

Mental health: Physically isolated but socially connected

All around the world governments are using social isolation (sometimes referred to as physical distancing) to curb the spread of Covid-19. In most countries, this strategy seems to be working. People are keeping away from others who would have been part of their daily interactions. It is only when these regular interactions are taken away from us that we realize how much they are part of our wellbeing. Relationships with other people give us a sense of meaning, happiness, purpose and connectedness. Here are some tips on how we can maintain our mental health while we are socially isolated:

Maintain connection

We may be physically apart but we can still be socially connected. Here are some ways of keeping connected:

- Phone calls, including video calls using applications like WhatsApp, Facetime, Skype and others
- Contribute to quality time with the people who live with you. Make a deliberate effort to do fun things like:
 - A candle lit dinner for two
 - Camping in the backyard over the break
 - Watching a film together.

Manage connections with people you live with

For some households, social isolation means spending a lot of time with other people. This might be an opportunity to deepen those relationships, but can also be stressful. Each of us have quirky behaviours which may not even be noticed when things are normal, but they can be magnified when people live together without a break. Here are some strategies that can help reduce tensions:

- Discuss and agree on a roster for household work, making sure it is fairly distributed
- Schedule in activities that you all enjoy doing e.g. gardening, board games
- Share positive emotions – expressing them explicitly to each other
- Talk about worries and concerns and support each other
- Look for occasions where you can share a laugh together
- Respect each other especially in times of conflict – call a halt when discussions become heated and come back together when you are feeling calmer.

Structure your day

Having a plan for each day is usually helpful, so you have a purpose and a schedule of activities. If you are working from home as well as supporting children's education or caring for children, managing each day is clearly complicated. Below are some tips to help structure your day:

- Go through your morning routine as you would normally if you were working outside home, such as taking a shower, having breakfast and changing into fresh clothes, though not necessarily your regular work clothes. Avoiding wearing pyjamas during the day will help your sense of structure and delineation.
- Set up a dedicated work space. If possible, try to create a work space that is quiet, has plenty of light and is safe.
- Follow a work schedule as close as possible. Start and finish on time and as far as possible avoid working extra hours. It is easy to blur boundaries between work and non-work times when working from home. If work-life becomes unbalanced it can affect one's wellbeing.

- If you are looking after children and working from home, this can be challenging so taking extra care of yourself is warranted. It may be easier to negotiate and structure your time with teenage children. If you have younger children, you may have to work around their needs, for example, share caring responsibilities with other adults in the house, set the children play activities or other activities that they can do independently or work during their rest periods.
- Minimize distractions wherever possible. Draw up a schedule and stick to it as closely as possible. The trick is to factor in hourly breaks so you know you can stop work from time to time to attend to other matters. If you do have distractions you can try to defer them until your break.
- Communicate regularly with your manager and colleagues. This will ensure everybody knows what everybody else is doing.

Helping your child through self-isolation

Many families with children will find that their routine is significantly disrupted. Families are now having to find new routines while spending a lot of time together. Here are some suggestions that can help families with children:

- Agree on a daily routine with the children. Routine gives certainty for children in a time of change. Of course, older teenagers could have more free time to decide their own activities. The various activities need to be synchronized so family members can get on with their activities without interrupting others. Mix up the activities so they are both engaging and productive, for example school work, play activities, quiet reading and homework. Try not to use screen time as a reward too often.
- Encourage children to maintain significant social relationships with people outside home, such as friends, grandparents, cousins etc. As always, monitor the use of social media by teenage children. For all its benefits, there are significant downsides as well.
- Don't forget to have fun. Children have a lot of energy. With most outdoor activities being cancelled, it is important to find ways of burning up energy and having fun at the same time. Children usually have great imaginations, so invite them to suggest activities for everyone to do. Older children can take turns to organise activities for everyone to do.