**How to Not Let Covid-19 Steal Your Mental Health While You're At Home**
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We are fortunate to be going through this pandemic in the age of electronic communication that provides us with information, connection, productivity and entertainment. We are equally fortunate that we have decades of psychological research to guide us in getting through an experience of isolation in a way that will stave off depression and anxiety while helping us grow and thrive. As a mental health professional, I would like to share some tips about how to be physically isolated without letting it take a mental toll.

**Create Structure** Make a schedule each day and keep to it. You may want to change it on the weekends or different days for variety. If you don't consciously fill your time, your time will fill up for you. Listen to podcasts, watch videos, read, exercise, talk to friends, work on a project, create art, listen to music, dance, play games, cook, take a bath or do whatever you're going to feel good about at the end of the day. Just be proactive, rather than reactive.

**Get Physical** Give yourself a daily goal for physical activity. Of course, you can go outside to walk, run or bike. There are also thousands of youtube videos to lead you in exercising, stretching, and yoga so you don't need a gym or any equipment to keep up your physical activity or start a new routine.

**Learn Something** Is there something big you've always wanted to master? This is a great time to start by reading online, ordering books, or watching youtubes. There might be smaller things you could look into that would support you in your job, a hobby, or your personal growth. You can even learn an instrument, a language, or an art technique by watching youtubes or hiring an online teacher. This is the perfect time to either delve into major research or learn something small daily.

**Stay Connected** Call or video chat with at least one person every day. Use this opportunity to contact people who you rarely have time to connect with. Look up some people you've fallen out of touch with and say hi. Write a letter to someone who helped you in the past. You can even do activities separately, such as watching the same movie, reading the same book, cooking, or taking a nature walk, and talk about the activity with a friend or family member. Join an online book club or discussion group. Text is better than nothing, email is better than text, phone is better than email, and video is better than phone. The more social cues, the better.

**Create Meaning** Humans are wired for meaning and purpose. There is a difference between how we feel at the end of the day if we've just passed time versus if we've done something that holds meaning to us. Examples of meaningful projects might be writing a personal history for our children; organizing photos; creating a woodworking, gardening or art project; learning a language; or doing anything else that will give you a sense of satisfaction at the end of the day rather frustration that you wasted a day.

**Change an Unsupportive Habit** This is a good time to repeat new behaviors so they become habit. It's very hard to *not* do something because we have to make the choice over and over again if something is tempting us. It's much easier to *do* something that replaces an unsupportive choice. Try drawing a picture every time you want to play a computer game outside of the time you are allowing yourself. You can reach for rice crackers instead of potato chips. If you want to drink in the evening, you could arrange to watch the same movie as a friend and talk about it. If you feel anxious, listen to relaxing music or a motivating podcast. It helps to have a plan in advance. It also helps to set goals with a friend and then check in daily or weekly so you can support each other in creating new habits.

**Have Fun** You finally have permission to watch that Ken Burns series you always wanted to watch, take long baths, hike, play a Monopoly tournament, do the thousand piece jigsaw puzzle your aunt gave you, or play every John Coltrane song in existence. Go wild.

**Keep Balance** Certain activities, such as online games, feel good when we're doing them but can depress us when we're done. Keep activities in balance so you have a variety that includes mental stimulation, physical activity, connection with others, fun, personal growth and accomplishment. Think of how you're going to feel after doing something, not how you're going to feel while doing it. This will guide you to mentally healthy activities.

**Grow** Our brains form connections based on the experiences they have so this is the perfect time to give yourself a new daily emotional experience. If you have a goal of becoming more relaxed, you can listen to visualizations, learn to meditate or take up yoga. There are online resources or workbooks that will suggest daily practices to help you become less self-critical, more positive, more confident, more self-connected, a better communicator, less anxious, or more compassionate. Give yourself a new daily practice, such as a gratitude journal, and you can come out of this experience in a better place psychologically than when you entered it.

**Think Positively** Our brains have a bias toward negativity in order to scan for danger and keep ourselves safe. If we don't want to become depressed and anxious, we have to make an effort to move toward the positive. If you think of everything that can possibly go wrong all of the time, you will have given your brain the experience of bad things happening even if none of your fears come true. Use this as an opportunity to catch your negative thoughts and identify them as old mental habits rather than as truths. Ask yourself whether a positive outcome is possible and focus on what that would look like. If you think of staying home as an adventure you will tell stories about someday, you will feel much better than if you think of it as a catastrophe.

**Limit Negative Inputs** Of course, we all need to listen to the news to get information about the situation. There is no reason to update yourself more than once or twice a day. Decide how you are going to get your news and choose a non-histrionic, reliable source. Print is a better medium than video for taking in the content factually rather than

emotionally. Don’t let yourself be pulled into constant updates. Better yet, look up a “good news” website and get a daily dose of good news to counter the anxiety-provoking news. Our brains respond to whatever we feed them.

**Relax** Many of us have real concerns, such as a drop in income or an ill relative. It is important to problem-solve about these things and it is equally important to give ourselves a break from the problem-solving. Do whatever gives you a physiological sense of relaxation. You might go to an old favorite, such cuddling with your dog, or you might try something new, such as deep breathing.

**Limit Electronic Time** More screen time makes us more depressed and anxious in the long run even though it might feel good in the short run. Software designers use our psychology and physiology to pull us into websites and keep us there. Decide in advance how much time you’re going to spend on screens. Put your phone away for a few hours in the morning and afternoon or check it only once an hour. Research shows that sleeping with your phone within arm distance can disrupt sleep.

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There is a concept in psychology called Post Traumatic Growth. If you think about coming out of this situation better than you went in, it will help you design a way to get through it that is empowered and proactive. I wish all of us growth, connection, health and peace through these very bizarre times.