

FIVE WAYS TO GUARD YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID 19 OUTBREAK

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These are challenging times for our mental and emotional well-being. The stress and uncertainty of the [COVID-19 outbreak](#) have been difficult enough, and now the social distancing requirements have led to profound changes in our daily routines. You may be feeling the strain already—personally it only took about two days before the stress and disruption led to tension between my wife and me. It's hard to find your equilibrium when everything feels upside down. Every life situation is bringing its own unique challenges during this time. Countless college students are living at home again, separated from their friends and partners. Parents are doing their best to homeschool their kids while working from home themselves. Single people are struggling with the unprecedented social isolation. And all of us are faced with daily uncertainty about how long this crisis will last and where it will take us, individually and collectively. So many of the routines and activities we took for granted have suddenly fallen away: commuting to work, going to class, hanging out with friends, shopping in stores, going to the gym. Now that our lives have been stripped down, we need to be very intentional about protecting our mental health. Here are five key practices to guard your heart and mind during this crisis.

1. Be Good to Your Body

Mental health starts with physical wellness. A growing body of research supports our intuitive understanding that the mind and the body are intimately connected. The following areas are especially important:

- **Make sleep a sacred priority.** Give yourself enough time in bed to get the rest you need (typically seven to nine hours). Stick to a consistent sleep schedule as much as possible, resisting the tendency to let your schedule fall apart if you don't have daily commitments. Build in a technology-free winding down routine for 30 to 60 minutes before bedtime.
- **Move every day.** Now that gyms are closed and our activities are so limited, it's easy to become inactive and not realize that you're barely moving throughout the day. Find a way to move. Go for walks every day if you're still allowed to where you live—we've been scheduling short hikes with our kids each afternoon. Look into online [exercise](#) or [yoga](#) videos, or bust out those ballroom dancing home instruction videos you've been meaning to get to. Consistent physical activity is well known to lower stress and anxiety and improve mood, not to mention strengthening your immune system.
- **Feed your body and mind.** Speaking of your immune system, choose healthy food options like vegetables and fruits, and avoid highly processed foods and refined sugar. Resist the pull toward letting your diet turn to rubbish during this time. Limit your alcohol consumption, and beware of too much caffeine, which can aggravate stress and anxiety. If you're aiming to eat better, focus on making one improvement to one meal at a time, and gradually build from there. Good nutrition is good not just for your body but for your mind and emotions.

2. Follow a Schedule

Few things are more challenging for your well-being than a lack of daily structure. Your body and brain operate on a 24-hour (circadian) cycle, and need specific activities to happen at predictable times. There's a perfect German word for activities that provide timed structure to our days—Zeitgeber; the direct translation is "time giver." Establishing a consistent routine is one of the friendliest things you can do for yourself during this period of social distancing. Incorporate as many of the following Zeitgebers as you can:

- **Sunlight:** Spend time in the sunshine in the early part of the day. Exposure to natural light is probably the most powerful way to establish a healthy circadian rhythm. If your area is discouraging nonessential time outdoors, at least sit by a window in the morning.
- **Sleep:** Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day.
- **Meals:** Eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at consistent times.

- **Exertion:** Plan a consistent time for exercise (e.g., first thing in the morning; after work).
- **Bathing:** It can be surprisingly easy to fall off the shower wagon when you don't have to leave the house for an extended length of time (okay, I'm speaking from personal experience). If you have kids at home, ensure that they bathe regularly, too. The routine is good for them, and being stuck at home together is a lot nicer when everyone smells fresh.
- **Work:** Follow a predictable work schedule, even when working from home. Put it in your calendar to make it feel more official.

3. Be Kind to Your Mind

Your thoughts can be a powerful ally or a formidable foe, now more than ever. Practice training your mind in helpful directions that support your well-being:

- **See the story.** Recognize that your mind is constantly making predictions, which are just guesses about the future. Right now, it may be telling you stories like:
 - You're going to get horribly sick.
 - You'll be ruined financially.
 - The economy will completely collapse.

You don't have to believe everything your thoughts tell you. Know that they're fantasies that may or may not come true—and that other outcomes may be more likely.

- **Direct your attention.** We can't completely control the thoughts that go through our heads, but we can decide where to focus our attention. For example, we can choose to focus on the worries of the day, or on being the person we want to bring to these challenges we're facing. We can dwell on our struggles, or on opportunities to love each other through this time.
- **Practice gratitude.** On a related note, we can make a habit of noticing all the things that are right in our lives, rather than dwelling on what's wrong or missing. If it's hard to think of things to be grateful for, just imagine how things could be worse—because as hard as this time it, it could be much, much worse. For example, thankfully this crisis isn't hitting us in the dead of winter when spending time outside would be extremely challenging, as my wife pointed out. Even our current difficulties can point to something good—for example, being stuck inside with your kids underscores that you have a family (even if the noise is a bit much at times). Finding ways to practice thanksgiving is one of the most reliable ways to guard your mental health.

4. Find Moments of Stillness

Stress and tension collect in the body and mind throughout the day. Set aside time religiously to release this nervous energy. Step out of the modes of doing and producing and checking the news, and into a state of being. The following principles and practices can help.

- **Release tension.** Notice where stress lodges in your body, and find ways to let go of the tension. For example, try this quick exercise: Sit comfortably and take three slow, relaxing breaths. Shrug your shoulders up toward your ears, feeling the tension that creates, and then let your shoulders completely relax. Repeat the shrug/release cycle twice more. End with three more slow breaths, and notice how you feel.
- **Breathe.** Close your eyes and take a slow, smooth breath in through the nose for a count of 4, feeling the belly rise and expand. Exhale slowly out the mouth for a count of 8. Pause briefly before starting the next inhale. Repeat for 1-3 minutes.
- **Unplug.** Being constantly connected to screens takes a toll on your nervous system, but it can be hard to avoid when so much of your work and home life exists online. Establish some tech-free zones; good candidates include mealtime, the bathroom (I know), the bedroom, and during quality time with those you care about.
- **Be in nature.** All kinds of good things can happen when you [simply step outside](#). Your stress level tends to go down, your perspective widens, and your mood generally lifts. You don't have to go for an hour-long hike; just a 5-minute walk around the block can make a big difference. If your time outside is restricted, savor brief

essential trips outdoors—for example, while walking from the car to the grocery store. Look around, feel the air, breathe.

5. Share Love

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, exercise your truest nature as a being of love. It's easy to neglect our relationships or to frankly find them irritating, especially with the people closest to us that we see every day. But nothing is more important for your well-being than these relationships. Invest time and energy in the people who will be with you no matter what.

- **Be with people you enjoy.** “Being with” might be virtual for now, through texts, emails, and Skype or FaceTime. One way or another, find time each day to focus on the people who matter most to you, whether friends, parents, partners, children, siblings, or canine/feline “family.” Prioritize time with those you find to be life-giving.
- **Forgive.** Look for opportunities every day to let go of others' shortcomings. There may be many such opportunities if you're living in close quarters with others! Be quick to forgive an accidental slight, for example, and make the first move to smooth over a potential rift with someone you care about. These gestures make huge deposits in the bank account of your relationships.
- **Serve.** Find a way to be of service every day. Serving is especially important during difficult times like these, because it draws you out of a world-shrinking preoccupation with your own struggles (something I have to remind myself to do). Liberate yourself from narrow self-focus by asking yourself what those around you need. Few things are more rewarding than doing something to improve someone's life.

We don't know exactly how long this social distancing directive – or the virus, itself – will last, so it's wise to go ahead and start putting emotional wellness practices in place now, on the front end of this journey. You can begin by choosing just one to focus on, and then adding others in the following days. Your future grateful self will thank you.

More than anything else, grant yourself some grace. This is a difficult and stressful time as you adapt to a completely new situation. There's no need to aim for perfection in how you manage your mental health—you're going to feel anxious and off balance at times as you find your equilibrium, and lose it, and then find it again. You're doing the best you can, and that's enough.

Some of these practices are adapted from [The CBT Deck](#) and the forthcoming sequel for anxiety. If you'd like more easy daily practices to help manage anxiety, my e-guide “10 Ways to Manage Stress and Anxiety Every Day” is available for free when you [sign up for my newsletter](#).

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