

# 7 ways meaningful activities can help us get through the coronavirus pandemic

November 30 2020, by Mary Ann McColl

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We hear over and over that it is important to remain occupied during pandemic restrictions. People are gardening, baking bread and taking on DIY projects in record numbers. But what exactly does all this "occupation" do for us in stressful times?

Meaningful activities can be a [source of healing and relief in stressful times](#). In the fall of 2011, in response to the events of September 11, I contributed a position paper to an expert panel of the American Occupational Therapy Foundation that sought to offer guidance on meaningful activities. Although the current circumstances are dramatically different, the argument is much the same. Being occupied is good for us, and its benefits are even greater when we are beset with [uncertainty, distress or upheaval](#).

As long as [human history](#) has been recorded, we have known that it is important for human beings to be [occupied in meaningful ways](#). Based on an exhaustive review of the international literature, there is solid evidence for seven ways that meaningful activities can support our well-being in difficult times.

**1. Identity:** What we do reminds us of who we are. How we occupy ourselves contributes to the formation and maintenance of the self. Difficult times threaten the integrity of the self. Occupation provides the mechanism through which the past, present and [future of the self are integrated](#). In the face of difficult circumstances, [occupation](#) offers the potential for [a fuller, more integrated self once the crisis resolves](#).

**2. Mastery:** Occupation reminds us of our capacity for exercising control over our circumstances. It validates our sense of being able to master a situation, turn it to our advantage and come out of it intact. Occupation makes people [agents of their situation rather than victims of it](#). Occupation is both intrinsically motivated and intrinsically rewarding because of [its validation of our sense of mastery and adaptation](#).



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**3. Habit:** Being occupied in usual ways in the midst of a crisis reinforces in us our normal daily habits. It reassures us that the world continues to turn and that it is possible to have a normal life again. Habits have been understood for many years to have restorative properties when chaos appears to otherwise reign. Habits have been shown to [increase skill, decrease fatigue, free attention](#) and protect individuals against [the stressful effects of difficult situations](#).

**4. Diversion:** Doing something provides a diversion from the negative aspects of stressful situations. Diversional activity allows individuals to transcend the obstacles and difficulties of their daily lives, and in some circumstances, to even achieve an optimal experience beyond the fixed realities of time and space—[a state we call "flow."](#) Occupation has the power to divert people away from the difficulties in their lives, [toward](#)

[satisfaction and healthy engagement.](#)

**5. Support:** Being occupied often involves interacting with others—providing support to their coping efforts, and receiving support in return. The sense of belonging is widely understood to be one of the factors that helps people to achieve positive outcomes and to weather stress without undue negative consequences for their health. Shared occupations can thus have a two-fold positive effect. Besides the obvious beneficial effects for the recipient of support, occupations contributing to the welfare of another have been shown to have [numerous benefits for the provider as well.](#)

**6. Survival:** Many occupations actually have [survival value.](#) Evidence from anthropology and prehistory show that humans created and differentiated occupations that promoted co-operation and favored the survival of both the individual and the group. Occupations meet safety and sustenance needs, and as such are essential tools for survival.

**7. Spiritual Connection:** Finally, when difficult times arise, occupations can be the means through which meaning in life is restored. Whereas in earlier times, people might have turned to religion to restore meaning, [in the contemporary world of secular pluralism,](#) occupation may be the most effective medium available through which individuals can affirm their connection with the self, with others, with the cosmos [and with the divine.](#) In stressful times, being occupied may provide the sense that one is not alone, both literally and in the most profound sense.

So keep on learning to knit, doing yoga online and sorting photographs. There are seven good reasons to do so, all of which will help to see you through this pandemic with your sense of self and community intact.

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