

Mental fitness tips during COVID-19

As the Coronavirus continues to spread across the world, and the number of cases increases, we will struggle with many emotions. Some common reactions include:

- feeling hopeless
- worry and panic
- anger
- paranoia
- obsessiveness
- sleep challenges
- wanting to withdraw
- restlessness
- concentration problems

Even though you may feel powerless, there are many things you can do to support emotional regulation, improve coping, facilitate communication, and minimize dysfunction. This time calls on us to tolerate uncertainty and lean into the feelings that are associated with it. Our beliefs about life will be challenged and our sense of meaning and purpose will be at the forefront. Things that seemed so important pre-Covid -19 are now comparatively small. Remember, you are more resilient than you think. Here are some suggestions based on the science of psychology.

1. Stick to a **routine**. Go to sleep and wake up at a reasonable time. Make a plan for your day that includes varied activities and projects .
2. At a time when decisions are made for us, we want to **focus** on what is within our control.
Things we can control:
 - ~ *Behave*– be mindful of your behaviour, the impact it has on others, slow down your reactions
 - ~ *Feel*- validate present emotions that come with this difficult time. Observe feelings without judgement. Be curious about your feelings, they provide information about what your mind is struggling with.
 - ~ *Think*– Give yourself compassionate, supportive self-talk. Accept that others will get on your nerves, the ones who aren't social distancing, not washing their hands long enough; it is inevitable. Try to be patient. People have different ways of coping in difficult times.
3. **Self-care** matters.
 - ~ Every day, get showered, dress in comfortable clothes, bathe, wash your face, brush your teeth. Our mental state is reflected in how we present ourselves to the world, regardless of how small our world feels right now.
 - ~ Get up at the same time every day, and have a consistent bedtime
 - ~ Have regularly timed healthy meals
 - ~ Hydrate often
 - ~ Minimize caffeine intake
 - ~ Minimize how much alcohol you consume
 - ~ Make time for quiet. Go in the car, porch, balcony (if space is at a premium) where you live.
 - ~ Get grounded – breathe deeply, garden, meditate, work to stay in the present moment, walk barefoot

4. **Go outside** if possible, for at least thirty minutes. Discover a new path, walk early or late to maintain social distancing. Open a window if you are not able to leave the home to let in some fresh air.
5. Make a small **intention** for the day to feel more productive. It could be as simple as doing the laundry or something bigger like organizing a closet or decluttering a specific area your space. Make this intention achievable and within your present emotional and mental capacity. Start small.
6. Find some time to **move** each day - daily for at least thirty minutes.
 - ~ exercise videos, stretching, yoga, lifting weights
 - ~ climbing stairs, ride your bike, walk
 - ~ play with kids (hopscotch, frisbee)
 - ~ turn on the music and dance!
7. **Connect**. Reach out daily to a few people, even if you don't feel like it.
 - ~ Avoid focusing on too much talk about the pandemic
 - ~ Use FaceTime, Skype, make phone calls, text.
 - ~ Don't forget to do this for your children as well. Set up virtual playdates with their friends
 - ~ Facilitate virtual meetups for adults and teens
 - ~ Have your morning coffee with friends/coworkers in a video conference
8. **Limit** the amount of news and social media. Find a reliable source and check it in the morning and then in the afternoon for a small amount of time. Do not research before you go to sleep.
9. Develop a **sensory diet**. Try to explore all senses daily.
 - ~ Touch - soft or weighted blanket, furry pillow, cool stone
 - ~ Taste - hot drinks, cold popsicle, peppermint gum, strong spicy and savory food, sour candy
 - ~ Sight - use soothing lighting, keep a tidy pleasing atmosphere where you live, look outside
 - ~ Sound - play comforting music, listen to the breeze and birds
 - ~ Smell - vanilla, lavender, eucalyptus oil, burn candles
 - ~ Movement – rock in rocking chair, walk in place, pass an object from one hand to another, bounce a ball against the wall
10. **“Be scared without being scary”** (Brene Brown 2020 post). Be patient, we are all stressed and not at our best. You have a choice whether you engage in arguments. These are global stressors that impact us all differently. Now is the time to expand our tolerance for those who we live with, and work with (if essential). Others, and ourselves will not be at our best. We need to be patient, and let some things go.
11. Practice **radical acceptance**. This is happening, there are many unknowns, it is unprecedented, but, you can control how you respond to the unknown. Indeed, sometimes the unknow provides us with unexpected gifts.
12. **See the good** in the world
 - ~ spring is coming
 - ~ witness the kindness of others
 - ~ notice generosity towards strangers.
 - ~ hunt for feel-good stories
 - ~ Look for the heros in your life – they are everywhere

13. **Help others.** Find ways, big and small, to give back and contribute. Support restaurants, offer to grocery shop, check in with elderly neighbors - helping others gives us a sense of agency when things seem out of control.
14. Find a **long-term project** to dive into. Now is the time to learn how to play the keyboard, start a giant puzzle, play a board game, paint, read, refinish old furniture, learn to sew, juggle, or do calligraphy. Keeping busy and occupied helps to distract from what is going on in the outside world.
15. Engage in **repetitive movements** and left-right movements. Research has shown that repetitive movement (knitting, coloring, painting, jump roping etc.) and left-right movement (running, drumming, skating, walking) are effective calming measures in times of stress.
16. Express yourself through **art**. Being creative is a way to release emotion productively. Sculpt, draw, dance, and sing. Listen or record music, film some video, now is the time!
17. **Laugh. Be silly.** Humor has been shown to lighten the emotional load we carry. It relieves the stress response, reduces heart rate, and lessens the physical impact stress can have on our bodies. In the long term, laughter improves mood, increases immunity, and improves personal satisfaction. There is a lot to be worried about right now. Contrast this heaviness with a daily dose of comedic relief.
18. **Reach out for help** – there are people who can help. Some mental health clinics continue to offer session via video. Seek out support groups, call a mental health line, share your worries, and fears with family and friends. Others want to be helpful in these times, and you will have the chance to reciprocate when you're ready.
19. Remind yourself daily that this is **NOT the new normal**. Ambiguity is hard and destabilizing for humans, and in uncertain times, it seems it will never end. This will pass, we will learn from it. We will be ok. We will once again lead busy, productive lives, and we may even yearn for certain simplicities we had in COVID-19 times.
20. **Find your meaning.** What will COVID-19 teach you? What is there to learn? How will you make your life better as a result of the experience? In the midst of all suffering there is wisdom if you look for it.

SELF-AWARENESS · TOLERANCE · FLEXIBILITY · CONTRIBUTION

One day this will be a story we tell ...