

HEALTH

**mind matters**



**MINU BUDHIA**

I am a 29-year-old hoping to be a mom for the first time in two months. I had a miscarriage last year and am anxious about this pregnancy and about how and if I will be able to care for my child during this pandemic. My family and I are being very cautious and following protocols but many residents in our complex are not. I am scared about going into labour early or the lockdown being extended. Also, what if the oxygen shortage persists till then? I am plagued by these negative scenarios and have had two panic attacks already. Please help me.

Firstly, my best wishes and congratulations to you. Pregnancy is both wonderful and wonderfully stressful and it must doubly be so in the middle of a pandemic. Here are some tips to help you feel less scared and more focused on a happy now beginning.

Visualise a happy future with your child. When you wake up every morning, spend 10 minutes talking to your baby. Share your favourite things, tell the baby the plans you have for it, how much you can't wait to meet it, and how loved it will be. Think about the first day, the first week, the first month, the first year and the many, many, firsts you are looking forward to with your baby. You can even make a digital vision board or an audio diary by leaving little voice notes of your thoughts.

Speak with your gynaecologist and GP regularly. Fix a schedule for these calls over the phone or on video, and speak with them to dispel any worries you have. Also, connect with a counsellor to schedule some sessions or call a local helpline to share your feelings. Sometimes, the best thing to do stress is to talk to a non-judgemental, unbiased stranger who is trained to help you to keep negative thoughts at bay.

Focus on what you can control, rather than on what you can't. If fellow residents are uncooperative, speak to the complex committee. Limit your family's and your exposure to them via self-imposed isolation. Walk indoors and make sure to get some fresh air from the window/balcony instead of going to the terrace.

Make a go-to hospital checklist, a go-to hospital bag, and a list of emergency contacts of all types—family, friends, doctors, oxygen supply, pharmacy, an ambulance, people who can drive you. Taking positive action will empower you to feel more prepared and, thereby, less scared.



I am a 14-year-old boy and have been at home and studying online since the last lockdown. My parents barely allow me to go out anywhere—only to the terrace or balcony and for weekly drives to pick up essentials. My problem is that whether I feel happy, or sad, or angry, or scared, I start feeling hungry—even if I have just had a meal. And I only want tasty salty or sweet snacks. Lots and lots of it. Sometimes I feel so sick after eating that I throw up what I've eaten. Please help me stop eating so much.

I firstly want to congratulate you for reaching out to get help. This is the toughest and the biggest step to take towards regaining good health. Sometimes, when we're incredibly stressed with no one to share our emotions with, it may feel like we're losing control over our lives. So much has changed for you personally, and this feeling of being 'stuck' is natural. And at a time like this, food can feel like a great comfort. While an occasional ice cream or brownie or French fries is fine, eating to bury your emotions (positive or negative) or fill a void is already taking its toll.

One of the first things to do is to speak with a parent. Talk to them about how you are feeling. If you feel like you're finding it difficult to open up to them, call a mental health helpline in your area.

Secondly, design a packed timetable. Fill it with not just academics, but everything you can think of—sleep, study, fitness, me-time breaks, hobbies, virtual catch-up times with friends, meals, screen time, etc. If you have something to occupy your mind from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep, it will help to take your mind off food.

Thirdly, try cooking healthy but tasty snacks. YouTube is full of healthy yummy recipes and substitutes that will keep you full while providing you with nutrition. Cooking and meal planning are life skills and you can even start a YouTube channel and vlog your journey.

Fourthly, start a food and mood journal. Keep a small notebook, and each time you eat or drink something, write it down in the journal. And right next to the food name, write down how you were feeling at the moment—you can even draw happy, sad, angry or meh emojis.

Following these tips should help to curb your cravings. However, if you see that you still feel the need to throw up, even after small healthy meals, you must tell your parents and connect with a counsellor as this may be the beginning of an eating disorder. The faster you get help, the sooner you'll feel better.

Last year, both my father (in his late 60s) and I (in my early 40s) tested positive for Covid-19. I recovered and survived, but my father did not. Since then I have been consumed by grief and haven't had a good night's sleep. Now, seeing the rising number of cases, the deaths, the dire situation of those affected, I am constantly worried about my wife (late 30s) and myself (both not vaccinated) dying. We are any way maintaining isolation, working from home, have given our domestic help leave, and I am the only one who goes out for essentials that are not available through online deliveries. However, I feel this paralysing fear overcome me when I have to step out. Please help.

I am so sorry to hear about your father. From your question, it seems that you are currently going through two things—survivor's guilt and anxiety.

To manage survivor's guilt, firstly allow yourself to feel your feelings. Losing a loved one, especially a parent, is cause for trauma. It takes time to process the complex feelings and, in your case, I would recommend grief counselling. You can do this via telephone, or on a video call from the comfort and safety of your home. We all need a shoulder to cry on or a hand to hold, and sometimes a trained professional is our best guide to find our way out of such deep grief.

To manage your fears about your wife's and your own survival, speak freely with your wife about your concerns. Any time you feel that the fear is overwhelming you, write it down in a



notebook. Also, set small achievable daily goals as positive actions will help you to feel a little in control. Ask your doctor about the vaccine options and make an informed decision. Read up on the pros and cons of each and take baby steps to get your vaccine. It will not only protect you physically, but will also give you some peace of mind. Since it also seems like you are emotionally exhausted, take a short break from work.

To help with your sleep issues, try a complete digital detox:

- Ditch the smartphone, laptop, and tablet and find non-tech solutions—listen to the news only once a day, that too on the radio, or you can even ask your wife to do so and give you the important points.
- Try your hand at a mini kitchen garden. Start small with herbs and you'll find some happiness and satisfaction from growing something with your own hands.
- Help your brain recognise bedtime by practising good sleep hygiene. Don't work, eat, or watch TV while in bed and make sure to change out of your day clothes and into a fresh set of pyjamas. Take a warm bath before going to sleep and a void heavy meals at night or snacking right before bed.

Minu Budhia is a psychotherapist, counsellor, founder of Caring Minds, iCanFly, Cafe iCanFly, and a TEDx speaker. Write to askminubudhia@caringsminds.co.in