

Quick Read: How to stay mentally healthy during COVID 19, March 2020

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The science is in, when we're as mentally healthy as possible our physical health is better, and we have improved immunity to diseases.

Here are some simple steps we can all take every day to help us through the COVID 19 situation.

Dealing with Difficult Feelings When They Arise

Lots of us are scared, sometimes we might feel angry. The risks and dangers are real right now. It's okay to feel that way.

It's important to allow ourselves to feel our feelings about this situation.

- When we do it helps to pay particular attention to how our body is feeling:
 - ✓ do you feel the feeling in your stomach?
 - ✓ in your chest?
 - ✓ if feeling had a colour what would it be?
 - ✓ if the feeling had a shape what would that be?
- Having a good cry is healthy and helpful.
- Talking through our fears with friends and loved ones is also healthy and helpful.
- Reach out to **online counsellor** if needed. There are many available. Look for a Registered Clinical Counsellor or a Registered Psychologist.

Allowing a Break from Difficult Feelings is Essential

It's important not to allow ourselves to spend all day every day in these negative feelings. Here are some options to give ourselves a break from them:

- **Minimise news intake to 30 minutes – 1 hour per day.**
We should really call "The News" "The Bad News" because that's what they report on for the most part. We all need to stay informed but let's use reliable websites which do not sensationalise things, and we shouldn't spend too long on them.
- **Pay attention to positive news sites and online resources e.g.**
 - ✓ <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/>
 - ✓ read the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation newsletter
 - ✓ watch YouTube videos of Italians singing together from their balconies in self isolation.
 - ✓ <https://reasonstobecheerful.world/>
 - ✓ Greater Good Science Centre <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>
- **Writing down three things we are grateful for Every. Single. Day** or saying them aloud to another human is a proven way of increasing mental health and wellness. Taking this five minutes a day helps remedy the negative effect of the scary information the media bombards us with. This is also a great skill to teach children.
- **Helping others** makes us feel good and makes them feel good. Us humans can do marvelous things when we work together. Find people who are vulnerable or isolated and offer support, it could be practical or emotional:
 - ✓ a chat on the phone
 - ✓ a run to the grocery store

- ✓ a letter mailed to a senior's home
 - ✓ make a cheerful or funny video for loved ones who are far away
- Try to focus on getting through **one day at a time**. Panicking about the future doesn't help any of us.

Staying positive.

Endorphins, dopamine and serotonin are our happy neurotransmitters and we want them working for us right now.

- Laugh as much as possible; watch and listen to comedies. Even a fake laugh will give us a little boost.
- Exercise is a quick way to flood our body with good feelings and keep us healthy.
- Connect with friends and family. Lucky us, we can stay connected even when social distancing prevents us from physically being with our loved ones. Connect often with apps like FaceTime, WhatsApp, Skype, or even pick up an old-fashioned telephone.
- When we do see other people in person, we can still look them in the eye and smile, even though we can't get physically close.
- Take a moment longer than usual to really notice and savor little things you enjoy, tastes, sights, smells, and sensations.

Routine and goals

Us humans thrive when we have a routine and short, medium- and long-term achievable goals. COVID 19 has really messed with that for most of us!

It's time to make new, temporary routines and goals.

- Try to get up and go to bed at around the same time every day. Eat meals at regular times (and pay attention to enjoying the taste!). If working from home keep regular work hours.
- Incorporate exercise every day, preferably a walk outside (being careful to adhere to social distancing guidelines). Fresh air and exercise are easy ways to get our happy neurotransmitters working for us.

For many of us normal work and school are suspended so now it's time to find some new short-term goals that we haven't had time for before.

- Always wanted to learn how to sing? Play a musical instrument? Paint? Write? There are so many online resources for learning new skills. Pick one and start a course, spending some time every day enjoying it.
- Maybe there's some tasks around the home that usually there's no time for:
 - ✓ Marie Kondo-ing that cupboard that's in chaos
 - ✓ putting in a flower bed in the yard, planning a vegetable garden
 - ✓ decorating a room or a wall
 - ✓ rearranging the furniture
 - ✓ spring cleaning
 - ✓ finishing that DIY project
- For those of us with children we so often rush around in our day-to-day lives and miss precious time with them. Here's our opportunity:
 - ✓ play that game with the kids that there's never normally time for
 - ✓ teach the kids some skills around the home e.g. baking, lighting a fire, grooming the pets
 - ✓ read together
 - ✓ look at family photos together

A few more notes about our body

Pay attention to the breath. Many of us breathe in ways that negatively affect our health when we are stressed.

- ✓ Take time each day to focus on **nice long deep breaths**, filling all parts of the lungs and then emptying them completely.
- ✓ Sometimes it helps to imagine oxygen coming into your body from the trees and nourishing you, and then giving back the carbon dioxide as a gift to keep the trees healthy on the out breath.
- ✓ Some of my favourite 15 minute breathing exercises can be found here

<https://www.haven.ca/stay-connected/bookstore-and-resources/practice-at-home>

- **Sleep.** Get the best sleep possible. As you know decent sleep is essential for mental and physical health. For great tips to improve your sleep, head to <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/healthy-sleep-tips>
- **Remedy for panic symptoms** (heart racing, stomach in knots, sweating, shaking, shallow short breaths, panicked thoughts that won't go away).
 - ✓ Try breathing in for a count of 3 and out for a count of 7 until the body feels calmer.
 - ✓ Believe it or not breathing in and out of a paper bag also works well for panic symptoms.
- If you are experiencing lots of fear and anxiety **minimize caffeine**. Caffeine mimics the effects of the fight or flight response, which drives our anxiety (and our anger).
- <https://www.anxietycanada.com/> has fantastic resources for managing anxiety.
- Using a **relaxation exercise daily**, preferably at bedtime, will reduce the negative effects of stress on the body and improve sleep. Andrew Johnson has some great low-cost and free apps to help with sleep and anxiety. You can find them on YouTube, the App Store, the play store or his website www.withandrewjohnson.com
- **Meditation** is a great skill to learn while we have extra time on our hands. There is mounting evidence that it improves physical and mental health, some studies even suggest it repairs telomeres; the parts of our chromosomes that shred as we age.
 - ✓ Apps like Headspace and Insight Timer are great resources.
 - ✓ Lots of free meditations are also available on YouTube.
 - ✓ Free, made in British Columbia, Mind Shift app for iPhone and Android

Feel free to distribute to anyone who might find this helpful.

Humans are amazing, especially when we work together. We got this.