How to Cope with Loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Are you unsure how to cope with loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic? You could be self-isolating because you’ve caught the infection, but there are many other reasons why you’ve elected to stay indoors. Whether you are quarantined due to suspected exposure, staying home because you are in a high-risk category, or simply living alone, you may find yourself unprepared for the feelings of loneliness that will likely follow.

While those with chronic illness may already be familiar with what it’s like to face long periods of time alone at home, most of us are used to getting out daily; even those who are retired or don’t work usually make trips to run errands or visit friends. To have all of that stop suddenly is jarring, to say the least.

A 2017 systematic review of 40 studies from 1950 to 2016 published in the journal Public Health found a significant association between social isolation and loneliness and poorer mental health outcomes as well as all-cause mortality. For this reason, it’s important to take care of your mental health during times of decreased social interactions. It’s normal to feel stress when faced with staying indoors and interacting less with people, especially when that is added to the underlying stress of worrying whether you will catch the virus. These factors could increase your chances of developing a mental health issue, like anxiety or depression.

While social distancing refers to avoiding large gatherings of people, staying a certain distance from others in public, and only going out of the house for essentials, it can still start to feel a lot like “cabin fever.” You might also feel stigmatized if you are isolated because you’ve contracted the virus or you suspect you may have contracted the virus.

What’s the best way to get through this period of isolation? There are many strategies that you can employ to ensure your well-being and good mental health. Most of these involve either finding ways to distract yourself (keep busy) or finding ways to connect with others (despite the circumstances).

If you are unable to go places or interact socially with many people at this time, you might be wondering what you can do. Below are some ideas on how to manage your feelings of loneliness during these times.

- Keep to a schedule so that your days feel more normal.
- Stay informed, but don’t let the news consume all of your time and energy.
- Stay active with at-home workouts or walks around your neighborhood.
- Connect with others using phone calls, video chats, letters, and social media.
- Pick up a new hobby or start a home project.
- Practice self-compassion and gratitude. Think about the positives!
- Find sources of comfort, even in the little things like cooking, taking a bath, playing with your pet, or drinking tea.

If you find yourself with very poor mental health while isolated during coronavirus and aren’t able to pull yourself out of feelings of anxiety, depression, or fear, it is important to reach out for help. Consider calling a crisis line or an online therapy service to find out about options. While it’s normal to feel afraid and lonely at a time like this, worsening mental health could indicate the need for outside help.

Source: VeryWell Health
Healthy Cooking: Summer Strawberry Spinach Salad

**Ingredients:**
- 1 package (5 oz.) fresh spinach
- 8 oz. strawberries, halved (~2 cups)
- 1 large avocado, sliced
- 1/2 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1/2 feta crumbles
- 1/3 sliced almonds
- 1/4 chopped shelled pistachios or another nut

*For the balsamic strawberry vinaigrette*
- 3 tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, grated or finely minced
- 1/2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1/2 tbsp. strawberry jam
- Fresh salt and pepper

**Directions:**
1. In a mason jar or small bowl, add all of the vinaigrette ingredients. Shake or mix well to combine. Add more salt and pepper if necessary, to taste.
2. Toast the almonds on the stovetop: add the almonds to a pan and place over medium heat, stirring for 2-5 minutes until the almonds are slightly golden brown. Remove from heat and allow to cool.
3. Add spinach to a large bowl, layer on the strawberries, avocado slices, red onion, feta, almonds, and pistachios. Feel free to add dressing now or set it our for personal servings. Serves 4 as a side. Feel free to add a protein and/ or grain to bulk it up.
Anxieties related to loss of control and uncertainty are understandable as we shelter in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. While a natural fear response is par for the course, too much anxiety can be problematic. Instead of spending time and energy worrying, why not channel that energy into what you can control — self-care. Focusing on sleep is a natural fit for working on self-care, as we know that getting enough sleep can benefit your immune system.

**Can sleep help my immune system fight the coronavirus?** Ample sleep supports the immune system, which reduces the risk of infection and can improve outcomes for people fighting a virus. On the other hand, sleep deprivation weakens the body’s defense system and makes people more vulnerable to contracting a virus.

**Can sleep help improve my mood and productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic?** It's not easy to function at our best without easy access to our usual coping skills (e.g., social support, exercise, etc.) while sheltering in place. Adequate sleep can maximize your potential for having better days under these circumstances. Optimal sleep helps regulate mood, improve brain function, and increase energy and overall productivity during the day.

**Why are so many people having trouble sleeping while sheltering in place?** Elevated stress and an overload of information can keep the mind racing and elevate the body’s arousal system response, triggering insomnia. People are spending every waking moment getting one last look at their screens (news updates, COVID-19 education, social connections). The blue light from these screens tells the brain to stop producing the sleep hormone melatonin, which can lead to trouble falling asleep. Also, loss of daytime structure can upset nighttime sleep schedules. Inconsistent bedtimes and wake times can shift the pressure, or urge, to sleep, making ability to fall asleep less predictable.

**What will help me sleep better during this time?**

- **Create a sleep schedule.** Figure out your sleep need (experiment with different amounts), then prioritize that amount of sleep each night. While six or nine hours can be appropriate for some adults, most need seven to eight hours. We are not obliged to late night social activities, so getting to bed “on time” is more realistic right now — take advantage of that.

- **Find time for you.** Take the hour before bedtime as “me time” with no electronic engagement. Minimize conversations and calls during that hour. That’s not easy, especially if you have young children at home, but it’s important. We all need at least one hour alone per day. Take a hot bath/shower, play soothing music, try a meditation app and read a book or magazine.

- **Minimize naps and screen time.** Daytime sleep should be less than 30 minutes and before 2 p.m. If you have any trouble falling asleep, avoid napping. Turn off your devices one hour before bedtime. Leave your cell phone charging in the kitchen so you are not tempted to look at COVID-19 updates during the night.

- **Enhance your sleep environment.** Make sure your bedroom environment is conducive to sleep. Keep the room temperature cool, try an eye mask or blackout shades, and use a white noise machine to block extraneous noise from the street or the hallway.

- **Structure your daytime schedule.** Commit to daily activities (e.g., exercise, meals, socializing) at certain times to build structure to your days. This will support a regular bedtime and wake time. Set cell phone reminders to anchor your schedule, and as a reminder to turn off screens an hour before bedtime.

Source: UChicago Medicine
During a period of social isolation, which may include having your children and entire family together all day, work schedule disrupted, and a loss of daily routine, can cause an increase in stress and anxiety and lead to unhealthy eating. All of this can then lead to a decrease in your immune system.

If you find yourself in this situation, your goal is to incorporate immune boosting foods which also help to decrease anxiety. Below are some foods that you will want to add into your daily diet...

- Vitamin C-rich foods: Vitamin C is known to boost immunity. Foods that contain vitamin C are citrus fruits (such as oranges), broccoli, kiwi, cantaloupe, and bell peppers.
- Spices: Ginger, garlic, and turmeric can be added to stir-frys, smoothies, and soups.
- Magnesium-rich foods: Low magnesium levels has been associated with stressful conditions. Incorporate food rich in magnesium such as legumes (kidney beans, black beans, etc), nuts, seeds, leafy greens, and whole grains.
- Omega-3 fatty acids: Some studies have suggested that omega-3 fatty acids can reduce both inflammation and anxiety. Food high in omega 3 fatty acids are salmon, tuna, chia and flax seeds, and walnuts.
- Antioxidants: Add colorful fruits and vegetables such as berries, carrots, and spinach to protect against oxidative stress which strengthens your immune system.

Staying at home can be challenging but don’t let this affect your eating. Plan your meals and snacks ahead and continue to make healthy food choices and incorporate some of the foods that boost your mood and immunity.