Maintaining your mental health during social isolation

To help control the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) across the country, all Australians have been asked to practise social distancing. In some cases people are required to, or may choose to, self-isolate. Understandably, the challenges associated with social distancing and isolation, including separation from loved ones, loss of freedom and reduced income, are leading some people to experience feelings of anxiety, boredom, frustration and fear.

This information sheet outlines some useful strategies you can use to maintain good mental health during this unprecedented time of social distancing and isolation.

Stay connected

Positive social connections are essential for our mental health and can help us cope in times of stress. In the current crisis, we are being asked to distance ourselves from others so it is important that we maintain our social networks using available methods of communication. This can be as simple as phoning a friend to share your experience, using videoconferencing technology to check in with a family member, or spending quality time with the people you live with.

The information in this tip sheet is current as at 20 March 2020.

Avoid difficult situations

At times, people will be required to self-isolate with others in their household. While this will provide opportunities for social connections, living with someone 24/7 with little or no time away from each other may give rise to arguments and/or tension. There are a number of things you can do to limit conflict with those you are isolated with, including:

- creating a roster to help you distribute chores equally and fairly
- identifying and taking part in activities you like doing together such as movies, board games, jigsaws, gardening
- sharing positive emotions and experiences, rather than anger, frustration and disappointment
- communicating about your worries and concerns, and seeking support from one another
- maintaining your sense of fun and positive humour
- remaining respectful of each other in times of conflict – walk away and take time to calm yourselves, returning to the discussion later and repairing any hurt caused.

Structure your day

While in isolation it is beneficial to plan out your days to restore a sense of purpose and normality to your daily life. Schedule tasks such as cooking and laundry, as well as activities you enjoy to help you stick to your routine. Structuring activities around mealtimes and bedtime can also help you keep to your schedule while ensuring you eat regularly and get enough sleep.

Given the current need to practise social distancing and isolation, many people are also being encouraged to work from home where possible. Working from home can bring a whole new set of challenges and the need to provide structure to your day is even more important.

Some tips to help you have a sense of normality and work effectively from home are listed below.

- **Change out of your pyjamas each morning –** While you don't have to dress as formally as you might when going into the office, getting out of your pyjamas can help you get in the right headspace to start your day.
- **Set up a dedicated workspace –** Choose a space away from noise and with adequate lighting to set up your work desk. If possible, use an adjustable desk chair so you can work comfortably. Visit Worksafe Victoria for tips on setting up a safe workspace (bit.ly/2Wr2vjL)
- **Set a strict schedule –** It can be hard to switch-off from work, so it is important to clearly define your working hours, ensuring you have regular breaks. Disconnect from all work-related accounts (e.g., remote desktops, email) at the end of your working day to help maintain a clear boundary between your work and home life.
- **Limit distractions –** Being at home can mean you can be easily distracted by other people or tasks (e.g., household chores). Schedule set times where you can take a break from work to complete these tasks, rather than completing them randomly throughout the day where you can lose track of time.
- **Keep in touch –** Maintain regular contact with your manager/colleagues (via phone, email or videoconferencing) to ensure you are each aware of your tasks, workload and timelines.

Tips to cope with self-isolation

Maintain a positive outlook during periods of self-isolation by:
- reminding yourself that this period of self-isolation is temporary
- thinking of the benefits of self-isolation to the wider society, including slowing the spread of the virus and protecting those most vulnerable in your community
- remaining mindful that medical and scientific experts are following strict protocols to contain the virus and treat those affected
- ensuring you have access to accurate, reliable and up-to-date information that communicates what is expected from you if you are in isolation
- maintaining relationships with family, friends and colleagues (e.g., via telephone or video technologies)
- not overusing social media as you are likely to be exposed to negative news and get drawn into doomsday discussions – try to keep your mind busy with activities you enjoy such as reading, watching movies, exercising and even spring-cleaning the house
- structuring your day when working from home – allocate specific work hours, schedule breaks and set-up a dedicated workspace where distractions are limited.

Helping your child through self-isolation

While most schools in Australia have not yet closed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, many children are spending significantly more time at home, not taking part in out-of-school activities, and some are even required to self-isolate with their families.Below are some ideas on how parents can help their child cope with periods of social distancing or isolation.

- **Set a daily routine –** Routines can help children cope with change and help them understand what is expected of them. Work with your child to develop a routine that suits the whole family and includes a range of activities, for example,

schoolwork (literacy and numeracy), physical activity, creative play, family time and limited amounts of screen time.
- **Maintain social relationships –** Use technologies (such as FaceTime, Zoom or Skype) to help your child maintain contact with friends and other family members, such as grandparents. For older children and teenagers, it is important to monitor their use of social media accounts as excessive use can lead to increased levels of anxiety.
- **Have fun –** For many children, their out of school activities (e.g., swimming, football) have been cancelled but it is important for them to stay active. Harness their interests and have fun with them at home (e.g., play cricket in the backyard or dance to music inside). You can also take this opportunity to spend quality time with your child by teaching them a new skill or game, read with them, or research a new topic together.

Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of self-isolation is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:
- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.com.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

More information

Australian Government Department of Health
The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about coronavirus (COVID-19), including translated resources.
bit.ly/38OOwHe

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about the coronavirus such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected.
bit.ly/39MEmI8

World Health Organization
The World Health Organization provides information and guidance regarding the current outbreak of coronavirus disease.
bit.ly/3cQUwCw