

Self Isolation: Preserving your mental health

My name is Sophie Burgess and I am a Clinical Psychologist working for the NHS. I have come together with some colleagues to compile a handout with ideas for coping during periods of self isolation, particularly in terms of looking after your mental health.

Structure and routine

Try and keep as much structure to your day as possible e.g. sleep and wake times, and being sure to get dressed and 'ready' every morning. Imposing a rough structure of activities/plans across the day can also help avoid boredom and increase a sense of routine, order and achievement. Be sure to build in some relaxation time though!

Rituals

Many people find a daily ritual helpful at times of high stress. Rituals are very personal things and depend on your interests, ability and what helps you. Rituals can include making a diary entry, scrap booking, image making, or simply thinking of five positive things that happened that day at the end of each day. Likewise, many people find writing down anxious thoughts or finding other more creative ways to document them can also help to reduce the mental load when things feel overwhelming.

Use your space

If you are having to remain in the house, try to use all of the space creatively rather than confining yourself to one room. Moving between rooms at different times in the day and for different activities can reduce the sense of cabin fever.

Connect with people

Use any available methods to connect with people around you. If you have them, use your WhatsApp groups, FaceTime etc to keep close to the people you love. Do activities alongside each other e.g. agree on a book you might all read or a film you might all watch in your homes. This way you might feel more connected even if you are apart. Likewise, make sure to communicate with loved ones who are isolating with you when you need some alone time. Even at times like this most of us need our space.

Language and re-framing

Terms like "self isolating" or "distancing" may feel passive and/or anxiety provoking (then again they may not, it's all personal). If you are feeling helpless or passive, try instead to re frame your thoughts and adopt a different language, the language of resistance. Remaining at home is a form of active resistance against the virus. You are committing an act of resistance by remaining at home and you can feel proud of this.

Tell people what you need

This might sound obvious but we all have different needs at different times. If you need to be left alone a bit, let those who are around you know this. If you need someone to just listen and not try to solve your concerns then tell them this at the start of the conversation. Being clear on the kind of help we need from each other can help us to help each other, and it also stops people from having to guess and getting it wrong!

Focus on what you can control

Feeling out of control can hugely increase anxiety. If you feel like this, try and focus instead on what is within your control and take action in line with this. You might not be able to control who is and is not following the Corona virus guidelines, but you can control how you act towards yourself and others. For example, you can choose what media sources you choose to listen to and what you choose to switch off from. Keeping control of what we can is hugely protective against anxiety.

Self care

It's obvious but vital. Try and get enough sleep, stay hydrated, well fed with a balanced diet (but a dose of spoiling yourself too). Try to get basic exercise even within the home. Take time to think about the self care activities you most enjoy and build it into every day. It could be as simple as painting your nails, or taking that bath but be sure to do it!

'Flow' activities

The Positive Psychology Movement defines flow activities as those that you can get readily into and involved in, that you enjoy and that gives you a sense of achievement. They shouldn't be too simple or too difficult, just enough to take up your focus and interest. Flow activities are very personal, but for many include baking, knitting, crafting, gardening (if you are going into the garden) and yoga.