How to look after your mental health during a pandemic

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As part of the global response to the pandemic, the citizens of many countries are having to stay at home. However, prolonged isolation can take its toll on mental health. In this Special Feature, mental well-being advocates share their top tips on what you can do to cope with anxiety and stress while stuck at home.

What can people do to look after their mental health while stuck at home?

our coronavirus hub and follow our live updates page for the most recent information on the COVID-19 outbreak.

In a press briefing on March 26, 2020, officials from the World Health Organization (WHO) discussed the challenges that the world is facing in terms of mental and psychological health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Physical distancing and isolation measures, [and] the closure of schools and workplaces, are particularly [challenging for] us, as they affect what we love to do, where we want to be, and who we want to be with," said Dr. Hans Kluge, the WHO's regional director for Europe, in his opening remarks.

"It is absolutely natural for each of us to feel stress, anxiety, fear, and loneliness during this time. At [the] WHO, we consider [effects on] our mental health [and] psychological well-being as being very important consequences of COVID-19," he added.

As people all around the world find themselves working from home or being home-schooled — unable to travel even down the street to visit friends or family — staying mentally healthy could become increasingly difficult for many.

So what can individuals, as well as society at large, do to preserve mental well-being and cope with stressors such as anxiety and loneliness?

To find out, *Medical News Today* have reached out to two mental health advocates: business neurolinguistic programming practitioner and mental health trainer Tania Diggory, founder and director of *Calmer*, and leadership coach and mental health first aid instructor Kat Hounsell, founder of *everyday people*.

This Special Feature presents some best practice tips for maintaining good mental health that Diggory and Hounsell suggested, as well as the official advice offered by experts from the WHO.

Unique challenges of working from home

Working from home may seem like the dream set-up for some, as it offers the possibility to tap into that latent creativity from the comfort of a cozy, familiar environment.

However, it can also bring a unique set of challenges — especially as an enforced measure.

"While [being able to work from home] can empower and up-level our working life, if taken to the extreme, we end up being switched on the whole time," Diggory told *MNT*.

"In many cases, the boundaries between home life and work life can become blurred, and these boundaries are what enable us to stay healthy and well," she cautioned.

In an enforced "work from home" situation, people may end up continuously sharing a space with other family members, and they may start to feel as though they have to attend to both domestic tasks and work assignments at the same time.

This blending of home and work life may also lead to working longer hours than usual.

"People may [...] fall into a pattern of overworking, a sense or feeling that they 'should' be working long hours, to show colleagues that they are

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Managing stress while working from home

So, how can people address these challenges and reduce the amount of stress that comes with working exclusively from a home environment?

"Firstly, accept that stress levels will likely be higher for many at this time — whatever you're feeling is valid considering the current context," said Hounsell.

That is why, "[w]hen working from home, prioritizing your mindset and well-being at the start of the day is essential," Diggory told us.

One helpful way to set boundaries so that a person does not become overwhelmed with competing tasks is to create a physical space that is for work only, where the person will not face non-work-related disruptions and interruptions.

> "Where possible, it is worth designating a space that is yours for work only. This separation can support you physically and mentally, and help get you into the appropriate headspace each time you settle in to work."
>
> – Tania Diggory

"If you live with family, a partner, or housemates, you could […] [have] a chat with them about what boundaries you need to put in place in order to ensure a healthy and productive mindset," she suggested.

She also said that people who share their homes with others may actually be able to benefit from the situation by co-opting family or housemates to actively help them stay on track.

For instance, Diggory said, "If you struggle to take breaks throughout the

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their help in encouraging you to take time away from your desk at lunch or for a mid-morning/afternoon break."

Cooperation is key, Hounsell agreed. "Be kind and patient with yourself and those around you," she advised.

She also stressed the importance of maintaining other healthful habits — such as eating regularly and sticking to a healthful diet — because these are, in themselves, a cornerstone of mental health.

"When planning your day, schedule in eating regular nutritious meals, [...] renew through exercise, make time to connect with others," and maintain good sleep hygiene, Hounsell emphasized.

She also mentioned the importance of maintaining good communication with both housemates and work colleagues at this time.

"Be open with your plans with those you live with and your team — have clear boundaries with your non-negotiables, and be open to flexibility where your schedule may need to adapt to support someone else," she added.

What can employers do?

There are also adjustments that employers can make to ensure that their employees do not hit burnout mode in record time while working from

Hounsell said that there are a few questions that employers should ask themselves if they want to help their employees maintain their well-being and remain productive.

These questions are:

1. Do my team members have the right physical set-up, [such as] equipment to do their work remotely, platforms for online communication (including video calls), and a comfortable chair and desk set-up?

2. [Do they have] meaningful connection opportunities, beyond meetings, that focus on the work? People need time to have fun and engage in supportive chats with colleagues just as they would in the office.

3. [Do employees have] an appropriate workload considering [their] change of circumstances? There are many people who are working alongside home-schooling, supporting others at risk, [and] self-isolating.

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," employers should aim to address these issues to support their employees in achieving an adequate work mindset away from the office.

Hounsell also advised "[r]egular check-ins and signposting to supports available, so that everyone's well-being is being nurtured on a daily basis," as well as "[opening] a feedback loop" to address any "communication challenges" that may appear due to the remote work setting.

How to get back into 'home time' mode

Another possible stumbling block when a person has to work from home

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That can be tricky, especially if the person does not have access to their usual "signals" that work is over — such as their commute from the office, a regular pitstop at the mall after work, or a quick session at the gym.

In speaking to *MNT*, Diggory suggested that one way of marking the end of the work day — though this could also apply to ending a study period, for example — is to set up something akin to the school bell.

"Try using an alarm to signal the end of your working day — choosing the hour, or even the minute, that you can press the 'off' button, put down your pen, and leave the home office," she suggested.

Bookending the start and end of the working day with suggestive activities might also help.

"[P]lan a simple short ritual you look forward to in order to 'check-in' and 'check-out' of your working day," Hounsell advised.

"It could be anything, like starting the day with a cup of tea and 10 minutes [of] journaling learnings from yesterday, or hopes for today. Then, your check-out could be a short scheduled call with a colleague, friend, [or] family member to share your evening plans," she suggested.

"[P]lanning enjoyable things to do in the evenings can be a nice reward for all your hard work, and something to look forward to each day," Diggory noted.

However, Hounsell also advised our readers to go easy on themselves, should this strategy not work perfectly every time.

"[D]on't beat yourself up if work starts bleeding into the evening — just *stop*," she said. "Stop, take a breath, observe what's happening with kindness, and proceed with intention into the next part of your evening."

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Coping with loneliness

Research has sl   s most significant
risk factors for p   oblem (at the best
of times), what l   n of movement is
severely limited?

In the press briefing from March 26, 2020, Dr. Aiysha Malik — the WHO's
technical officer within the Department of Mental Health and Substance
Abuse — noted that some of the people most at risk of experiencing an
increased sense of loneliness and anxiety are older individuals, as well as
those already living with mental health issues.

**To cope with loneliness while in (relative) physical isolation, Dr. Malik
said that there are some "basic strategies that [the WHO are]
advocating across the population, such as taking part in some [form of]
physical activity, keeping to routines or creating new ones, engaging in
activities [that] give a sense of achievement […] and, importantly, really
maintaining social connections."**

Although staying connected may be more difficult now than ever before,
Dr. Malik points out that now is the time to explore the full potential of
digital technologies in helping us stay in touch with our loved ones.

In speaking to *MNT*, Diggory agreed with this perspective. "As much as
an overuse of digital technology can be detrimental to our well-being, we
are truly fortunate to be living in the digital age, where it's never been so
easy to stay connected with the people who matter to us most."

"Where possible," she said, "video calls are essential; [they help] to give
that illusion of proximity and feel like the person or people you're talking
to are nearby."

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Also, throughout the virtual press briefing, Dr. Malik repeatedly emphasized the importance of sticking to old routines and creating new ones. This, she explained, can help give structure to our daily lives at a time when our normal activities are disrupted.

Once again, Diggory agreed:

> "Routine is [...] very important for well-being, so if you're living by yourself, write a list of the people and activities that lift your spirits; be sure to prioritize time for connecting with others and doing things you enjoy every day. "

For those who live on their own and are finding that enforced isolation has hit them hard, Diggory also suggested "[considering] the things you enjoy doing by yourself, yet haven't had time to dedicate to them."

"[W]hat books do you like to read? What self-care routine can you put in place to support your mind and body? What nutritious foods can you cook to boost your immune system?"

People should ask themselves these questions and try to take this unexpected time to themselves to focus on aspects of their lives that they may not have paid very much attention to before.

Tools for coping with anxiety

In the press briefing from March 26, 2020, the WHO officials also talked about how people may start experiencing increased levels of anxiety during this uncertain time.

Dr. Kluge said that "[o]ur anxieties and fears should be acknowledged, and not ignored, but better understood and addressed by individuals, communities, and governments "

"The issue, making all of us nervous, is how we mange and react to stressful situations unfolding so rapidly in our lives and communities," he continued. He then shared a few personal strategies for coping with stress and anxiety:

"Personally, I am trying to stick to what has worked for me in the past when I want to be calm — for example, learning and practicing simple relaxation techniques, like breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, mindfulness, [and] meditation, [which] can all be very helpful in alleviating mental distress."

When *MNT* spoke with Diggory, she also suggested that practices such as mindfulness and meditation can help relieve anxious thoughts.

"One of the key factors of experiencing anxiety is a sense of feeling out of control," she explained. However, "[t]he practices of mindfulness and meditation have been scientifically proven to reduce stress and anxiety, and when practiced regularly, can help you feel more in control of your own state."

> "We're not always able to control external circumstances; however, we can learn to cultivate [healthful] habits where we feel in control of our personal well-being, and exercises such as meditative breathing [are] an example of this."
>
> – Tania Diggory

Diggory went on to explain that since the start of the pandemic, there has been an increase in online wellness classes, which people can easily join from the comfort of their own homes.

Open communication and simple relaxation

"What has been so amazing to witness is the booming wealth of online resources to support [people]. You can go on virtual art gallery tours, watch videos of theater and dance online, have video dinner dates with friends (this one comes tried and tested from me), online pub quizzes, live-streamed yoga and workouts, [and] even The Open University has released a multitude of free courses for keeping learning … such an opportunity to get creative," she said.

"And," she added, "what's really great is [that] we can also reconnect with those hobbies and relaxation techniques that don't require a screen — reading, taking a bath, gardening, listening to music, playing music, journaling, writing, arts and crafts, cooking new recipes, [...] stroking your pet, daydreaming … so much to savor and enjoy."

In turn, the WHO regional director for Europe also spoke of the importance of engaging in earnest communication at this time.

"I myself I also try and acknowledge upsetting thoughts when they occur, and discuss them with people around me. They are likely to have them, too, and we may be better able to find solutions collectively," he said.

Hounsell made a similar point when she spoke to *MNT*. She emphasized that we should all try to check in with each other and practice our sense of empathy.

"Looking out for one another [...] and checking in regularly to spot signs of stress or mental health issues evolving" could have a lasting impact, she suggested.

Other *MNT* resources

Here at *MNT*, we have already put together numerous resources to support our readers in their quest for holistic well-being.

Following on from the advice presented above, here is a list of existing features from our website that we think our readers may find helpful at this time: