery – from heart palpitations to headaches, shortness of breath and fatigue. Decreased lung capacity is observed by doctors during follow-up consultations. All this impacts on your ability to return to 'normal' life, be it

helping in the home, working, doing sport, playing with children or grandchildren, or having the energy to socialise again.

The shortness of breath may take considerable time to improve. Your body is getting over scarring and inflammation in the lungs. Some doctors report recovery taking two to eight weeks, with tiredness lingering. Spending a long time in bed-rest or hospital leads to muscle wasting and weakness. Patients will be weak and the muscles will take time to build up again. Some people will need physiotherapy to walk again.

There does seem to be an added element with this disease – viral fatigue is definitely a huge factor. There have been reports from China and Italy of whole-body weakness, shortness of breath after any level of exertion, persistent coughing and irregular breathing. Plus needing a lot of sleep. Some people have reported their symptoms coming and going for weeks after illness. One day they are in the shops buying supplies and feeling ok, the next day they battle to get out of bed.

We do know patients may take a considerable period, potentially months, to recover. Historically other coronaviruses (such as the SARS virus) have resulted in reports of patients still battling with chronic fatigue and decreased levels of physical ability (compared to their level of activity prior to the illness) even after 2 years, but it is hard to generalise.

WILL CORONAVIRUS AFFECT MY HEALTH LONG-TERM?

We don't know for sure as there are no long-term data, but we can look at other conditions.

Acute respiratory distress syndrome (called ARDS) develops in patients whose immune systems go into overdrive, causing

damage to the lungs. There are really good data that, even five years down the line, people can have ongoing physical and psychological difficulties.

People also need mental health support to improve recovery. Doctors report how they tell patients, "You're having difficulty breathing, we need to put you on a ventilator, we need to put you to sleep. Do you want to say goodbye to your family?". PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in these most severely ill patients is not surprising. There will be significant psychological scars for many, not just the most severe cases.

Sometimes even mild cases of the disease may leave patients with long-term mental health problems – issues from concerns over stress and anxiety of surviving the illness, job security, depression, family and financial worries during lockdown.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Having a team of medical professionals working with you will get you through this. Physical activity will be critical to re-build your strength and fitness. Pulmonary rehabilitation may be key to improving your exercise tolerance which will improve your ability to do daily chores and return to normal life sooner. Pulmonary rehabilitation is proven to work with patients' chronic lung disease or individuals recovering an acute lung illness or lung surgery. As Covid-19 primarily attacks the lungs, this may be a good starting point that a physical therapist can guide you through. In combination with this, seeking counselling, speaking to professionals and social workers may assist in dealing with stress, anxiety and depression. There are also instances where patients have suffered from deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and strokes



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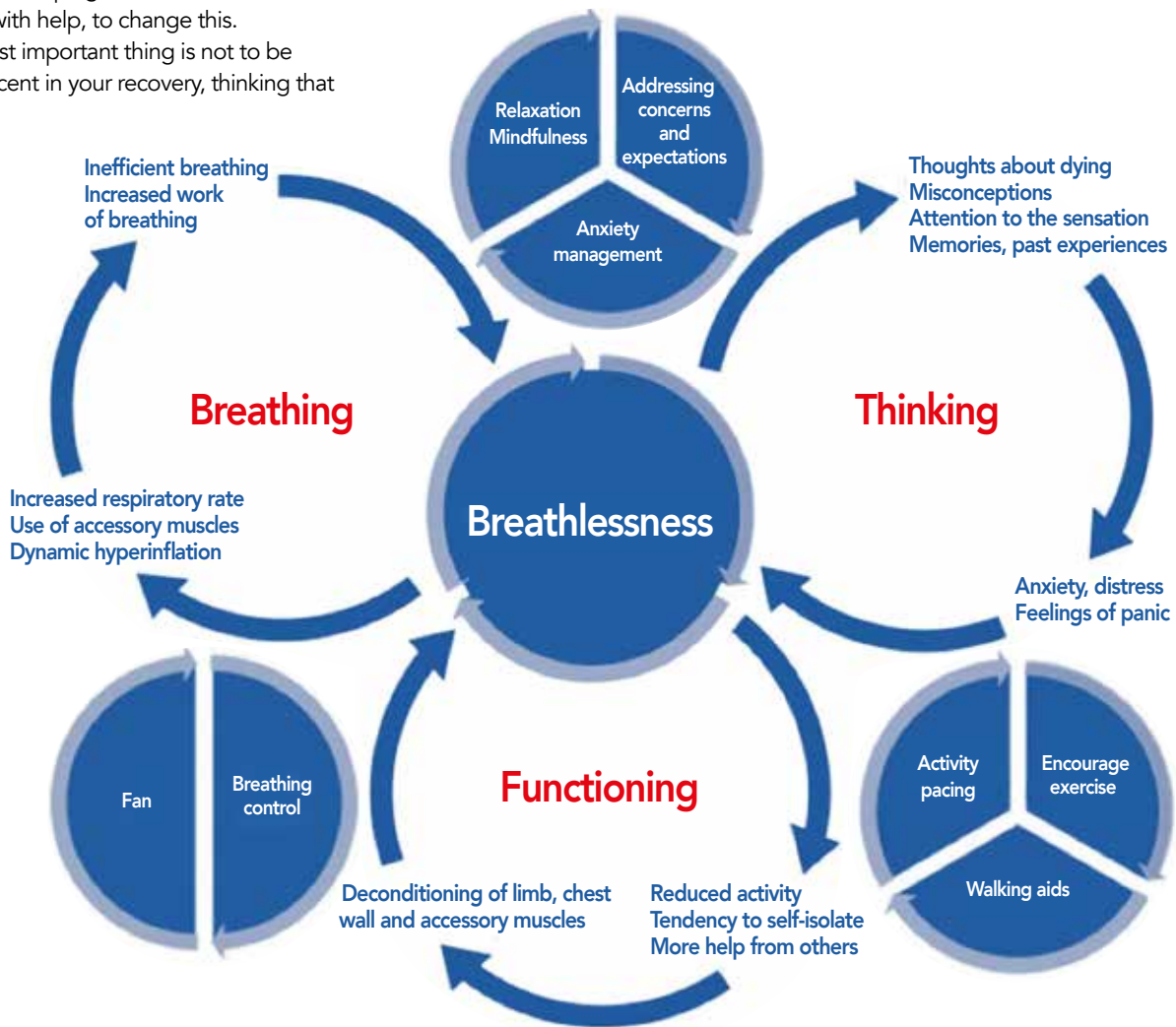
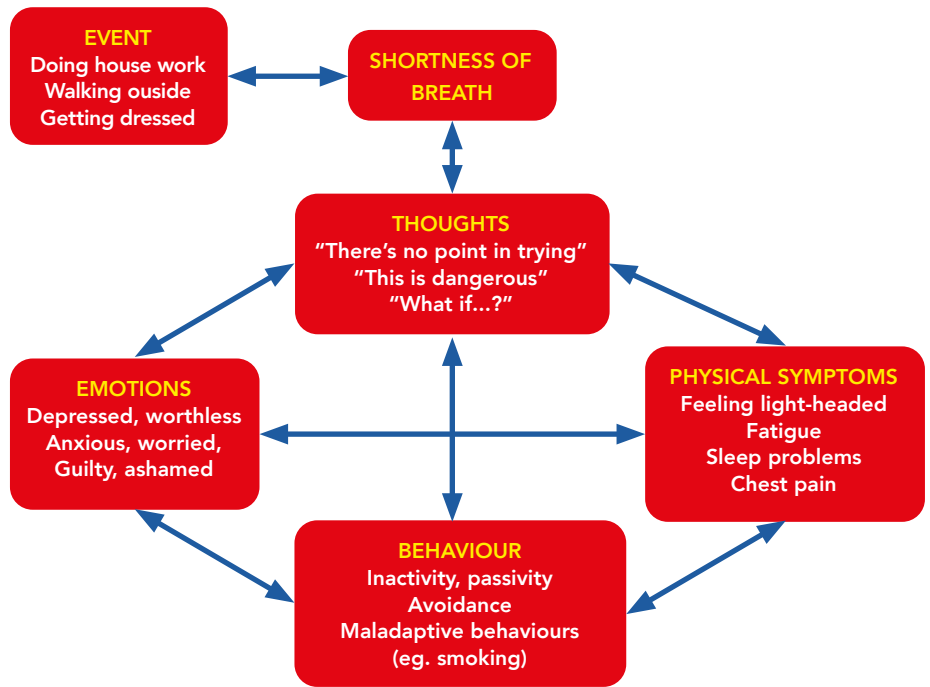


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with Covid-19; in which case doctors and physical therapists will provide you with a personalised rehabilitation plan depending on your needs.

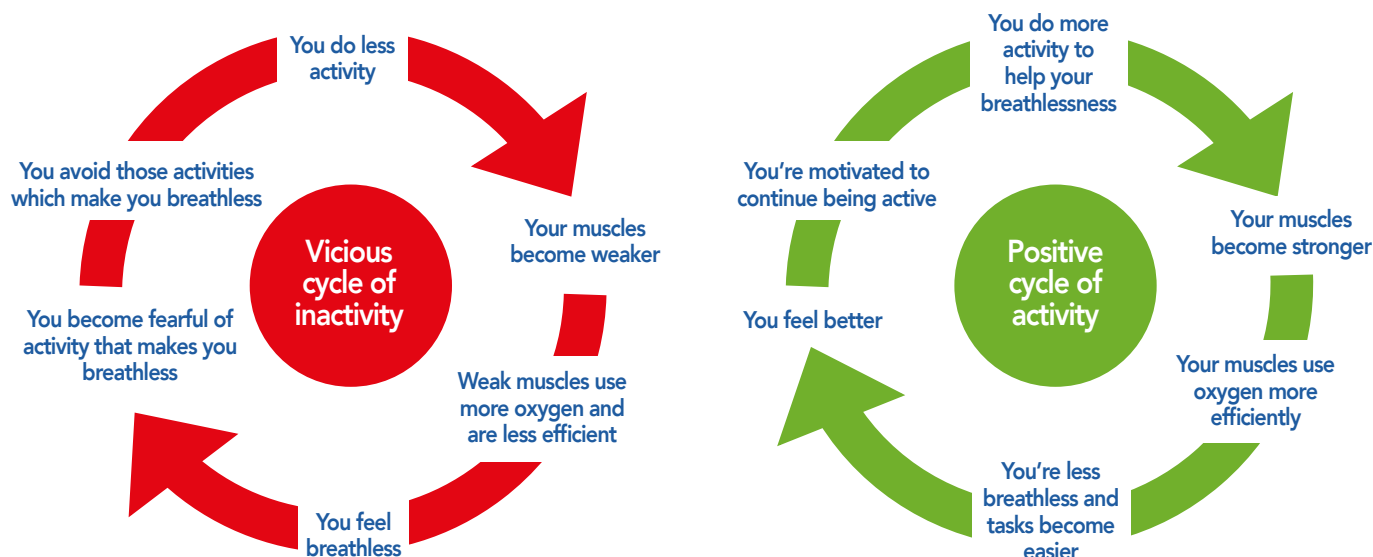
Shortness of breath or feeling breathless with even the smallest task (such as getting dressed or doing some housework) can result in a cascade of thought, emotions, behavioural and physical responses that can be unhealthy physically and mentally. Below in the solid blue smaller circles are techniques you can use to control and improve your breathlessness – coping techniques that can be taught to you by a physical therapist.

Being breathless often leads to inactivity. The more inactive you are, the more breathless you become and the vicious cycle continues. Being inactive also leads to weight gain, also making you more breathless. Being inactive can increase your risk of developing a DVT. You have the ability, with help, to change this. The most important thing is not to be complacent in your recovery, thinking that



this is simply the flu and 'I will feel better soon'. This can often lead to a downward spiral of prolonged symptoms which can result in the development of chronic complications in lung function, exercise intolerance and even chronic fatigue syndrome (formally

called ME or myalgic encephalomyelitis). Be pro-active and ask for help, most of which can be even done over telehealth calls, virtual consultations and group exercise or support sessions via Zoom or Skype, for example.



There are many breathing exercises you can do which can help you to relax and destress, but also improve your lung function, particularly if you've suffered from a recent respiratory illness. The following exercises are designed to help you to increase your lung function and capacity.

Where possible dedicate 10 minutes, preferably twice a day, but once is better than nothing, and particularly anytime you're are feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed.

Caution: Breathing exercises can make some people dizzy or lightheaded, especially if they are new to you. So, always work safely by lying down or sitting while you perform the exercises. Also take it slowly, do 1-2 exercises at a time initially and perform them 2-3 times through the day.

1. Lions Breath

This exercise is good for strengthening the diaphragm.

- Take a deep breath in through the nose
- As you exhale open your mouth and push your tongue out as far as possible.
- Repeat 8 times

2. Forced Exhalation

This is a good exercise to strengthen your diaphragm and improve your deep breathing mechanics.

- Breathe in through your nose pushing your belly up and out
- Then open your mouth and breathe out hard in a shot sharp blow. Remember to pull your stomach in as the same time as you exhale.
- Repeat 8 times.

3. Huff Cough

This is a progression from forced exhalation and is more for someone who has been ill or has experienced a build-up of mucus in their chest. The huff cough is a breathing exercise designed to help you cough up mucus effectively without making you feel too tired. It should be less tiring than a traditional cough, and it can keep you from feeling worn out when coughing up mucus.

- Place yourself in a comfortable seated position. Inhale through your mouth, slightly deeper than you would when taking a normal breath.
- Activate your stomach muscles to blow the air out in 3 even breaths while making the sounds "ha, ha, ha." Imagine you are blowing onto a mirror to cause it to steam.
- Try this 3 times as it should elicit a productive cough and relieve you of any mucus. This can be done anytime during the day when you feel there is mucus build-up.

4. Forced Inhalation

This is a good exercise for strengthening your diaphragm and improving your deep breathing mechanics.

- Open your mouth and take a fast hard breath in. Don't forget to push your stomach out as you breathe in
- Slowly relax breathing out
- Repeat 8 times

The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2020

