How to Cope With Anxiety and Isolation During COVID-19

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us, even those who have not been infected by the virus, are self quarantined in our homes, and will be for the upcoming weeks. With the pandemic comes a sudden onslaught of changes: loss of routines, job lay offs, working from home, loss of social contact, and school shut downs. Uncertainty about the future and information overload has caused many to panic over scarce resources, feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and alone. Here are a few pointers that can help you manage negative thoughts and emotions and cope effectively during this challenging time.

**Reframe from thoughts of “I am trapped inside” to “I can finally focus on my home and myself. ”**

Think of the work from home policy as an opportunity to refocus your attention from the external to the internal. Doing one or two productive things per day can lead to a more positive attitude. Set your sights on long-avoided projects that you’ve been putting off. Make a daily or weekly plan to help you regain a sense of control and organization. When we take action in our lives it decreases the amount of time we spend in our heads worrying about things we cannot control and shifts attention to things we can do and change. This is your chance to slow down and re-focus.

**Stay close to your normal routine. Develop a schedule.**

For some people, sticking to a routine might be easier; however working from home could make self-discipline more challenging. Maintaining a schedule or routine, setting goals and following thru will make t easier to combat negative thinking and reduce stress. Keep a regular bedtime routine, known as sleep hygiene, set your AM alarm, eat regular meals, shower, establish an exercise regimen, and get dressed! Self-care is extremely important. Sticking to a schedule or routine will keep you active and reduce unproductive thinking and negative emotions. It will also make it easier to readjust to a business as usual world.

**Avoid over exposure to Coronavirus news coverage**

Having more free, unstructured time, and fewer social obligations allows you more time to obsess, worry and overthink. Limit your information gathering to a few credible sources for a limited amount of time each day (such as twice a day for 15 or 30 minutes each) Don’t bury yourself in news! Stay busy.

**Organize your living space**

A cluttered, disorganized home can lead to a cluttered disorganized chaotic mind. Keeping your home clean, organized and tidy will foster feelings of calm and predictability, and reduce restlessness and/or claustrophobia. Try setting up a work area separate from where you sleep, eat, exercise or relax, and visa versa. Maintaining these spatial boundaries and being more mindful of them can help you feel more organized throughout the day (we’ll come back to that).

**Start a NEW daily ritual**

With more time on our hands, now might be a good time to start something special or new. Remember, we can reframe this as a time of opportunity, self-reflection and growth. It is often helpful to write your thought and feelings in a daily journal. This can promote self-awareness and insight. We reflect back on our entries and can look for patterns and often find solutions to problems that we may not see otherwise see. My advise is to keep the journal and short, a page or two, and limit the amount of time you spend writing, perhaps no more that 30 minutes a day. Less is often more and you will be more apt to keep it up if you make it doable and not too overwhelming. Or take a walk every day at 4pm, connect with your sister over FaceTime every morning, or start an art project that you can add to everyday. Having something special during this time will help you look forward to each new day.

**Set aside family time each day**

For those of you who live with your families, especially now that children are home, set aside a special time to engage with each other in some enjoyable activities that everyone can participate in. Here are some ideas: a daily family meal time where everyone gets involved and eats together, create a simple alter in your home using photos, a crucifix, or statuary that you can pray around, read scripture or say the Rosary together, build puzzles or Legos, play board games or cards, talk walks together, or take a ride to the ocean and enjoy the calm expanse of God’s creation. Come up with your own ideas. The possibilities are endless. Engaging in these simple activities can enrich your family connections and bring you some light, love and laughter to your household.

**Avoid Naps**

Taking naps and oversleeping can promote lethargy, increase social isolation and reduce productivity. All of these experiences can feel like depression and can ultimately lead to depression. Try to adhere to a regular a sleep/wake cycle and develop a bedtime routine to help you fall asleep with ease. Try to go outside when you awaken and get 10 to 20 minutes of direct sunlight if possible. This will help you set you regulate your circadian rhythm. All these tips will help you if you suffer from insomnia.

**Exercise and practice mindfulness**

Many of us are good at taking care of others, multitasking and getting the job done. But we often don’t leave enough time in the day to take care of ourselves. Well, in this slowed down version of our lives, it is more critical than ever to attend to our emotional health. Exercise is known to reduce stress and promote overall physical and mental well being. Establishing an exercise routine into our daily schedule is a good way to start taking better care of yourself. Set aside 30 minutes each day to engage in some form of exercise, i.e. walking, jogging, yoga, mat Pilates, stair climbing or resistance training. All of these you can do at home or outside in your neighborhood with little or now equipment. Also, doing 10 to 20 minutes of either mindfulness or loving kindness meditation will quiet your mind, increase focus and concentration and calm your body. Practicing mindfulness throughout your day will help you be more present which means you will spend less time in your head worrying about the future or dwelling on the past and more time being intentional, proactive and productive. You can find worksheets, mobile apps and videos on line to help you develop workout routines and build mindfulness skills.

**Stay connected, and socialize while “social distancing.”**

Even though travel plans may have capsized, concerts and events have cancelled, and restaurants are closed, we can still socialize and connect with others. As humans we are designed to be in relationship with other, seek meaningful connections form attachments. Without meaningful connections with others we may experience stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. We have to do whatever we can to maintain our vital connections with others in order to weather the COVID-19 storm. Make phone calls daily, do regular video chats, FaceTime, or set up a Zoom meeting with family, friends, exercise groups or bible study gatherings. Pick a movie and schedule a time to watch “together” and discuss later. For those who enjoy reading, you can create a “quarantine” book club. Read a chapter a day and have discussions. There are endless possibilities so be creative and stay connected. And remember to reach out to the elderly, vulnerable, marginalized or alone. Hearing a familiar voice or seeing a familiar face will bring a smile, a little joy and a reminder that they are cared for and valued.

**Humor**

Don’t forget the power of laughter. It’s important to keep our sense of humor through it all. Laughter is known to lift mood, reduce stress, and enhance your immune system and boot energy. It also strengthens social bonds. Sigmund Freud said that humor was the highest form of defense. So now is the time to pull out all those silly jokes and playful antics to keep people smiling and laughing. Of course use discretion and always sensitive to others. Timing is important.

**Finally…**

Freud also said “love and work are the cornerstones of our humanity.” So during this unusual time, when we have less work, maybe we can focus more on love and reacquaint ourselves with our humanity.