

Productivity Update

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Submarines and Stress: Lessons for Social Distancing

You may be beginning to feel a bit concerned about being cooped up indefinitely, working from home, or working outside the home while trying to maintain social distancing.

The problem of dealing with isolation (physical or mental) is not a new one. In fact, a great deal of research has been done on this problem over many years: think of the crews of nuclear submarines who are deployed and physically isolated for months at a time, or the astronauts who serve on the International Space Station for very long periods of time, or the scientists and researchers who work at the Antarctic Research Station.

What these three groups have in common is a limited environment -- that is, a small number of people in a limited space for long periods of time. These conditions make it essential that the inhabitants get along and maintain their ability to function.

As might be expected, the parent organizations did not leave it to chance that people under these conditions would handle it well. Psychologists, sociologists and other scientists studied the problem and came up with guidelines for coping. I think their recommendations can be useful for each of us as well.

With apologies to the American Psychological Association, here is a summary (in my own words rather than in theirs) of their "Update on COVID-19 Response from APA's President and CEO."

Limit News Consumption to Reliable Sources

It's important to get accurate public health information when you need it regarding COVID-19, but too much exposure to media coverage of the virus can lead to increased feelings of fear and anxiety.

Psychologists recommend balancing time spent on news and social media with other activities unrelated to quarantine or isolation, such as reading, listening to music or learning a new language. I'd add that exercising at home, taking up long-postponed home repairs or hobbies will also help.

Trusted organizations are ideal sources of information on the virus, but it's best to avoid the inflammatory or biased ones.

Create and Follow a Daily Routine

Maintaining a daily routine can help both adults and children keep a sense of order and purpose in their lives. If your children are home and you're trying to home-school them, stick to their regular school schedule: get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, "go to school." Treat working at home the same way.

Try to include regular daily activities, such as work, exercise, pet care, and recreation, even if they must be done at home. Be sure to include other healthy activities as well.

Stay Connected with Others

Your face-to-face interactions may be limited, but using phone calls, text messages, video chat and social media to keep in touch with friends, family, and other social groups can help meet the need for contact with others. Reach out to others who are in a similar situation.

Facebook groups have already formed to bring people together who are in strict quarantines. Call your neighbors to check on them. Write letters or texts to distant friends you haven't seen for a while.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, consider talking (by telephone!) with a therapist. Primary care physicians can often recommend someone, and your local or state psychological association maintains a referral service as well. You can find your association's web site with a google search.

Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

Get enough sleep, eat as well as you can, and exercise safely at home. Modify your exercise routine if your health requires it, but do something. Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way to cope with the stresses of isolation and quarantine. This is not the time to plant yourself in front of the television and stay there. Get moving, eat well and regularly, and get enough sleep.

Strategies to Manage Stress and Stay Positive

These are strategies that you can use with yourself or with family members if you see that they need some help managing worry:

- Look at what is worrying you and ask yourself some realistic questions: is this actually happening or am I simply worried that it might happen? Is this something I can do something about?

- Focus on what *you can do* and accept that there are things you don't have control over. It's not a catastrophe if you can't control everything that is happening around you.
- Keep a daily "gratitude" journal to remind yourself of the things, often taken for granted, that you have to be thankful for.
- There are online and smartphone apps that deliver mindfulness and relaxation exercises; these are especially useful for when you wake up in the night and start worrying.
- Remember, the most important reason for social distancing right now is to protect one another. You are doing your part when you follow the recommendations for social distancing, so give yourself credit for being part of the solution!

If Your Stress is Extreme

If you experience symptoms of extreme stress, such as ongoing trouble sleeping, inability to carry out daily routines, or an increase in alcohol or drug use, seek help from a health-care provider. Again, your primary care physician may be able to refer you to someone, and every state has a professional association of psychologists that can make referrals. You can get in touch with these professionals by email or telephone.

What Happens Next

As Yogi Berra, the baseball great, said, "Prediction is really hard, particularly when it is about the future."

None of us has a crystal ball, so we don't know how things will change tomorrow or next week or next month. But I do know this: we will get through this, no matter how bad things get. We can do this! Let's all take care of ourselves and our families, and help others when we can. And plan for how we can make the most of things when they get back to normal.

Tools and Resources

Mental Health and Coping during COVID-19 (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html>)

Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>) The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020

Coronavirus Disease (CCOVID-19) Advice for the Public (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>)

Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation during an Infectious Disease Outbreak
(<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4894.pdf>)

The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8))
Brooks, S.K., et al., The Lancet, 2020

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Distress Helpline
(<http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/>) 1-800-985-5990

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>) 1-800-273-TALK (8255)