

Coping with lockdown: Managing the psychological challenges of Covid-19

by Mark Smyth

One year ago, none of us could have foreseen how Covid-19 would transform our day-to-day routines on a global scale. It is literally something that none of us have ever had to experience or endure before.

Covid-19 is now a constant on our news, social media and conversations and this means there is a strong likelihood that we will be experiencing a wide range of challenging feelings as a result, with the following being the most likely: anxiety, frustration, anger, irritation, loneliness.

Most of the above will be normal reactions to trying to manage the realities of the stress of Covid-19. What makes it extra difficult is that the degree of uncertainty that exists about how long this has and will go on for or how serious it could get for each of us and our loved ones.

Anxiety is likely to be one of our biggest challenges. It is our bodies response to threat, perceived or real. It is incredibly draining being in a constant state of alertness for threat and danger. We are bombarded by news cycles of infection rates, news of people who have died, enforced closures of places and events which only fuels our anxiety. Limiting our exposure to the news cycle can give us a much-needed break.

Worrying about the worst is an understandable reaction, it would be more unusual if you weren't worried about the implications of Covid-19. It's important when we're feeling anxious to check in with friends and loved ones. There's a high likelihood that they will have been feeling anxious too. It helps to know we're not the only ones that feel a particular way.

Boredom is a sure-fire recipe for anxiety to take a hold in our minds and increase our stress levels. The busier we can be the less time we have to think / overthink. It's crucial to understand what we can and can't control.

Focusing on what is out of our control will only make us feel more anxious. Keeping busy should not be misinterpreted as working more hours, self-care and self-compassion is never more important than now so it's crucial to schedule in down time and enjoyable activities we can still engage in, this won't happen by accident, we need to plan for what we can do and when.

Routines take time to build and develop, they don't happen magically or overnight, we need to put time, planning and effort into them in advance, they rarely if ever sprout up spontaneously.

Now that much of the world is essentially on lock down, the routines we are used to have been pretty much thrown out the window and many people are struggling with this.

At a minimum what we need to do, is plan in advance, either What we need to do is, or preferably plan a few days in advance. This is where technology can be our friend. My go to for routine and planning is my google calendar. I can see briefly when I look at a day / week what's coming up, what I need to do, where I need to be, and what fun / enjoyable things I have coming up.



The key to this is to use different coloured calendars so we can see immediately where things are, especially the fun / enjoyable things.

We don't want to lose our spontaneity, but we do need to find some degree of certainty in our lives when we are currently trying to cope with so much uncertainty. Scheduling in lunch, dinner, chat's, book reading, makes sure that we are less likely to forget the important things. There are four key foundations that give us the potential for not only psychological survival but give us the possibility of enhanced psychological well-being. The analogy I use the most is a table. It has four key legs to keep it stable and strong.

All four are equally important and need to be equal in length for the foundation to be balanced and strong. If any of the four are neglected or if we do too much of any one of them then it will knock us off balance and it will be harder for us to cope with the challenges of everyday life, never mind the enormity of Covid-19.

Let's look at each of them in turn:

Sleep

When we're out of routine we often neglect one of the most important aspects of our self-care, sleep. We might stay up too late watching a box set knowing we don't have to be up in the morning or stay in bed way beyond what we usually would. For a prolonged period of isolation, it is inevitable that there will be some times where we will go to sleep later / get up later. What we need to try and do is make sure that it doesn't become a pattern, for ourselves or our kids. When Covid-19 comes under control, we will need to adapt back to our pre-Covid-19 lives again, this will be easier when our imposed isolation routines are not too out of sync with our previous routines.

The other aspect of Covid-19 that will impact on our sleep routines is worry / anxiety. It is understandable that we are at risk of lying in bed thinking about lots of "what if", what if I get it / a family member gets it / if someone I loves gets so sick they die. No matter how long / how many angles you think about it from while lying in your bed

trying to sleep, it won't change the risks or the reality of Covid-19. The only thing it will change is your tiredness levels and ability to think straight and emotionally cope the next day. Prioritise a good sleep routine.

Social

It is crucially important for our psychological well-being to be socially connected to others. With Covid-19 resulting in self or imposed isolation we could go through periods (maybe even an extended one) where it is difficult or not possible to be as socially connected as we are used to. So, what do we do to maintain our sense of connectedness? As bad a rap as it gets sometime this is where technology and social media can play an important interim role.

I think many of us can relate to zoom fatigue because we're often using it for work but also it remains an important facility to maintain safe social contact with others irrespective of where we are or what our medical status is. It will never replace face to face person to person contact, but as a

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temporary measure it can meet our needs for social connectedness and reduce risks of isolation and loneliness. People have adapted to this new way of communicating and are organising virtual playdates, coffee (or wine) video chats.

Exercise

Exercise is a well-known mood enhancer. With isolation we might be at risk of telling ourselves I can't go the gym / football training so I can't

exercise. A quick google search or any free exercise app on our phones will give us a myriad of exercises that we can complete at home or, weather permitting, in our gardens. Regular exercise will protect both our physical and mental health.

Food

When we are out of routine our healthy food habits and routines can slip also. We need to try and maintain our routines around eating and also resist

the temptation to overindulge in alcohol or caffeine (both will negatively impact on our mood and anxiety levels).

No one of the above will exclusively protect us psychologically, at different times different combinations will be more effective. The one constant that will protect us more than anything? Hope. It's crucial, it gives us energy to keep going, for ourselves and others. When we feel despair at the latest catastrophic headline, we need to try to keep hope, hope is our psychological antidote to anxiety, sadness, and despair, when we can't find it in ourselves reach out to others, we don't need to be alone, we shouldn't be, together we will find a way to get through this, our strength is in our collective unity and our willingness to be there for each other.

We are going through (literally) a world of pain right now and pain and death are inevitable parts of the human experience. In saying that, the level of pain and death currently occurring is on a scale not witnessed in many generations. As tragic as this is it doesn't mean that we have to suffer. The antidote to suffering is hope.

When we keep hope that we will get through this it will give us the energy to get up in the morning, to volunteer, to support our friends and families, to keep trying, to survive the grief and losses that could accumulate and risk overwhelming us. Hope is the indomitable spirit that endures, hope is what will ultimately be the bedrock upon which we will rebuild our lives and our world post Covid-19.



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