

How to know if isolation is affecting your mental health, and what to do about it

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Public health measures aimed at minimizing the risk of transmitting COVID-19 are necessary but they come with a price, according to University of Alberta mental health experts.

"Our first priority has to be safety, but at the same time, we keep asking,

"What happens to someone in isolation?" said psychiatry professor Adam Abba-Aji.

He explained it is inevitable that anxiety will creep into our lives during this situation. The first sign of it is usually a [lack of sleep](#).

"It becomes difficult to switch our brains off," he said. "Where there's a lack of sleep, people sometimes resort to ... alcohol or some other sedatives."

Although that may result in sleep, Abba-Aji said the next day will undoubtedly feature a lack of energy and concentration and even a feeling of depression.

"That itself can lower your immunity, which makes you susceptible to not necessarily COVID-19, but other infections like the common cold," he said. "Imagine the anxiety level nowadays when someone has something as simple as a sore throat."

Abba-Aji suggested trying yoga before going to sleep or practicing mindfulness, which is simply focusing on the present. A piece of this is recognizing that we're all in this together, he added.

"Nearly every part of the world and nearly every city in Canada is affected by COVID-19," he said. "Sometimes when people think they're not alone and everyone else is facing the same challenges, that could reduce the level of anxiety."

Focus on what you can do

Alex Clark, a psychosocial health researcher in the Faculty of Nursing, said part of that mindfulness can come from the difficult but rewarding task of practising gratitude.

"This situation gives us a glimpse of what's really important in life and what we can do together as a community—not despite the challenges, but because of them," Clark said. "It's not the most obvious thing, but can we challenge ourselves to be grateful here, even in the midst of these difficulties?"

Another mental exercise to gain some perspective, according to Abba-Aji, is to recognize we're going through a period of transition and that it will get better.

"Whether it was SARS or Ebola before, we found our way through them," he said. "Try to use evidence about past epidemics and disasters to reduce your level of anxiety."

To that end, Clark advises people to let go of what they can't control and zero in on what they can, which includes proper handwashing, social distancing and focusing on what role they can play in "flattening the curve" of the number of COVID-19 cases.

"Those things give us a very clear way that we can respond and allow us a modicum of certainty in the midst of the uncertainty," he said.

Stay connected

Clark said routine, one of the mainstays of good mental health, will likely go out the window this week, so it's OK to feel a little bit discombobulated. He added people should try to avoid overeating or consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, while pursuing good habits associated with mental wellness—fulfilling commitments to family and community, exercising, reading, or working on a project around the home.

"Find a distraction and do it without feeling guilty," he said. "It's an

opportunity, even in the midst of a very, very difficult circumstance."

Being isolated at home and having to work presents its own set of challenges. Abba-Aji suggested creating a workspace that feels like work, and trying to keep up the positive interaction with work colleagues.

"You have to be informed, but try to sway discussions away from COVID-19 from time to time. Too much talk about [coronavirus](#) can be counterproductive to our mental health."

He noted the Alberta provincial government's decision to allow physicians to see patients virtually was a great step to help those too afraid to leave their house to get help.

And though he worries about the coming uptick in generalized anxiety disorder, post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) and depression among people adjusting to life after the pandemic, he worries more about children.

"Parents need to explain to their children why it's so important, for instance, to continually wash their hands or not see their friends," Abba-Aji said. "We need to keep educating them about what we're going through and that when things return to normal, we will not have to care so much about these precautions."

Despite the isolation that comes with fighting COVID-19, Clark said, it is of the utmost importance for our mental health that we find a way to stay connected.

"It might not be physical connections anymore, but where we can, make an effort to check in with each other, offer to help where you can or just call to say you're thinking about someone," he said.

"There's no such thing as little things in these situations."

Provided by University of Alberta

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