

COVID-19 is changing the way we live and work. How do we cope?

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As the United States becomes increasingly shuttered in the face of a global pandemic, life goes on—but it looks very different than before.

Like many other colleges across the country and worldwide, the University of Arizona announced that it will move classes online for the remainder of the semester to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Employees are being encouraged to work from home.

In response to the ongoing health crisis, David Sbarra, a professor in the University of Arizona Department of Psychology, decided to change not only how he's teaching, but what.

Sbarra is entirely reinventing his health psychology course so that when the university resumes classes—fully online—on Wednesday, his 286 undergraduates will focus almost entirely on topics related to COVID-19, including, among other things, the psychology of panic and [social isolation](#); stress management; the epidemiology of disease progress; the role of public health guidance on decision-making; and the role of culture in accepting social distancing policies.

Sbarra is a clinical psychologist and directs the Laboratory for Social Connectedness and Health in the Department of Psychology. He studies how human health—both psychological and physical—is tied to our close relationships.

He shared some of his advice for coping with the anxiety and social impacts of the pandemic, as well as tips for communicating effectively with children and loved ones in times of uncertainty.

Q: As more people begin practicing social distancing and/or self-isolation, what are your tips for how not to go stir crazy or get lonely?

A: Whether you're engaging in social distancing or are isolating in some capacity, the experience of being disconnected from others can be

emotionally challenging on many levels. Best advice: Find a means to connect with others without over-connecting on social media, or constantly "being in the know" about the news. Families will likely be doing social distancing together, so find time to really connect with your loved ones. Focus on them by asking questions and exploring how they're feeling and coping. Giving support has many positive benefits to the givers as well as the receivers. Also, consider actually calling your loved ones; have a deeper conversation than a text exchange allows. FaceTime friends and family and "do something" while you're on the connection—like watch a show together.

There's lots we can do to prevent boredom and going stir crazy. First, keep a routine. When will you work? When will you do child care if needed? What does the basic schedule of the day look like, and how can you maintain basic routines—sleep/wake, meal prep, exercise and physical activity, socializing in any form and relaxation. Don't give in to the urge to binge watch shows or follow the news all day. This is fine in the short term, but it is not a long-term—weeks to months—solution if we really need to shelter in place, as they say.

Second, I recommend people think about getting back to basics and using their newfound time to explore valued activities in new ways. Would you like to be outside more? Go to a park or go into the mountains. Physical activity is a great way of coping. Do yoga or stretch. Garden. Clean your house. Not only does physical activity help us regulate negative moods, the benefits extend to the night as well; the more our physical output, the more our bodies will be prepared to sleep. Speaking of sleep, a "basic to basics" approach means trying get the amount of rest you probably need and always lament not having. Finally, if you have a bit more time than expected, it's a great opportunity to engage in some new activities. Music? Making art? Would you like to read some books? Go for it. Start a walking or running program. Maybe you've wanted to try meditating? Now would be a good time. Keeping

your mind active will be key to managing boredom.

More severe loneliness and even depression may come about if you need to self-quarantine or isolate yourself. Again, look for opportunities to structure your time—redesign your room, watch some films, do body weight exercise regimens. Write letters to people. Write poetry. Keep a diary of what's happening for your loved ones.

Finally, we can cope in unhealthy ways too. Adding an extra glass or two of wine or a few beers to take the edge off might be fine once or twice, but if that becomes a pattern, then your first problem of loneliness has a fellow traveler. I would put binge watching in that same category of "good in the short term, not good for the long term" activities.

Q: What's the best way to talk about COVID-19 with kids?

A: Parents should read about ways to discuss this topic with children so they can speak with their kids in what we refer to as a developmentally appropriate manner. This means, depending on children's ages, providing them with specific answers to their questions but, at the same time, not involving them in adult-level conversations that may provoke anxiety. Our son is about to be 12 years old. He has a keen sense of what is happening and has already felt the negative effects of closures for his cherished activities. We talk about the scope of the problem and the need to make personal sacrifices in order to promote public health. We tell him what's up, but we do not involve him in the actual decisions, such as whether he should go to a specific camp over spring break. (See sidebar for additional resources.)

Q: People are responding to the pandemic with varying levels of fear and anxiety. How can

individuals best support partners and loved ones who may be feeling especially anxious?

A: We all need to remember that it's normal to be anxious in the face of uncertainty and in uncontrollable circumstances. A global pandemic certainly fits the bill for uncertainty and uncontrollable. When it comes to strong emotions, however, it's rarely the emotions themselves that get us into trouble; it's our responses to those emotions. Panic is essentially a fear response going off at the wrong time. To counteract this panic, we can try to connect to the present moment and recognize that, unless there is an immediate medical emergency, we can just take a couple of slow, deep breaths to let worried thoughts pass through our mind as we re-engage in the task at hand—working, being with kids, checking on friends or the like.

We can also think about whether our partners or loved ones are over-engaging with anxious thoughts—for example, fretting about how bad things will be, worrying about schools being closed or obsessing over physical symptoms. Telling this person "calm down" doesn't work, but interacting in a way that takes a more accepting stance to what is happening and what may happen can be beneficial. If your partner says, "I'm just so strung out by all this—it's making me crazy." You might say, "Yes, it's so stressful. Let's just take it one day at a time and keep things simple. We can only do what we can do—we're washing our hands, we're doing social distancing and we're being as cautious as possible. Let's just see what happens from here." The bottom line is this: Don't co-ruminate. There's a way in which any two people can make a conversation about COVID-19 very upsetting. Talk about the facts and how you're responding to what is happening and what you need to do in the future. Then acknowledge that you can only do what you can do.

Q: There is so much information, good and bad,

circulating on social media, and all of us are so connected to our phones. How important is it to take a break?

A: On social media, the fear of missing out, or FOMO, is real, but there's a considerable downside to scrolling through post after post about the scary toll of the pandemic. It's too much, and it's too intense. Just check your trusted and reliable sources few times a day. We all need to find a way to create distance from the constant barrage of messages, and the easiest way is to schedule planned breaks—say, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and 8 p.m. onward—to be free from the constant barrage of messages. Engaging with social media before bed seems like a terrible idea as well. We need to create a "glide path" toward sleep, and activating your mind at the wrong time has a negative toll. Set your intentions on a daily basis. How much do you want to interact with social media? What's good for you? Once you have the intentions in mind, actions may follow more easily.

Q: There are a lot of unknowns, and the situation is evolving quickly. Do you have any other general tips for managing stress in the face of a situation as uncertain as this one?

A: Control what you can control: Wash your hands, do social distancing, self-quarantine if you're exposed, isolate if you're sick after seeking medical attention, consider limiting [social media](#), keep a routine as well as possible, and practice good self-care. Eat as well as possible, limit the booze, get as much [physical activity](#) as you can, be outside if possible, reach out to others through any means, and create an environment—quiet and dark—that is conducive for sleep so you can get enough rest.

Provided by University of Arizona

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