

Self-isolation and quarantine: coping strategies, tips and ideas

Psychological help in challenging times

Self-isolation and quarantine are exceptional situations that most of us will never have faced before. These measures, which are being imposed by outside developments, can be extremely demanding and can put great pressures on us in mental and emotional terms.

Fortunately, there are clear and well-researched approaches and mental strategies that can help us cope with these exceptional situations. Everyone is different, though, so we should each adopt those recommendations that suit us personally best.

General practical tips



Give yourself a daily routine

Structures counter chaos, give us a sense of security and strengthen us in stressful times. A daily routine is a kind of ritual. So don't spend the day in your pyjamas: get up as you would usually do, get dressed, and keep to your usual mealtimes, workhours or learning times and bed-times. Maintain a daily structure, in other words, and just adjust it where necessary to the new situation.



Reflect on your strengths

It's resources that help us get through crisis situations. So make full use of your inner resources: all the positive experiences you have had in your life, all the problems you've faced and overcome, all the strengths, talents and abilities that you know you possess. All these resources can be a source of immense strength. So be sure to activate them and use them to the full.



Plan your day as precisely as you can

Planning our actions and activities as extensively and precisely as possible can prevent us feeling helpless and at the mercy of events and developments. Instead of our feeling powerless, a planned day gives us a sense of command and control, because we are the ones deciding what to do and when.



Keep moving

Movement and exercise work wonders in the head, and have been scientifically proven to have a positive effect on our mental and emotional well-being. Sport and exercise can be engaged even in the smallest of spaces, and there are ample training and workout videos online. So get those muscles working!



Be selective in your media consumption

Facts help fight emotional overload. And clear and well-founded information gives us a sense of orientation and assurance. But try to avoid non-stop media consumption.



Maintain virtual social contacts

Staying in touch with family and friends gives us a sense of identity and belonging. Pick up your phone, set up that video chat and just ask "What made you happy today?"



1. How to deal with fears and concerns

Extraordinary times and situations can expose us to new stresses and unfamiliar emotions. And these new circumstances and challenges take time to get used to.

- **Limit your media consumption**

Make a conscious decision to structure (and limit!) your consumption of the latest media updates on COVID-19. Constant exposure to stories and images on the subject, even if these are from more reputable media sources, does not help to master the situation, and can actually lead to greater worry and stress.

- **Don't listen to the scaremongers**

Set your own limits and avoid taking in the masses of text messages, emails, videos, WhatsApps and social media comments on COVID-19.

- **Focus on the positives**

Focusing on positive content can give us a sense of calm and stability. Talk to the people who mean most to you and keep the conversation positive.

- **Listen to your feelings**

We're all experiencing a wide range of emotions – fear, stress, confusion and more – in the present exceptional situation. These are perfectly understandable. But too much of them can be simply overwhelming. So take the time to take in and express what you are feeling. Some people may want to write their feelings down, or put them to creative use (such as in painting, music or meditation).

- **Talk about your feelings**

If you feel the need to discuss your feelings, do so with someone you feel close to and comfortable with.

If you don't have such a person available to you, you could also seek professional help, from a helpline or from a psychologist offering telephone (e.g. Skype) assistance and advice.

- **Don't brood too much**

Brooding is one of our many strategies for dealing with stress situations. But too much brooding can be counter-productive, because it actually causes additional stress. So think in advance of what activities you could undertake if you find yourself "over-brooding". This could be doing something completely different that makes you feel good: baking, reading, writing... whatever you enjoy.

- **Do some simple relaxation exercises**

Fear and relaxation just don't get along. So doing some relaxation exercises can help reduce your fears. You'll find instructions for a host of such relaxation exercises online.

- **Remember: this too will pass!**

It's very important to remember that this outbreak of COVID-19 won't be around forever. Just take every possible action to minimize your own risk of infection, such as washing your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water and avoiding close personal contacts. Also: be sure to spend some time planning all the things you intend to do once the whole thing is over!



2. How to help children and adolescents cope

Isolation is an imposition. So the paramount objective in any isolation is to get through it with as little stress as possible. Isolation is not about making you a better family. So debating how best to raise the children or resolving conflict issues with our partner should not be the focus of our energies in such times.

- Keep to your usual daily structure and routine.

- Clearly plan learning and play times.

- Clearly define certain times when everyone does something for themselves.

- Do some activities together.

- Make sure there are places people can withdraw to, to prevent or reduce conflicts.

- Give your child(ren) opportunities for physical activity as far as is currently possible.

- Draw up rules together on how to make the best use of the time you now have available.

- Set limits with your child(ren) on the "screen times" for TV, the computer and the mobile phone.

- Explain the situation to your child(ren) in age-appropriate terms.

- Accept that your child(ren) may be more "clingy" than usual and give them this physical reassurance, too. What they now need most is to feel safe and secure.

- Postpone any big child-raising debates or ambitions to more normal times, and try to minimize any punishments, too. Use praise and positive words to strengthen your child(ren) and motivate them to the action or behaviour desired.



3. How to deal with conflicts

Sharing a confined space for longer than usual generates stresses of its own. The unusually high volumes of time spent together can also create tensions and conflicts between partners and within families. All of which can come out in arguments and even physical violence.

- Clearly define certain times that each family member will spend alone.
- Make sure that every family member has a place they can withdraw to.
- Address any anger before the situation worsens.
- Take an occasional solo walk around the block or into the woods.
- Hold a daily “family check-in” meeting where each family member can say how they’re feeling, if they have any good ideas and if there’s anything they particularly want or need.
- Be more tolerant than usual, with others and with yourself! This situation is a challenge for every family.
- If you feel you need it, don’t be afraid to seek professional help.



4. How to cope with boredom

You may find that you suddenly have unusually large amounts of time at your disposal – because you’re not currently going to work, or because you can’t pursue your usual leisure interests. The important thing here is to still give yourself a daily structure and set yourself some achievable objectives.

- Set yourself some fixed daily tasks.
- Start working on “projects” that you’ve always been postponing, or do the little jobs you never seem to get around to.
- Plan yourself a daily highlight that you can look forward to.
- Keep in touch with people who are important to you. Share your (positive) news and views with them and plan things you want to do together once these isolation and quarantine times are over.



5. How to handle violence

Sharing small spaces and being unable to spend time on our own or have intimate moments with our partner can lead to feelings of aggression and even violence. We need to take active steps to stop matters getting this far. And here are some ideas:

- **Recognize violence and call it what it is – in ourselves, too!**
Violence comes in many forms: hitting, shouting, denigrating, ignoring... So be honest with yourself. And if you notice that things are all starting to get too much and you're showing signs of violence, take appropriate steps.
- **Phone a friend!**
If you feel you're at your limits, phone a friend – even if it's just to talk to somebody else. Do this from another room if possible. And breathe deeply. If all this is still not enough, call a helpline.
- **Don't act the violence out!**
Negative emotions, tension and aggression are all perfectly normal in an exceptional situation. It's not so terrible to have aggressive feelings towards someone. It only gets dangerous if you act on them!
- **If violence does occur, talk!**
If you notice that another adult in your home is becoming violent – towards children or adolescents in particular – talk to them. You may be the only person in this situation who is in a position to protect the child. Seek help in doing so, too:
 - from an anti-violence telephone helpline, for instance, or from psychosocial services.
- **If you suffer violence yourself, get help!**
The same applies, of course, if you are the subject of violence yourself: if this happens, get help. What's important here is not to remain alone. You may feel that you're alone because of the self-isolation, but you aren't. So get help: from friends, from counsellors, from an anti-violence helpline, from your family doctor or – if the violence is serious – from the police or the child protection agencies.
- **Above all, get help in good time!**
Don't wait till it's too late. All the above tips and advice – on boredom, on fears and worries and above all on conflicts – are designed to help us all cope with the unpleasant feelings that so often arise in tense situations... before these escalate and express themselves in violent actions.

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