

9 Mental Health Practices To Maintain (Or Begin) During The Coronavirus Lockdown

As many of us are being told to hunker down in our apartments and houses, and limit trips outside and social contact, things are feeling pretty “real” at this point. Aside from the general worry people may have about their physical health as they digest the news from around the world and here at home, there’s the larger toll this is taking on our collective mental health. Lots of organizations have put forth [guidelines](#) to help combat the stress of the coronavirus pandemic, and with good reason: One of the main weapons we have to fight the virus is social distancing—a deeply unnatural practice for humans, but an essential one.

Here are some of the mental health practices to make sure to keep doing—or begin doing, for some of us—during the lockdown period.

Have a routine (as much as you can)

We know how important routine is, especially for kids, under normal conditions. And when schools are closed and many people are working from home or told to stay at home, it might feel like all bets are off. But it’s actually much better for everyone’s mental health to try to keep a routine going, as much as possible.

“Studies in resiliency during traumatic events encourage keeping a routine to your day,” says [Deborah Serani, PsyD](#), professor of psychology at Adelphi University and author of [“Sometimes When I’m Sad.”](#) “This means eating meals at regular times, sleeping, waking and exercising at set times, and maintaining social (socially distant) contact. Unstructured time can create boredom, spikes in anxiety or depression, which can lead to unhealthy patterns of coping.”

Another reason is that keeping a routine reduces “decision fatigue,” the overwhelm and exhaustion that can come from too many options. So in the morning, rather than wondering whether to start work or help the kids with their online learning, it’s better to know what you’re going to do—make a schedule that everyone can get on board with, and try to stick with it (as much as is possible—don’t beat yourself up if it doesn’t always work, and it’s sure not to work some days). This will free up some mental bandwidth during this time of uncertainty, which is already straining everyone’s cognitive capacities.

Start an at-home exercise routine

Working out at home in these times is obviously a good way to stay healthy and kill indoor time. There are lots of options, from the 21st century ones (Peloton and MIRROR) to the old-fashioned ones (workout videos and the dusty hand [weights](#) in your closet). Many online workout sources are offering free access or longer free trial periods during this time, which might be worth looking into. But again, anything that gets your heart pumping or builds muscle is excellent for both physical and [mental health](#).

Get outside—in nature—if you can

This is much easier in the country or suburbs, but if you’re in the city and it’s feasible, shimmy past your building neighbors and go for a walk in the park. Remember to stay six feet away from other people—as city dwellers know, this can take some maneuvering, but it’s possible.

And there are some very good reasons to do so. Lots of recent research finds that spending time in nature is a boon to both mental and physical health. For instance, multiple studies have found that time in green and blue space is associated with reduced anxiety and depression, and the connection may well be a causal one.

On the physical side, an interesting [meta-analysis](#) in the journal *Environmental Research* a couple of years ago found that people who spent more time “forest bathing,” also known as shinrin yoku, had significantly reduced risk for chronic health issues, including reduced risk of coronary heart disease, lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, lower heart rate, and reduced all-cause mortality and death from heart disease.

But what’s fascinating is that it doesn’t seem to have to do with just the extra activity, the sunshine, or the air quality (though these certainly play a role). Forest bathing may actually help the immune system: One mechanism is thought to be through the chemicals that trees release, phytoncides—some [studies](#) have found that people who spent more time in nature had greater activity of immune cells known as [natural killer cells](#).

So get out to the park and breathe in some phytoncides (making sure to practice good social distancing, of course)—it will be a very good habit for body and mind.

Declutter your home

Working on your home if you have time can be a good way to feel productive and in control (see caveat down below though). “Take the opportunity of the extra time by decluttering, cleaning or organizing your home,” says Serani, referencing the book [Trauma-Informed Care](#). “Studies say the predictability of cleaning not only offers a sense of control in the face of uncertainty, but also offers your mind body and soul a respite from traumatic stress.”

The caveat is that you don’t want to become obsessive about cleaning, since there’s only so much you can do. But using the extra time, if you have it, to reorganize and toss or donate items you no longer use is a very good idea.

Meditate, or just breathe

Meditation has lots of research behind it, as most people by now know—it's been [shown](#) to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and even increase the volume of certain areas of the brain. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at UMass, has been shown, through numerous studies, to be effective—and while it generally involves an eight-week course, a number of organizations offer this online.

But if meditation isn't for you, just breathing slowly might be. Controlled breathing has been used for millennia to calm the mind—and a [study](#) a few years ago showed the mechanism that might explain it. The researchers found that a tiny subset of neurons in the area of the brain known to control various types of breathing also seemed to house a group of neurons that controlled the animals' level of arousal. Knocking this area out made mice uncharacteristically calm—and the team believe that slow breathing might also tap into this area of the brain and have the same effect.

The researchers also point out that slow breathing is used “clinically to suppress excessive arousal and stress such as certain types of panic attacks,” which is nothing to sneeze at. So trying some controlled breath work (there are good resources for this online) may be an especially healthy idea these days.

Maintain community and social connection

As mentioned, we're fundamentally social creatures, and during crises it's natural to want to gather. Social connectivity is the perhaps the greatest determinant of wellbeing there is, as this landmark 80-year-long [study](#) from Harvard reported, and one of our most basic psychological needs. Unfortunately, it's the opposite of what we can do right now, so we have to be creative, to maintain both psychological closeness and a sense of community. Texting and social media are ok, but picking up the phone and

talking or videoconferencing, or having a safe-distance conversation on the street, is probably much better.

Be of service, from a distance

Being of service is one of the best things we can do for society—and on a more selfish note, for ourselves. Studies have repeatedly found that serving others, even via small acts of kindness, has strong and immediate mental health benefits. And feeling a sense of purpose has [also been shown](#) to help people recover from negative events and build resilience. For people who are lucky enough to be healthy right now and not caring for a loved one who's sick, finding ways to help others in this kind of crisis is probably very good for your own well-being.

Here's a [breakdown](#) from the *Times* on organizations that are helping those affected by coronavirus on a larger scale. And on a more local note, organizing efforts to help neighbors in need of food or supplies, buying gift certificates to local business, ordering takeout from neighborhood restaurants, and helping fundraise locally can help the financial fallout that's happening all over the country. (More ideas are [here](#).)

Practice gratitude

This is not the easiest thing to do in these times, particularly if you've felt the more brutal effects of the pandemic, like job or business loss, or illness. But practicing gratitude for the things we do have has been [shown again and again](#) to be hugely beneficial to mental health. For instance, in one of the first key [studies](#) on the subject, the researchers found that writing down five things one was grateful just once a week was significantly linked to increased well-being. Other studies since have borne this out; and of course gratitude is a central tenet of most religions and philosophies around the world.

So even though it might be a challenge right now, write down some of the things you're grateful for; or if you have little kids and it's easier, try talking about and listing aloud things that make you happy and that you're thankful for.

Let yourself off the hook

The might be the most important thing to keep in mind—don't beat yourself up when things are not going perfectly in your household. On top of everything else, being upset with yourself is totally counterproductive. If the kids watch too much Netflix or play too many hours of video games, it's not the end of the world. Things are going to be hairy for a while, and if you can't stick to your schedule or can't fit in your at-home workout every day, it's really not such a big deal in the long run. It's much more valuable to everyone to cut yourself some slack, use the time to reflect on the important things, and try to keep a sense of “we're all in this together” at the forefront.