



Maintaining Good Mental Health During COVID-19 Pandemic

By Lauren Abdill, MSW, LGSW

Outpatient Therapist at Relate Counseling Center

Health experts across the nation are warning people to do more than just practice social distancing and wash their hands during the COVID-19 health pandemic – Americans are also encouraged to be proactive in maintaining good mental health.

Why? Current conditions in the U.S. -- millions of people quarantining at home, a struggling economy, and a seemingly endless stream of doomsday news headlines – are perfect breeding grounds for depression and anxiety, two mental health disorders that thrive on isolation, fear and pessimism.

Taking good care of your mental health should be just as important as taking care of your physical health. Here are some tips to help you stay emotionally healthy:

1. **Keep your routine.** Keeping your current routine as similar as possible to your pre-quarantine life is essential to help create a sense of normalcy during these totally-not-normal times. Try to wake up and go to bed at the same time you did before. Stick with your typical morning routine -- even if “going to work” just means walking out to the living room. Yep, that means showering and getting dressed for the day. It might seem pointless (people on Zoom meetings can’t smell you, right?) but keeping up with your normal routine will help you stay motivated and prevent depression from creeping in.
2. **Give yourself some grace:** All that talk about normal routine aside, don’t beat yourself up if you find your work productivity is down or you haven’t been keeping up with your weekly workouts. We’re in truly unprecedented times and we all need to give ourselves some grace. Try to find a balance between staying busy and motivated, but also not making yourself anxious about things that aren’t getting done. Some things might fall off your to-do list right now and that’s okay.
3. **Limit your media exposure:** There’s enough news content right now that you could be reading articles every second of every day if you wanted to. But that’s not great for our anxiety. You’ll want to find a balance between being informed and being totally overwhelmed. That’s going to look different for everyone, so spend some time checking-in with yourself after reading an article or watching a video. Ask yourself “how am I feeling right now? Is there more information I need to know? Will getting that information right now raise or lower my anxiety?” Don’t be afraid to turn off your news alerts if you need to.
4. **Get moving:** This one is a no-brainer to us therapists. There’s an undeniable connection between physical and mental health. When you feel good physically, you feel good mentally (and vice versa). Set an alarm on your phone to remind you to get up and stretch once an hour. Jump on your bike and go for a ride with your kids. Take a walk with your neighbor (just remember stay six-feet apart). Get outside and play with your dog. Lots of fitness streaming services are offering videos for free right now, so take advantage of those and get in a good workout in your living room.

5. **Focus on what you can control:** There's so much right now that's out of our control, it's easy to get overwhelmed, anxious and depressed. When you find yourself thinking about something you have no control over (for example, your frustration that your neighbors aren't following social distancing guidelines or that the supermarket is out of toilet paper), pause, take a deep breath and try to shift your thinking to area of life you *do* have control over. When we stop and think about it, there actually are a lot of things we can control – how much sleep and exercise we get, the kinds of foods we eat, how much media we engage with, the people we connect with/check-in on, the books we read and shows we watch, the music we listen to, etc. Focusing on those areas will keep your spirits up and keep depression/anxiety at bay.

Shut-down schools and restaurants. Long lines at grocery stores. Limited stock of toilet paper, hand sanitizer and disinfectant. These have all emerged over the last two weeks as uncontrollable byproducts of the global health pandemic caused by COVID-19. But one thing we do have some control over? Our mental health.