Seven tips to manage your mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 outbreak

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Coping with isolation in the COVID-19 pandemic is unquestionably a challenge. But there are steps you can take to manage your well-being.

I am a clinical psychologist who specializes in academic mental health and well-being. In mid-March I was due to run a resilience and well-being workshop in Sweden for doctoral candidates, but was instead facing day eight of quarantine with two small children in my apartment in Spain. Like many people’s, my sense of resilience feels increasingly frayed. When our minds are consumed by the spread of the coronavirus and its impact on our health, loved ones, home countries, economy and students — not to mention our research programme, funding or employment status, and an abrupt transition to e-learning — how do we maintain our own mental health and well-being and that of our community?

Here are some tips that have resonated from discussions I have held with academic leaders and students about responding to COVID-19:

Manage your expectations

This is unlikely to be the writer’s retreat that you have long dreamt of. The suggestion that periods of quarantine might bring unprecedented productivity implies we should raise the bar, rather than lower it. Do not underestimate the cognitive and emotional load that this pandemic brings, or the impact it will have on your productivity, at least in the short term. Difficulty concentrating, low motivation and a state of distraction are to be expected. Adaptation will take time. Go easy on yourself. As we settle into this new rhythm of remote work and isolation, we need to be realistic in the goals we set, both for ourselves and others in our charge.
Proactively manage your stress threshold

Try to lay a solid foundation for your mental health and well-being by prioritizing your sleep, and practise good sleep hygiene (for example, avoid blue lights before bed, and maintain a routine around your sleep and wake times). Eat well (be conscious that you might be inclined to lean on alcohol, or other indulgences, to manage stress — this is understandable, but potentially damaging in the long run). Exercise: it will lower your stress levels, help you to better regulate your emotions and improve your sleep.

Know your red flags

One way to manage moments of distress is to identify key thoughts or physical sensations that tend to contribute to your cycle of distress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Our thoughts (“Why can’t I concentrate?”), feelings (frustration, worry, sadness), physical sensations (tension, upset stomach, jitters) and actions (such as compulsively checking the latest COVID statistics) each feed into and amplify these negative emotional spirals. Addressing one aspect of this loop by, for example, actively reducing the physical symptoms (I use box breathing: breathe in for four counts, hold for four, breathe out for four and hold for four, then repeat) can de-escalate the cycle and help you regain control.

Routine is your friend

It helps to manage anxiety, and will help you to adapt more quickly to this current reality. Create clear distinctions between work and non-work time, ideally in both your physical workspace and your head space. Find something to do that is not work and is not virus-related that brings you joy. Working in short bursts with clear breaks will help to maintain your clarity of thought.

Be compassionate with yourself and with others

There is much that we cannot control right now, but how we talk to ourselves during these challenging times can either provide a powerful buffer to these difficult circumstances or amplify our distress. Moments of feeling overwhelmed often come with big thoughts, such as “I cannot do this,” or “This is too hard.” This pandemic will cause a lot of stress for many of us, and we cannot be our best selves all the time. But we can ask for help or reach out when help is asked of us.

Maintain connections

Even the most introverted of us need some sense of connection to others for our mental as well as our physical health. Many working groups have created virtual forums where you can contribute or just sit back and enjoy the chatter. Staff teams have instigated virtual coffee groups, online book clubs and co-working spaces where you can work in the (virtual) presence of others. We are in social isolation, but we need not feel alone. Reach out to those who might be particularly isolated.

Manage uncertainty by staying in the present

Take each day as it comes and focus on the things you can control. Mindfulness and meditation can be great tools.

This will probably be a stressful time for all of us, and will test the mental-health policies and practices of many research institutes, just as it is testing much else in the world. By embracing good mental-health and well-being measures, and by relying on others when necessary, we can protect ourselves and those around us.

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