

Be proactive about mental health during COVID isolation, clinical psychologist says

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Seeking out good news is a great way to keep mentally balanced during the long period of social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 battle, says a clinical psychologist who is an associate professor of psychology at

The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH).

"I would like to urge everyone to look for the good news out there, especially the good news about COVID-19," says Dr. Eric Seemann. "Many valid news agencies have these stories on their websites but you need to look for them."

It may seem trivial but it's not, he says.

"Absorbing good news, such as the high recovery rate for most people who have contracted COVID-19, the promise of new treatments, and people-helping-people stories out there provide perspective and another frame of reference."

Staying on a schedule, exercising and setting some minor and achievable goals are also ways to keep mentally healthy. Dr. Seemann says the first two will help with stress and improve sleep, while goal-setting can provide points of mental focus.

"Set a few minor goals so that you can have a list of accomplishments by the end of the day," he says. "Keep in touch with people as you choose during the day. Exercise your spiritual or existential beliefs, if any, as a daily practice."

For many people, hobbies and activities outside of work are also valuable for [social interaction](#), Dr. Seemann says.

"Another factor in this is that self-isolation may seem voluntary but many perceive it as 'under duress,'" he says. "In layman's terms, no one likes being forced to do something, even if we make the choice to do it. What makes matters a bit worse is that there is no 'enemy' to identify."

It's one thing to self-isolate because someone or something specific and

identifiable is causing a threat, like an escaped inmate in an orange jumpsuit for example.

"It's another matter entirely when the threat is faceless and impossible to identify on sight," Dr. Seemann says. "In the second case, people feel powerless, and powerlessness often leads to maladaptive behavior—for example, hoarding supplies."

Isolating because of an unseen enemy can also often lead to competitive behavior as opposed to collaborative behavior.

"People may feel helpless, and they experience increases in depression and anxiety," he says. "Because you cannot engage in social coping, such as going to see your [best friend](#) or calling a family member to come over, many may experience increases in anxiety or depression."

Isolation is generally more difficult for extraverts than introverts. Gregarious social extroverts are most affected.

"After just a few days, they literally feel like they are mentally and emotionally starving to death," says Dr. Seemann. "To reduce the stress of isolation, social extraverts may go out to the store for something they don't need in order to talk to someone. This puts them at an increased risk of contamination."

Even if a social extravert is with a spouse, roommate or other person in the home, there will be a need to get out and contact others because social extraverts need to engage their social, creative and intellectual needs.

Playing games that require interactions with a partner or online, connecting online with friends through Zoom, Skype or another service, or using in-game technology for connecting with friends on game on

systems such as Xbox and PlayStation may provide social extroverts with relief.

"This may sound counterintuitive, but planning to get things done around the house that have been put off also is a good idea, especially if completion of that task is set as a goal to accomplish before the person plays games or interacts with others," he says. "Doing such chores with a partner at home also helps meet the need."

Phone calls with friends and family are also a good way to get out of the here and now and focus on something more interesting and social.

"If you're worried about running out of things to discuss, look up common interests on the internet and start a conversation that way," Dr. Seemann says. "This is a good time to contact an older relative and learn about family history if you're interested."

Adventurous extroverts have the same positive emotions when engaging in activities as social extraverts but they are more excitement-seeking, adventurous and tend to look for new experiences. They like solo activities, such as rock climbing, traveling, urban exploration and geocaching, even if they are with others when they do them.

"Adventurous extraverts will also feel trapped, but for different reasons. Some of the solutions for the social extravert will also be helpful here," he says.

"Planning a trip for after the quarantine, even something simple, may help take their focus off of the moment-by-moment feeling of being trapped and shift it to the future. Keeping in touch with friends and family by phone, much like the social extravert, may provide distraction and relief. Learning about others' experiences may also be a good way for this type of extravert to cope."

Some introverts are more contemplative, and have a number of casual contacts but few close friends. They are most at peace when engaging in high-concentration activities and solo pursuits, says Dr. Seemann.

"Contemplative introverts will be affected the least. As many will joke, 'I've been training for this my whole life.' In the short term this may seem like a vacation to them. That being said, they are still people, and will become distressed over time."

Contemplative introverts are less likely to reach out to others and more likely to engage in personal interests and pursuits. This type of introvert may need a reason to contact others.

"Calling others who they know well to ask about where something may be available, ask about a question at work or to ask for advice on solving a problem may be good reasons or motivators for making contact with others," he says. "Solving problems and reducing ambiguity will likely help reduce distress."

Social introverts, on the other hand, appear to be quiet and standoffish with people they do not know well or in large groups. Yet they act like social extraverts when they are with a small number of people with whom they are close.

"Throwing off this person's routine is likely to cause distress, and introverts are likely to worry about what they are 'not doing' in quarantine more than the people they are not seeing," he says. "Creating a routine is important for this type of introvert."

Contact with those with whom they are close by email, text or internet meeting technology will help relieve distress.

"Continuing to engage in personal pursuits, hobbies, or responsibilities

will give this type of introvert a feeling of engagement and help relieve boredom."

Perspective is your friend, according to Dr. Seemann. Knowing there are things we can do to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 will help us avoid feeling overwhelmed, he says.

"Remember that, as bad as COVID-19 is, you are much more likely to be injured or killed in a car accident or suffer a lifestyle-related medical issue," he says. "So, why is it that most people have never been in a car wreck? They take precautions; they just don't see it that way."

Seat belts, driving in your lane, managing speed, not driving when exhausted or intoxicated and clearing your windshield are all precautions that are taken for granted.

"COVID-19 has precautions that are new or uncomfortable but tolerable once we get used to them," he says. "These precautions have two important benefits. The first is reducing the feeling of powerlessness and giving us the feeling like we can do something. The second is helping normalize the experience of quarantine."

Because social isolation has placed great emphasis on electronic communication and emails, Dr. Seemann says we should keep a few guidelines in mind to avoid miscommunication.

- Ask questions if you feel negative emotions. Questions should be simple and open ended. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean, will you explain it a bit more?" Or something like, "When I read that I got the sense that you are angry with me; if that is the case, I'd like to talk about it with you." Sometimes a short, grammatically incorrect message that uses a lot of abbreviations may seem rude but the sender was actually time-pressed. Ask

something like, "I think you are pretty busy right now. I'll text you later if that's okay, I did not understand your reply. Thanks!"

- Use affirming language if you do not want to convey irritation. "Hi, John, I hope you are well. I need to..." Salutations and polite closings are important for conveying tone in a text or an email.
- If you need to convey something complex, may have significant emotional undertones, or may be misunderstood, try to do so with a method as close to in-person as possible. Zoom is better than email or text. If you have to use an email, make sure it includes a polite salutation and closing, as well as a reasonable degree of explanation. For such an important message, don't use text. Send a text that simply asks the recipient to read the email.
- If you read an email or text message and you get a negative sense, wait a few minutes, do something else, and then read it again and actively ask yourself what the sender is trying to say, both in terms of objective information and in the tone. If you are still confused, text back and ask a question.

Dr. Seemann says if you feel isolated and stressed, call any of the mental health or crisis hotlines to talk to a volunteer.

"If anyone feels like they have no energy and nothing is appealing, call one of these hotlines or reach out to someone you trust," he says. "If for any reason you do not want to talk to someone you know, call Crisis Services of North Alabama. They are completely confidential. If you are a military veteran, call the Veterans Administration's crisis line. Anyone can call the crisis line for Huntsville Hospital or the crisis line for Wellstone Behavioral Health, which is the mental health center of Madison County."

If you have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, Dr. Seemann says to call a crisis hotline or dial 911 to speak to emergency personnel, who will come to you. If you find yourself overusing alcohol, medication or other

substances, he urges you to call for help.

"I cannot stress this enough," he says. "If you need to talk to someone, call someone."

Provided by University of Alabama in Huntsville

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