Coping with COVID-19

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The impact that COVID-19 is having on our health, finances, and daily life is enormous. We are currently experiencing an unprecedented pandemic that requires serious action and has led to a remarkable disruption to global society. Given all of these changes and general uncertainty, it is normal for people to feel anxious and overwhelmed with how to cope with these rapid changes, especially social isolation. Combining research, clinical work, and currently available resources, there are a number of things within our control that can help decrease anxiety and help us stay sane in a time of chaos. In short, I recommend that we *stay structured, stay active, stay curious, stay connected, and stay grounded*. We **will** get through this!

**Stay Structured**

We know from research that maintaining a daily schedule with clear, attainable goals helps people’s mood in general. It can be difficult to maintain the level of productivity that you had previously outside of the home, but you can still do things to help create structure.

* **Designate a work space in your living area**. This can be as small as one side of the couch, and as large as a specific room. Make sure you are set up comfortably, and that work is easy to do in that space (e.g., there is an outlet, back support).
* **Maintain a daily calendar/planner with specific activities**. Structure is effectively created when we have a specific, measurable, achievable goal for each hour of the “work day.” Part of a typical schedule is lunch and time for breaks, so be sure to schedule those things in to make sure productivity is maintained and there is some normalcy.
* **For those who are not currently working** because your industry is not operational, use this time to beef up skills with webinars, polish resumes, or engage in chores that have been pushed to the side. Here is a link to 24 FREE online classes offer by Ivy League universities that can help anyone increase their knowledge & marketability <https://www.themuse.com/advice/24-free-online-ivy-league-courses-you-can-sign-up-for-today-regardless-of-your-gpa>.
* **Take stock of your accomplishments at the end of each day**. Note the progress you’ve made and internalize the goals you have accomplished. No goal is too small to praise! This will also help you transition into relaxation time, which you have earned!
* **Continue to maintain good sleep hygiene**. Separating your place of work and place of sleep are key (i.e., don’t do work in your bed). Maintain your typical wake & sleep routines to keep your sleep cycle on target. Try to continue going to bed around the same time and waking up around the same time to keep your typical rhythm. This will also help when you (eventually) transition back to typical work days.

**Stay Active**

Another thing we know from research is that physical activity releases chemicals in your brain that improve your mood. Staying active can also help you feel healthy and accomplished, and it is another way to help bring structure to your day.

* **Schedule a time of day, a duration, and physical space for your workout** that has a high likelihood of happening. For example, if you’re not a morning person, it wouldn’t be wise to go for a 6am 2-hour workout. Similarly, if you typically eat at 6pm, a 6:30 workout also wouldn’t be the best idea. Shoot for a time when you have a break in your schedule, a duration that fits your pre-COVID behaviors, and a space that is conducive to working out.
* **Try one of the dozens of free workout apps or websites**! This is a link to 50 (five-zero) of the best free, at-home workout sites/videos/routines. There is every type of workout you could ask for, from yoga to high intensity interval training (HIIT), to Pilates. <https://makeyourbodywork.com/how-to-exercise-at-home/>
* Instead of viewing this as a time where you are unable to be as active as you would like (i.e., go to the gym, commute to work, take walks), use this as a time to **explore fitness genres you may never have tried before.** Perhaps you have always gravitated toward weightlifting – give kickboxing a try. Maybe you have been a core power person – see what a HIIT workout feels like. This could easily be turned into a specific goal on your daily to-do list.
* **GO OUTSIDE**. Quarantined and/or sheltered in place does not mean you can’t still walk/run/bike outside (just maintain 6 feet of distance from your neighbors). People need fresh air, and luckily it’s not too cold at this point to enjoy being outside, so take a walk on your lunch break, walk the stairs of your local park, take your pet for an extra-long walk, or take a nice jog outside.

**Stay Curious**

Since everyone is in this together, many places that would have required in-person attendance are now providing virtual resources. Take advantage of this free opportunity to enjoy sights and sounds that would have cost money to enjoy before!

* **Take a virtual tour of an art museum**. Many museums, including our very own Art Institute, are allowing for virtual tours of exhibits. <https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/museums-galleries/museums-with-virtual-tours>
* **Watch a professional performance**. Since live performances are not possible, watch a Broadway show or popular artist streamed right through your computer! <https://www.vulture.com/2020/03/all-musicians-streaming-live-concerts.html>
* **Read a new book**. Here is a list of some great books you can download to an e-reader <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Kindle-Store-eBooks/zgbs/digital-text/154606011>
* **Try a new recipe**. There is no better time to try out some new meals than when you have plenty of time at home! Here are some simple ingredient recipes that don’t take too much time and have household ingredients. <https://ifoodreal.com/clean-eating-recipes-dinners/>
* **Watch a new series, movie, or documentary**. Most of us have some type of streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, etc.) and if we don’t, we have a friend or family member’s login information ☺. There are even some new movies in theatres that are currently streaming on these services. Plus, there is a wide array of new series and documentaries to watch. Here is a list of some recommended series: <https://www.digitaltrends.com/movies/best-shows-on-netflix/>.

**Stay Connected**

Human beings are not meant to exist in isolation. Studies from solitary confinement in prisons demonstrate the damage that social isolation has on our emotional health. The good news is that we can still stay connected even if we can’t be physically with others.

* **Video conferencing** platforms, such as Zoom, WebEx, and Microsoft Groups offer free accounts and allow you to talk with multiple people at once. Set up a family Zoom call and see everyone’s face at once! <https://zoom.us/>
* **Schedule individual FaceTime or Skype dates** with friends and loved ones. Have a meal together, watch a show together, do a workout together, or just chat. This can be a way to connect and still feel like you are engaged with others.
* **Start a book club**. Perhaps you have a text thread with a group that you don’t get to spend a whole lot of time with anymore. Pick a book, read it, and discuss all together!
* **Write a letter**. Snail mail might be making a comeback! Take time to write a personal note and send it to a family members (perhaps one who is less technologically inclined).
* **Join or start a group meditation or group prayer**. Many congregations are streaming services and engaging in prayer virtually – if a place of worship is important to you, join!
* **Start or join a virtual dance party**. There are DJs hosting sets, where multiple people are tuning in and having a living room dance party at night – this is also a chance to get active! <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/9340211/dj-d-nices-virtual-social-distancing-dance-party-drew-vips-like-michelle-obama-missy-elliott-more>
* **Go on a date with your partner**. Go on a walk together and order a special meal from an upscale restaurant that is offering a takeout option. Here is a list of some great Baltimore takeout options:
* <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-fo-coronavirus-carryout-20200318-vylvufroovf6zfrbvqprpweefq-htmlstory.html>
* <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1In-C5ClJS4Yzx5cTGfelmF2GRQ-Ws86QCwjQCihwx14/htmlview?fbclid=IwAR2GEfzfiTpnZQWQ_HvIo-D4k_doLrA1dxRF3zwtgIozfTDe9Dnv5mBqVyM>
* <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1z-d6rcTypT2SDwmiNcDr3oiKK0VfMr_JnyW8Jy0ny1Y/edit?fbclid=IwAR1TXGqJGUt9OeqdBJeekWPd8m3_-D3xwHed_OCBnQvz8tDqCkhbCB2qfDk#gid=0>

**Stay Grounded**

Pandemics are naturally anxiety-producing. This is something that is going to affect millions of people, and there is no clear message about the future and when things will get back to normal. However, there are some things to consider when thinking the worst and feeling overwhelmed by the circumstances.

* **Unplug from the 24/7 COVID-19 reporting**. In order to stay grounded, it’s important to limit exposure to the constant news cycle that discusses this and only this. Be sure to stay on the lookout for important announcements, but check in with the news once a day rather than have it on constantly. This also includes searching for COVID-related stories, reading articles online, and getting caught up in social media.
* **While it feels like there is a lot out of our control, we do have control over our actions and how we view things**. **Choose to focus on what you CAN control**. There is a lot of change and also uncertainty occurring right now, which is notoriously scary for us. There are likely a number of worried thoughts running through our minds about having to stay home, not having enough resources, getting sick, and things closing. *Remember:*
  + You greatly minimize your chance of getting sick if you keep physical distance from others, clean surfaces, and wash your hands thoroughly.
  + You have likely gone to the store or ordered things online in preparation, so you are able to use your items wisely and have everything you truly need for the next week or so.
  + While businesses and leisure activities are shut down, essential places, like grocery stores, hospitals, and pharmacies are open and provide necessary resources – you will be able to access them.
* **Psychologists know how anxiety-producing this time can be, so some have produced podcasts about ways to manage stress and anxiety during this time**. Yale psychologist, Dr. Laurie Santos has a podcast, “The Happiness Lab,” where she has two COVID-19 specific podcasts about things we can do to decrease stress and anxiety. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-happiness-lab-with-dr-laurie-santos/id1474245040?fbclid=IwAR3qG8CC6H8CLLJrsHr4wgA8fYQGkLzR0IwmzEr_0HReDc1zXuYMzLBjGR0>
* **Seek out professional resources, such as therapy for additional support.** A lot of therapists (including myself) are transitioning to telehealth services. If you have insurance, most likely, there is an in-network provider currently accepting new clients via telehealth (phone or video chat sessions). For those without insurance, there are also resources that are sliding scale, ranging from $20-$60 per session.
  + Open Path <https://openpathcollective.org/client/>
  + Clear water Counseling <http://clearwatercounselingchicago.com/>
  + Better Help <https://www.betterhelp.com/>