

Promoting Mental Health during Social Distancing

Social distancing can have a profound impact on mental health. The loss of predictable routine, thoughts about the reasons for the distancing, and lack of face-to-face connection with other people can negatively impact mood and increase symptoms of anxiety and depression. To combat the challenges of social distancing, try some of the strategies below:

Use Behavioral Activation

The main premise of behavioral activation is that sometimes action precedes emotion. In a stuck-at-home situation, it can be easy to fall into a rut or feel depressed or anxious. To use behavioral activation, develop a list of activities that normally provide emotional benefit, anything from mundane tasks like making the bed or sweeping the floor to active tasks such as yoga or cardio to allowed social activities such as making a phone call or having a video chat. Make a daily schedule including some of these activities and – even if it is really hard – force yourself to do at least a couple of them. Often, even engaging in one is enough to provide mood elevation and increase motivation to engage in others. You may also want to enlist an accountability partner to talk daily about your activities.

Move

Getting moving can be hard if you are at home. Activities such as walking up and down stairs, marching in place, dancing, stretching, and sit-ups can all be done without equipment or substantial space. For kids, check out websites such as GoNoodle (<https://www.gonoodle.com/>) or Cosmic Kids Yoga (<https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>). Adults can try Yoga with Adriene (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFKE7WVJfvaHW5q283SxchA>) or search youtube for other home workout options (if you aren't used to following videos, try searching "workouts for beginners" to get some first-timer choices).

Turn Off the News

Or stop scrolling social media. Or stop clicking on that link full of updates. It can be important to stay informed but it can be equally important to take a step back, particularly if your engagement with various news sources (including your own friends and relatives) is causing you distress. There is nothing wrong with saying 'this is too much for me right now and I am not going to engage with it' and taking a break, particularly when you are repeatedly exposed to new information in other ways, such as through work or school communication channels.

Connect with Others

While in-person connection has substantial benefits, social connection is still possible when others are not physically present. Utilize video conferencing tools like Skype (www.skype.com) to video chat with loved ones or use the conference feature on your phone to have group calls. Write e-mail letters like it is the olden days (add some fun by writing as a made-up person from a different time period). Play online games or use video chatting to feature a board game that everyone can play from their own home. Choose a movie and watch it at the same time as friends and family and then talk together via chat or phone about what you liked and didn't like.

Get Some Fresh Air

Time outdoors is linked to positive mental health outcomes and it is no different in this case. Read a book on your porch, do a little yard work, have a picnic in your backyard. Two hours outside per week is good for adults, which means even just 20 minutes a day can make a difference. For kids, the optimal time is 4-6 hours, but any time letting off energy and exploring outside can be beneficial.

Complete a Task You Have Been Putting Off

This one may rely on you have necessary supplies, but assuming you do, is there something you have been wanting to get done? Journaling? Changing that lightbulb? Painting the hallway? Scrubbing the baseboards? Often tasks get neglected at home because there is not enough time in the day. Use any extra time you have to get something done. Maybe make it a friendly competition with someone else and post your results on social media.

Be Creative

Engage your left brain by creating. With a piece of paper and a pen, you can write a story or draw a picture. If you sew or knit, you can make clothes or scarves or hats. If you like to cook, you may be able to make a masterpiece out of a few pantry supplies. An instrument is great for making music, but you can also use your voice to sing familiar songs or make up new ones. Or you can just lay down for a while and let your imagination run wild – great ideas come from putting together snippets of imaginings.

What else?

Use the space below to add your own ideas, start a behavioral activation schedule, or draw a picture.