

## 10 Ways to Protect Your Mental Health During Isolation

While social distancing is critical right now to save lives, it can create or exacerbate mental health issues. Too much time on our hands can lead to rumination, increasing stress levels. Isolation can create loneliness and increase stress. Fear can take over and lead to too much binge-watching, alcohol abuse or other unhealthy ways of coping. Having a coping *plan* will help.

I am currently writing a workbook on anxiety, stress, trauma and the brain. One chapter gives research-based strategies for reducing stress on a daily basis. In this blog, I am not going into the detail that I would there. I am going to list some strategies and examples of how I applied them yesterday.

Keep in mind that we can't avoid stress, especially now. We must periodically *recover* from stress so that it doesn't increase our allostatic load to the point of creating physical and mental health problems. Just as you physically rest and recover periodically during physical fatigue, you must do the same with mental stress. This recovery needs to be deliberate and frequent. Here are some strategies from the book along with suggestions from my life. Every day I will implement these strategies in different ways, doing as many as I can. You might want to make yourself a checklist and track how many you can do a day or keep a journal.

Again, while not explained here, these strategies are shown in scientific research to reduce anxiety and/or depression.

- 1. Purpose/ meaning in life:** My work gives me purpose and meaning. However, with my events being cancelled, I don't have talks to write. This will give me time to focus on my new book and I will schedule normal work hours to do that. What gives your life meaning and how can you incorporate that? Reach out to family? Maybe this is a good time to think about that and plan for the future.
- 2. Exercise:** I am fortunate that I have a yard that I can enjoy. I did a little weeding. Sunshine is antiviral. I am currently sunburned LOL. You can probably still go for a walk even when social distancing. How about some online exercise classes?
- 3. Relationships:** Ok this is where social distancing may create the most stress. Fortunately, we have many ways we can still have meaningful relationships. Obviously, we can do Face Time and texting. Maybe you could reach out to people you never had time to keep up with. I had a phone call and texts with my grown nephews, something we are all so busy we don't take time to do often. Reach out to a different person every day. Reconnect.
- 4. Helping others:** I sent a check to my cleaning person because she can't come here. Maybe you can pick up groceries for an elderly neighbor or help small business with an online order.
- 5. Creativity and flow:** Getting absorbed in something where the time flies is one of the best ways to reduce stress. Crafts and hobbies are great. Don't think you have to be a "creative" person. You might color, journal, cook, or listen to music. I wanted to use up the flour and sugar while I still had necessary ingredients such as milk and eggs, so I baked muffins and biscuits. Maybe this is the time you could learn another language or take another type of online class in something you have always been interested in.

6. **Organizing:** While there isn't scientific research on organizing per se, it is something that calms the brain and gets your mind off anxieties. It can create a sense of flow. I am reorganizing how I store things on the floor of my closets. You might clean one junk drawer or go through clothes to see what you can donate later. Go through photos with the kids and make an album.
7. **Planning and projects:** Remind yourself and your family that there will be life after this and use the time to make it better. I painted a bedroom. It got my mind of things and relaxed me for hours 😊. Plan a trip for when this is over or rearrange furniture. Keep moving forward.
8. **Distraction:** While it wouldn't be healthy to binge watch all day (and that actually increases stress in your body although it gets your mind off things), allow yourself some limited time daily for pleasurable distraction. I watched Bombshell last night. Play board games, read, and watch shows.
9. **Mind and spirit:** Meditation has been shown to reduce anxiety, stress, and trauma. If you have never tried it, get online and give it a try. There are many kinds. Probably the easiest would be to find some guided imagery meditations online or try an app such as Calm, Buddify, or Headspace, so you can quickly calm down by listening and being guided through a meditation. Prayer is meditation. My friend said she got dressed in her church clothes yesterday and watched a service on tv. I did my gratitudes at night and watched the birds and the butterflies, clearing my mind of all but that to the extent that I could – mindfulness meditation.

**Rest and recover:** Being confined to home instead of being at work allows for a nap! Recharge!