



Staying Positive and Sane When Times are Challenging

In this strange new time, it's important to stay connected to the people you love and replace the physical contact that's been lost. Humans are social animals, our entire neuroendocrine system responds to touch and social proximity, particularly with people we care about. That contributes to our sense of well-being and connection in the world. Losing that shouldn't be underestimated. Never has anything like Covid-19 happened before, let alone on such a worldwide scale, and most, if not all, of us, will never have experienced anything like a 'lockdown'.

HERE ARE SOME COPING STRATEGIES

1. Maintain a connection with the people you love, even if it can't be a physical one

Social distance does not mean no social contact. Psychologically, face-to-face conversations are best, but right now they're not possible. Video calls may be second best in terms of emotional bonding but are the best option for now. Phone calls aren't as good as video chats, and texting is even worse. But of course, being totally isolated is even worse than all those things (unless you're a recluse!).

2. Schedule these interactions

First figure out which social interactions are most important for you to replicate. Perhaps that's a virtual happy hour with friends or a virtual Alcoholics Anonymous

meeting. Maybe it's staying connected to family who live elsewhere or co-workers you're accustomed to seeing daily. These will be very individual, so determine what's crucial for your personal well-being. Set up virtual dates, then add them into your calendar. Scheduling makes it far more likely to happen.

3. Continue regular therapy but via telehealth instead of in person

Keeping health appointments virtually is different to attending physical ones, but if you were engaged in mental health therapy such as counselling or psychotherapy, or physical therapy rehabilitation, before lockdown, do your best to continue doing it, albeit remotely.

In terms of physical therapy, while you may not be able to experience the "hands-on" component of a physical appointment, physical therapists in particular play many roles in your injury rehabilitation that you may not appreciate. While you may think it's all about the 10-15 minutes of hands-on treatment, the actual influence your physical therapist has on you, is much wider reaching, it just tends to get overshadowed by the physical component. This includes your therapist's clinical reasoning approach to make sure your rehabilitation is proceeding as planned, ensuring engagement and accountability in the rehabilitation process, and helping with motivation and encouragement. New exercises can be prescribed through

telehealth, in fact 2/3rds of your physical therapy appointment doesn't need to change, just because it's being carried out online.

One of the benefits of this time, particularly if you participate in regular massage therapy, is about creating time for you as this plays a major part in reducing mental and physical stress.

If you haven't yet heard from your therapist, reach out to understand how your sessions may continue. Your therapist should walk you through a basic telehealth checklist and consent, including ensuring that you have private time and space—which can be tricky with children or other family members at home—an internet connection, and a webcam. If telehealth isn't feasible, touch base regularly by phone.

4. Use social media actively, not passively

For the past several years studies have looked at how social media is used, including active versus passive use, and its contribution to mental health. In general, the work has found that restricting total time on these tools can decrease depression and loneliness, particularly if the time is active and spent connecting with friends and family. Active use ie. more time posting and commenting and less time just scrolling, is really important. Don't just sit there and watch social media like a magazine or TV show. Also, stop following people you don't know or don't know well,



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like celebrities and influencers, or even acquaintances and focus on putting effort into actively engaging with people you know and care about.

5. Replace lost physical contact

Most of us crave physical contact. If you're in a position where you're not being touched, that's going to be hard for people. If you're staying put at home and your family is healthy, it's fine to maintain normal levels of contact. That being said, the increased handwashing and no-face-touching advice still applies.

Pets are a good alternative, there are

real benefits to having pets as companions. They're not as good as human interaction but certainly better than being alone. Studies show there's positive oxytocin feedback that happens in both humans and dogs when you stroke your dog or cat. The more you can physically interact with your pets, the better, to get some of that positive, tactile comfort-loving connection. Pet your dog. Snuggle your cat.

Failing that, do anything you can to get yourself somatically comfortable—wrap yourself in a snuggly, warm blanket, hold a warm water bottle or ask your massage therapist for advice on how to carry out self-

massage on sore or tight muscles.

Mental health is a concern during this time, and everyone's circumstances are different. You may be locked down in a vulnerable place or relationship, or unable to work and concerned about income. The stresses and anxiety are real for most people albeit in different ways.



Quick tips to manage this anxiety include:

● Create a daily routine –

Change out of your pajamas, shower and make a to-do list of all the things you want to achieve each day to create a sense of normality and productivity.



● Take care of your body –

Eat healthily. It's not ideal to be going off to the shops at present but try getting plenty of fruits and vegetables to boost your immune system – outdoor fruit and veg stores are brilliant. Drink lots of water, and get plenty of sleep. A poor diet (including take-outs, processed junk food, alcohol and sodas), combined with lack of sleep will reduce your energy levels and lower your immune system. These too can contribute to feelings of depression.



● Exercise –

Schedule time to exercise in any form! It's great for stress relief and the endorphins released can help improve feelings of depression and anxiety.



● Break up your day –

Find tasks to break up your day and, where possible, change your environment for different activities.

● Take one day at a time –

Try not to project too far into the future. No one can give exact dates or times as to when this will be resolved or what the future may hold, but we do know that wherever you are in the world, the lockdown and isolation is a temporary measure for everyone's safety which we must respect. Remember you are not alone in this.

● **Help others** – If you're not under strict isolation rules yourself, and you're in a position to do so, find ways to support those in need by offering to run errands and collect supplies for them. Volunteer to help make phone calls to others, especially elderly people in your community to maintain that critical contact with people (for both you and them).



● Stay connected –

Make the most of technology and stay in touch with colleagues, friends and family via phone calls, texts, social media and video conferencing.



● Fight boredom –

Make the most of catching up on TV series, reading, creating photo albums and exploring projects you have been putting off - to beat boredom and stay mentally active. Use the time to try a new craft or hobby or tidy that cupboard and sort out goods for charity donations. The sense of achievement in doing something that has been on the backburner for years will boost your morale.



● Focus on the positives –

Amplify good news stories and honour caregivers working tirelessly to resolve the situation. Mindfulness is an excellent practice, as is meditation to focus your thoughts and concerns and de-stress.

● **Limit media intake** – Stay informed about the situation via reliable sources, but limit your news and social media intake to avoid feeling overwhelmed or reading into fake news that might elevate your stress levels.

● **Avoid burnout** – Set strict limits to your work to avoid becoming overwhelmed and make time to unwind. As you are not leaving the work place for home, it may be tempting to attend to every email the minute it comes in, rather than shutting off the computer and relaxing, exercising or enjoying fun with the kids.

Stay in contact with people virtually, engage in activities that give you pleasure and a sense of meaning, and do what you can to help others, which is a remarkable antidote to depression.

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