

How to keep mentally healthy and stay sane during a lockdown

We're entering unprecedented times with this Coronavirus pandemic. No one knows how it is going to pan out or how long it is going to last for. At some point it's likely schools will shut in the UK and we may enter a period of lockdown. An unintended consequence of this may be that people's mental health suffers as we keep apart from our colleagues, neighbours, friends and families. But there are many things individuals and families can do to stay as physically and mentally healthy as possible despite any constraints.

Below, we share lots of practical ways to look after your mental health and stay sane if you are stuck at home.

1. Keep active - when we are physically active, it keeps our bodies healthy, our immune system strong and our minds in tip top condition. Physical activity burns off stress hormones like cortisol so we feel calm, centred and energised. Why not try:

- Cleaning your house actually counts as 'moderate' activity so get tidying and not only will you have a work out, you'll have a clean house too!
- Break your day up with short bursts of star-jumps, press-ups or running on the spot.
- Try some gentle yoga routines online - there are plenty to choose from on YouTube.

2. Immerse yourself in nature - research shows that nature can have a healing effect on our minds and bodies. One study showed that patients recovering from surgery whose beds overlooked a garden recovered faster than those whose bed overlooked a carpark. Try these:

- If you have a garden, start tidying it ready for spring.
- Take care of any house plants - feed, water and prune them.
- If it's safe to do so, spend some time in a local wood and bathe in the natural world.

3. Focus on the present - our minds have a tendency to ruminate on the past, or fast-forward to the future, sometimes in a negative kind of way. This tendency is often exacerbated during times of stress. An antidote is to intentionally focus on the present moment - by noticing what's happening in our minds, bodies and the external environment with an attitude of kindness and curiosity.

- Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest and, as you breathe normally in
- and out through your nose, count 10 full breaths.
- Download and try one of the many free mindfulness apps that are available.
- If you find your mind racing, lie down and tune in to the sensations in your body.

4. Laugh - Laughing feels good, boosts our immune system and helps us keep things in perspective.

Laughing with others helps strengthen relationships and, because laughter is contagious, we laugh more with others.

- Share jokes at home and online.
- Watch funny clips and films.
- Try laughter yoga; there are plenty of examples on YouTube. There is some research evidence that even fake or forced laughter can improve mood and wellbeing.

5. Practise kindness - in times of need, we often see the best of humanity as people dig deep to help others.

- Offer to pick up supplies for self-isolating neighbours and maybe now is the time to donate some money to charity.
- Be extra kind to others in your house. Tensions can run high when we feel trapped inside.
- Make cups of tea, give hugs (if you're allowed to!), pay compliments.
- Reach out to friends and family and let them know you're thinking of them. Pick up the phone or have a video call with grandparents so they feel connected.

6. Focus on what's good - There is ample research to show that deliberately focusing on the good things in our lives - practising gratitude - can improve our wellbeing. It's easy to give in to our natural 'negativity bias' as our brains strive to protect us from harm, but we can counter that by deliberately focusing on what's good, even during challenging times.

- At the end of each day, write down three good things about the day, no matter how small (a rainbow in the sky, another day without symptoms, a funny joke you heard...it's amazing what you'll notice when you pay attention!).
- Share at least one positive story with other people each day.
- Say 'thank you' for all the little things others do for you and mean it.

7. Keep learning - our minds need challenge and stimulation to stay healthy, which is why learning new things is one of the 'five ways to wellbeing'.

- All those books you don't have time to read? Read them. Read them all!
- Take an online course. Now could be the perfect time to learn a new skill and there are lots of great free courses on sites like <http://www.coursera.org> and <http://www.edx.org>

- Research a topic you're interested in, then share five ideas or facts you learned with someone else.

8. Connect - Connecting with others is another of the 'five ways to wellbeing'.

[Research](#) shows that people who have the richest social relationships are the happiest; the quality of relationships has even been linked to physical health and longevity (and academic achievement in children). Social distancing doesn't mean you can't keep in touch. Let people know you care and especially contact those who may be more isolated or lonely.

- Each day, contact one person you haven't spoken to for some time.
- Ask your family, friends and the wider world via social media interesting questions about unusual topics. Encourage open and honest answers and use these as a starting point for fascinating conversations.
- Notice positive qualities in other people (e.g. strengths such as perseverance, kindness, being hopeful etc) and compliment them on those.

9. Concentrate on strengths - Character strengths are essential in supporting wellbeing. Research (see [VIA Institute on Character](#)) shows that recognising and working with our strengths increases our levels of happiness.

- Identify your top five strengths and consider how these can help you navigate these
- challenging times.
- Challenge family and friends to use a particular character strength in new ways.
- Watch a film or read a book, then discuss with others the strengths shown by different characters in the story.

Remember, nothing lasts forever, no matter how bad it is or feels at the time.

Human beings often grow and

flourish through adversity. This is an incredibly challenging time, but we are all in this together and we can take this opportunity to rediscover our shared humanity.

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