

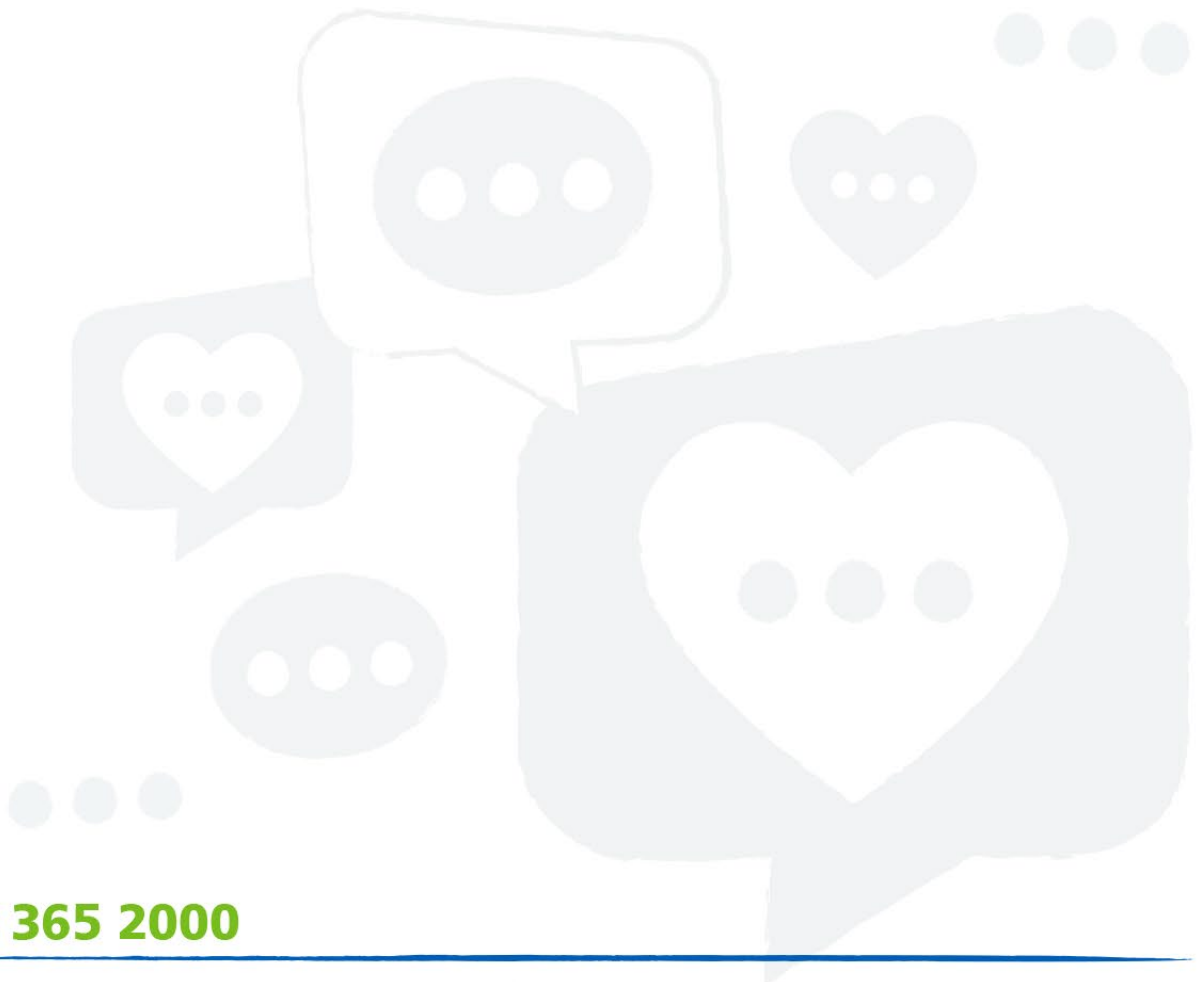


Talking Therapies
Workbook...

Workbook 16

Challenging times

A self-help guide



 **0300 365 2000**

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As you work through the booklet, feel free to make notes on the pages and use the “Notes” page near the back.

How you may be feeling...

Whether it is the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the cost of living, we are living in challenging times and this is **disrupting many aspects of our personal and working lives.**

People are facing new challenges that are having an impact on their mental health, including:

- Worries about getting sick
- Caring for loved ones who are sick
- Managing job loss or worrying about work stability
- Financial stress and economic worries
- Struggles with self-isolation
- Stress in families and parenting under pressure
- Balancing working from home while minding children

In this workbook we want to offer some support to people going through these challenges. We also want to equip you with tools to **manage stress and anxiety and to cope as resourcefully as possible.**



How you may be feeling...

Living through a challenging time or crisis situation can be unsettling and distressing. Suddenly having to adjust, both psychologically and at a practical level, to strange circumstances can put a strain on you and your mental health. **This is a normal reaction to exceptional circumstances.**

We are creatures of habit and we tend not to like change. Some people can tolerate uncertainty, but most people will feel some anxiety when facing uncertain situations. This is a **normal response** to your brain picking up the signals that there is danger out there.

In emergency situations anxiety is there to help you survive as best you can. It is not a sign that you aren't coping or that you are suffering with a mental health condition.

In these challenging times you might feel a range of strong and unpleasant emotions on a daily basis. You might **worry more than usual**. You might have to make some drastic changes to how you live your life, almost overnight.



Noticing your negative emotions

You are likely to experience some strong ‘negative’ emotions at this time. Emotions, even negative ones, communicate important information about the world around us. They are like an **internal compass**, helping us to make decisions and understand what we need to do.

While some emotions such as fear and anxiety may feel unpleasant, they are helpful because they motivate us to take action and keep ourselves safe.

Fear and anxiety

- These are **normal and natural responses** to danger and threat. They let us know that we might be in danger and that we need to take steps to **keep ourselves safe**.
- They are linked to the **fight, flight or freeze** response in the body. This involves physical changes such as increased heart rate (to pump blood to the arms and legs) and muscle tension (allows you to move more quickly).
- For example, in the current situation you might feel afraid that you or your loved ones will get sick, which motivates you to adhere to the recommended health guidelines (e.g. regular handwashing), which in turn helps to protect you from getting sick.

Sadness

- Sadness is a natural response to **loss and setbacks**, which are an inevitable part of life.
- Sadness gives you the space to pull back and process what has happened, and it can signal to others that you may need support and comfort.
- At the moment you might feel sad at the loss of your sense of safety, your familiar routines or you might be missing loved ones.

Noticing your negative emotions

Anger

- Anger occurs when we feel that we or the people we care about are being hurt or wronged in some way.
- Anger motivates us to take action to address these wrongdoings and set things right. It can also be associated with destructive behaviours like shouting or aggression. It's important to separate our possible responses to anger from the emotional message itself.
- In the current situation you might be angry about the pandemic itself and the unfairness of it all. You might also feel angry about the responses of other people or your government towards the situation.

Guilt and shame

- Guilt and shame occur when we feel that we have done something '**wrong**', i.e. something which goes against our morals or what we feel is expected of us.
- These emotions prompt us to address the situation and make amends, e.g. by apologising. They also allow us to learn from the experience and move forward.
- For example, in the current situation, you might experience guilt or shame if you sometimes forgot to follow the recommended guidelines around social distancing and later became unwell.

Four ways to manage distressing feelings

Journaling

Journaling can be a **useful and therapeutic coping method** in times of distress. You can use your journal to sort through jumbled thoughts, to solve problems or to manage difficult feelings.

Which emotions have you been feeling lately? You might like to make a note of these in your Journal.

Worry time

You probably already know that telling yourself to stop worrying or to stop thinking about something usually doesn't help. In fact, it can make you think about it more! A more useful way to manage worry is to **set aside time for worrying**. Take ten minutes on a regular basis, where your only task is to worry. We call this Worry Time.

1. **Set aside a ten-minute period once or twice a day, at a regular time.**

Schedule worry times in advance and put them in your diary. Choose a time when you can devote all of your attention to thinking about the things that are worrying you.

2. **As your worries and concerns arise during the day quickly write them down and set them aside for your Worry Time.**

Writing worries down on paper helps to make them clear. Many people find the act of getting worries out of their heads and onto a piece of paper to be comforting.

What to do during your Worry Times:

- **Categorise** the worries you have written down into worries about things you have no control over, and worries about things you can control.
- **Brainstorm** different solutions or actions you might take to deal with any of the worries that you do have some control over.
- **Think about how you would like to cope** with the worries that you can't control. How can you let go, learn to accept, or live with aspects you cannot change?
- **Make a plan** to address both types of worries.
- **Spend the full ten minutes** worrying, even if this means repeating worries over and over. Repeating worries can often take the power out of them.
- **Finish worry time** - Once you have made a plan, make sure to end "worry time".

Four ways to manage distressing feelings

Grounding exercise

Focusing on what is going on for you right now can help you to **reset and find calm in moments of distress**. Grounding exercises involve reconnecting with your senses and what you are feeling in your body.

Try some of these grounding exercises to bring you back to the here and now:

- **Take ten slow breaths**
Focus your full attention on each breath. Notice how it fills up your lungs as you breathe in. Observe what it feels like as you breathe out.
- **Splash some cold water on your face**
Notice how this feels and how the towel feels as you dry your face. Try to describe these sensations.
- **Listen and try to name the sounds around you**
Start with the closest or the loudest sounds and then gradually move your awareness outwards and into the distance.
- **Step outside or open a window**
Notice the temperature of the air and how it is different or similar to the air inside. What new things can you smell?
- **Put on a piece of music and take a piece of paper and a pen**
Start drawing a line as the music plays, following the music with the pen.

Relaxation exercise

When we are experiencing stress, we can easily start feeling overwhelmed, disconnected and tense. Relaxing your body is a simple way to **calm yourself and feel more anchored** during stressful periods. Relaxation exercises can be a helpful way to reconnect with yourself, and find a place of calm amidst everything that is going on. Relaxing is easier said than done, particularly if you are often tense or on edge, but you can learn to relax. **Relaxation is a skill and, like any skill, it improves with practice.**

You don't need to spend hours practicing relaxation; **five minutes a day can make a huge difference** and significantly lower your stress levels. To get used to the relaxation techniques, try practising them when you are feeling calmer to start with, as this will help you to be able to use them most effectively during times of stress.

Things I can and things I can't control

Challenging situations can be frustrating and stressful, particularly when you feel like you have no control over what is happening. The first step in working through challenging situations is to separate the things you can control from the things you have little or no control over.

Things I can't control: the actions of others if other people get sick how long the situation will last the future other people's emotions.

What I can control: my response, my worries, my actions, my attitude.

Things I can't control

In an ongoing emergency situation, it is hard to predict how things will develop and circumstances can change very quickly. Worrying about what might happen is understandable, but it is not very useful. In fact, it can make us feel more distressed.

Things you have no control over include the actions and reactions of other people, how long the situation will last, and what might happen to things like your job, in the future. This type of worry can drain a lot of your time and energy if you are not careful.

The key to managing worries about things you have no control over is to focus on coping strategies. This includes finding ways to manage the feelings that you are experiencing (e.g. stress, worry, anxiety).

Ask your therapist about our workbook on **Worry** for more help with managing worries.

Things I can control

A core part of dealing effectively with challenging situations is to focus your energy on the practical things you can control.

The one key thing you can control in this situation is your own response to it. Your response includes the way you think about the situation and your own behaviour in relation to it.

For example, you can limit your exposure to the constant stream of negative information from the media, which may be causing you to become more anxious. You can also follow official government advice on staying well or safe..

How to focus on what you can control

Keep a structure and routine

Your usual routine may have been disrupted recently. This can add uncertainty and stress to an already challenging time. Creating a new routine can **bring structure back into your life**. Make sure to include some of the positive self-care and social connection tips from this module in your new routine.

Limit your media usage

We are facing a situation that is rapidly changing, so it is understandable that you might want to check social media or the news frequently, to keep up to date. However, the **amount of information available can be overwhelming** and can make you feel more stressed and anxious.

It is important to keep a balance between staying informed while managing your exposure to the media. If you do find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the amount of news and information you are receiving, start to limit and be selective about what you are reading and listening to.

Checking a trusted news source at set times once or twice a day is a manageable way of staying informed. You could also use the Worry Time technique to manage any worries that arise after reading or watching the news.

While social media can be a way of keeping people connected, it too has the potential to cause anxiety in a time of crisis. Be mindful of stories and advice that may not be trustworthy, as a lot of what appears on social media can be rooted in opinion rather than fact. If you are friends with people who are overly negative or tend to share information which makes you anxious, it might be worth muting their posts or messages for a few days.

Keeping your phone out of the bedroom and trying to maximise your screen-free time every day are further ways of protecting yourself from the flood of unwanted information.

How to focus on what you can control

Stick to reliable sources of information

As well as limiting how much time you spend reading about the current crisis, it is important to **identify reliable sources from which to get your information**. Most media coverage is designed to engage its audience, so facts can often be taken out of context or sensationalised. The [World Health Organisation website](#) is a good source of reliable information. Check your government's website for the latest information and guidelines for your country.

Reinvent your self care

Your usual self-care activities may not be an option at this time. However, it is at times of increased stress and anxiety that **looking after yourself becomes even more important**. You can find help with this on our [Self-Care](#) page. Self-care also means watching out for unhelpful coping strategies that could feel like they are helping, but might be making things worse, e.g. increased alcohol or food consumption.

Stay connected to others

Having a supportive social network of friends, family and the wider community is **essential for maintaining well-being and resilience**. This is especially true in a time of crisis, as this network can provide you with valuable support for whatever challenges come your way.

Prioritise your time

Facing a challenging situation can prevent you from carrying out your various roles and responsibilities in the way that you normally would. You may now find yourself in a situation where you are having to do it all at once. Prioritising your time will ensure that you are **making time for the important things**, while being realistic about what you can achieve.

How to focus on what you can control

Be kind to yourself

When times are tough and we are under stress we often fall into negative patterns of criticising or blaming ourselves. Being **actively compassionate** towards yourself involves being aware of your needs and knowing when things are getting too much. See our section on [Self-Compassion](#) for more information.

Take action to keep yourself safe

Another thing you do have control over is following the official health guidance for your particular location, e.g. washing your hands regularly and maintaining a safe distance from people outside your home. These actions allow you to maintain your own wellbeing, but they also **contribute to the safety of your community**. See your local Health Service or government website for guidelines, or follow those of the [World Health Organisation](#) if in doubt.

Proactively solve problems

Problem solving helps you to **define exactly what you are worrying about**, and it helps you to work out the best way of dealing with a problem, with a simple step-by-step approach. Problem solving can be an effective way of working through **worries about things you do have control over**.



Taking care of yourself

Self-care is crucial during a time of crisis. Looking after yourself is not a luxury, it is an **essential part** of maintaining your energy levels and your resilience to stress. This is particularly true if you are caring for others.

Airlines advise you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping other people. The same idea goes for self-care - you need to look after yourself first, in order to be there for other people.

Self-care includes **caring for your health** and spending time on **activities you enjoy**. You can read about some of the different areas of self-care below.

Everyone has different needs and will find different self-care activities that work for them. Spend some time thinking about the things you need to do to look after yourself, as well as the things you can realistically do in the current circumstances.

Three of the main aspects of a healthy lifestyle are exercise, diet and sleep.

It may feel strange focusing on yourself and engaging in normal activities, such as exercising, when you are living through a crisis situation. However, at this time it is more important than ever to **maintain your strength and physical resilience**, because stress puts a significant strain on your body and mind.

A constructive way to restore yourself when dealing with a challenging situation is to spend time **doing things you really enjoy**. These could be hobbies, exercise, your work or other personal or creative pursuits.



Focusing the mind

Sometimes when you become engrossed in an activity or task that you are passionate about, you can lose all sense of time. You might suddenly realise that hours have passed, when it has felt like mere minutes. This is called **flow**.

Flow happens when you become totally absorbed in what you are doing and experience intense concentration.

Flow is characterised by an absence of emotion and self-consciousness, you are so absorbed by the task at hand that you don't think or feel. In this sense it is **similar to meditation**.

Flow can be very soothing when dealing with stress, as it gives you a time-out from the strong or overwhelming emotions you might be feeling. After periods of flow, people tend to feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction, which can be welcome positive feelings during times of crisis.



Kindness and self-compassion

Self-compassion is about how you talk to yourself when things aren't going well.

Stress, disappointment and setbacks are part of life and cannot be avoided entirely. What you do have control over, however, is **how you treat yourself** when these negative experiences occur.

Being actively compassionate towards yourself involves **being aware of your needs** and knowing when things are getting too much. It is not about excusing yourself from mistakes or denying your responsibility in problems. Instead, it focuses on removing negative self-judgements and **learning forgiveness and acceptance**.

Negative self-talk

Negative self-talk is extremely common. We tend to criticise ourselves, put ourselves down, blame ourselves for problems and ridicule ourselves for faults. We often treat ourselves much more harshly than we would other people.

When something goes wrong, rather than seeing it as a mishap, the negative voice assigns personal blame:

- *What is the matter with me?*
- *Why do I always get things wrong?*
- *Why can't I handle everything?*
- *I am always messing up and ruining things!*

Understanding your negative self-talk is the first step towards **distancing yourself from constant self-judgement**.



Kindness and self-compassion

Compassionate self-talk

Compassionate self-talk is anything supportive, kind, helpful, caring, encouraging or soothing you say to yourself. Talk to yourself as if you were talking to someone you love dearly.

The goal of compassionate self-talk is to create a less judgemental inner conversation, one that still describes the same reality, but in a much more compassionate way. For example,

If you feel overwhelmed juggling work and minding your children, instead of saying to yourself *“I can’t handle it, I’m a failure”*, it is more compassionate to say:

- This is a really tough situation, lots of people are feeling overwhelmed. I’m a good parent and employee. I’m doing my best and its okay if I’m not perfect.

If you make a mistake and forget to wash your hands once, instead of berating yourself with *“I am such an idiot, I’m going to get sick now”*, it is more compassionate and helpful to say:

- Everyone makes mistakes, I will learn from this and try to make it a routine so I don’t forget next time.



Kindness and self-compassion

Prioritising what's important to you

On any given day we carry out a number of different roles in the important areas of our lives. These range from your role in work, being a parent or spouse, to the voluntary work you do in your community.

Managing to juggle all of these roles and responsibilities, can often be a delicate balancing act. In a time of crisis, this is likely to become even more difficult.

During a crisis your life roles and routines can be thrown into turmoil. For instance, if you carry out a job on the frontline of the crisis, it is likely that the demand for your time in this area is going to increase, at the expense of your time in the other areas of your life. Or if you suddenly have to carry out your job from home, you may find that you are also having to care for your children at the same time, essentially **carrying out two roles that would ordinarily have been separate.**

Making time for the important things

In extraordinary circumstances such as this, it is important to recognise that it is **impossible to carry out these roles in the way that you normally would.**

Some things may have to take a backseat for a while and you may have to accept that sometimes “OK” is good enough.

Try not to be too hard on yourself. Maybe it's OK for your child to watch a bit more TV so you can get a piece of work done. Maybe it's OK for you to say no to a request from work, that would limit your time with family.

In order to be realistic about what you are able to get done in each area of your life, try to **prioritise the things that matter the most.** See the section below for help with this.

Making time for what matters most

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Important v urgent

During challenging times, things you may previously have taken for granted, such as taking care of the basic needs and safety of yourself and your family, could suddenly become urgent needs that you have to actively prioritise above everything else.

Stephen Covey's *'Time Management Matrix'* is a way of categorising our everyday tasks and activities into 4 different quadrants. This might be a useful tool to help you make sure that important, but perhaps less urgent things don't get forgotten about but also to help you see what might be things that you can let slide a bit as you manage your day to day life during a crisis.



Making time for what matters most

Quadrant 1 - Important and urgent

Quadrant 1 activities are those that are **important and have to be done urgently** – for example, in the current crisis scenario these types of activities include ensuring you have enough food for your family, that your children are looked after, and attending essential medical appointments, etc.

Quadrant 2 - Important and not urgent

Quadrant 2 activities are important activities that **aren't pressing or urgent** - for example, this may include making sure that, in spite of being pulled in a lot of different directions, you are spending time with family, listening to your partner, finding ways to do some physical exercise, keeping connected to others etc.

Quadrant 3 - Not Important and urgent

Quadrant 3 activities are those that appear **urgent but that are not that important** to you, such as chores that you have got into the habit of doing but which are not actually that important.

Quadrant 4 - Not Important and not urgent

Quadrant 4 activities are those time-wasting activities that we all engage in that are **neither important nor urgent**. Some appear relatively harmless like surfing the net or engaging in idle gossip or chit-chat, or some are more serious or addictive like activities such as over-drinking.



Making time for what matters most

Successful time management

The key to successful time management is to make sure that you prioritise Quadrant 2 activities and tasks.

People spending too much time in **Quadrant 1** are caught up in firefighting and dealing with constant pressure and emergencies. This is a **highly stressful place to be in** and, over time, can lead to burn out and poor performance.

People spending too much time in **Quadrant 4** are caught up in trivial, unimportant and frequently damaging or addictive activities. This quadrant is best **avoided, or at least kept to a minimum.**

Building new routines

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Creating a family routine

In a time of crisis, sticking to your own routine can be difficult. If you have children it can be even harder to manage your family's routine alongside your own.

Each family now has to adjust to new circumstances of trying to study or work while confined in the same household, without the usual organised social activities outside the home. Structuring the day and creating a new family routine is a way to make this more manageable. The following tips can help you build a routine that suits the whole family.

Build the day around mealtimes

Build your daily routine around family mealtimes. One silver lining in the crisis is the opportunity for families to have more healthy home cooked meals. Involve children as much as possible (according to their ages) in planning, preparing, cooking and cleaning up after meals. The more tasks are shared, the **more family bonding and shared pride** there will be. With older children you can set up a weekly schedule for meals, alternating who is cooking/ washing up and ensuring everyone gets their favourite meal included.

Set aside parent work time

Set aside spaces in the day when you can do your own thing while the children are doing their own thing (e.g. homework or play). This might facilitate you doing work projects or taking leisure time. If your children are very young and don't easily give you space, then you might alternate child minding with your partner throughout the day. If you are parenting alone, then this time might occur when the children are watching TV, napping or asleep in the evening. Through the course of the day, the goal is to alternate between time together and time apart. **Creating individual space and time**, while in the same house with others, is the key to coping.

Plan some play times

Rather than responding to your children's requests to play throughout the day, **try to set aside some fun play times during the day**, when you can give them your full attention. This might be doing a craft together, playing a family game in the evening, watching a family TV show or having a video call with a grandparent or relative together. Set one or two interesting goals each week that you can look forward to, whether this is trying a new game, learning something, or doing an online quiz with extended family and friends.

Creating a family routine

Relax about homework

Rather than becoming obsessed with 'home-schooling' your children, which can lead to increased pressure and battles, it is important to relax about homework. While you might punctuate the day with one or two learning periods when screens are turned off, it is better to set **small, achievable learning goals that the children are largely in charge of**. Avail of what online school supports might be available, so you don't have to take on the role of a strict teacher.

Help children plan their activities

Help your children create their own routine and alternate their activities throughout the day. For example, in a given day they might alternate between screen time by themselves

1. Doing a play activity
2. Reading a book
3. Watching a TV programme with family
4. Playing in garden
5. Playing music
6. Doing a craft
7. Going for family walk etc.

The key is to strike a balance between screens and other activities as well as time alone and time with the family.

Take the pressure off

Being cooped up in the same house already brings a lot of pressure. **Reduce your expectations** and don't expect to be a super parent doing everything. Have a gentle start to your day, set one or two goals, let your children watch a bit more TV, and focus on enjoyment and relaxation as much as you can.

Further resources



Workbooks

Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI) – <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/>

A range of detailed resources and PDF workbooks available to download for free focusing on a range of depression and anxiety related difficulties.

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS – <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

Self-help guides free to download by PDF and print on a range of difficulties including anxiety and depression.

Smartphone apps (found on Apple and Google Play store)

WRAP – Wellness recovery action app

Mood Tools – Depression aid

Fear Tools – Anxiety kit

Insight Timer – Meditation app

Websites

Mind – <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Mental Health Foundation – <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>

NHS – <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

Useful contacts...



Talking Therapies:

0300 365 2000

(Open 8am to 8pm Monday to Thursday
8am to 5pm Friday)

Email:

talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk

Other contacts:

Berkshire Crisis Team:

0800 129 9999

(24 hours, specialist service for
immediate mental health crisis)

Samaritans:

116 123

(24 hours, confidential listening service)

NHS Direct / out of hours:

111

(24 hours, physical and mental
health concerns)

In an emergency always call 999

