THIS WAY UP ⇧⇧

Helping You Take Care of Your Mental Health

Guide for Getting Through

Self-Isolation

Guide for Getting Through Self-Isolation

Self-isolation can be a frightening and stressful time. You may be grappling with a COVID-19 diagnosis or worrying about your loved ones' health. You might be concerned about how isolation will impact your mental health, family, and finances, and wondering what the future holds. At the same time, you are also probably navigating other losses, stressors, and challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

So what can you do to look after yourself throughout your self-isolation period?

First, let's take a look at the reason why dealing with self-isolation, and the COVID-19 pandemic more broadly, may be particularly challenging from a mental health point of view.

Meeting Our Fundamental Needs During COVID-19

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) theory says that human beings have universal needs, which when met, **contribute to our sense of well-being.**

The more fundamental needs are down the bottom, such as basic needs for food, water, shelter and safety. Next there are psychological needs such as feeling a sense of belonging, connectedness and being respected. Then, at the top is the need for self-fulfilment and achieving our life goals and aspirations.
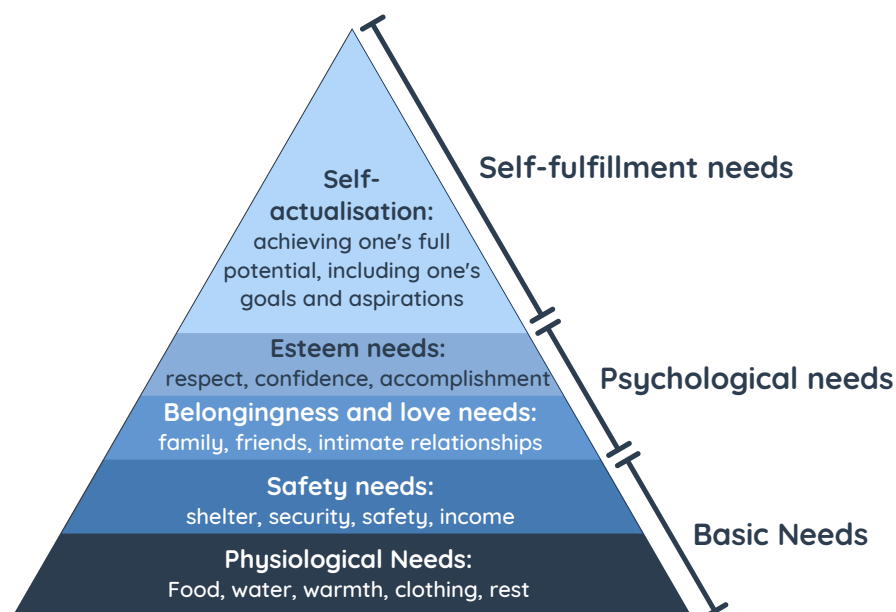
Self-isolation can threaten our ability to meet our needs, which can in turn, affect our sense of well-being.

Having or possibly being exposed to COVID-19 can make us feel unsafe, as we worry about our health and the health of those around us. Self-isolation can also cause some people to worry about job insecurity, and about accessing or affording essentials like food and housing. By it's very nature, social isolation also makes us feel isolated and often stops us from accessing our normal coping strategies, pursuing the opportunities we value, or following through with plans that were important to us.

Both the pandemic and self-isolation can make it harder for us to fulfil our different needs and **it's only natural for us to feel low, angry, worried, or overwhelmed at times.**

When so much is out of our control, it can help to focus on the things we can do to build resilience and prepare ourselves to go the distance.

Here are 10 tips to help you get through self-isolation:

1. Acknowledge your experiences

Acknowledge your own experience of how this pandemic and self-isolation have affected you. Self-isolation presents each person with their own set of hurdles, so try not to compare your situation to that of others, and focus on what you can do to get through this. If you are caring for others, it can be easy to focus on how they're coping, and ignore your own emotions - so take time to check in with yourself.

Give yourself permission to feel what you feel, without criticising yourself or minimising how you feel. Keep an eye out for thoughts like "I'm being weak, I shouldn't be upset about this" or "It's not a big deal, others have it worse than me".

It is possible to maintain perspective and be empathic to the plight of others **and** acknowledge the difficulties of your own circumstances at the same time.

2. Identify and use your personal strengths

Each person has their unique strengths. **Take a moment to reflect on what your strengths are**, or on what others have told you they've noticed about you. If you're isolating with your household, remember that each person has strengths to contribute.

It might be a determined spirit, positive attitude, problem solving, creative thinking, sense of humour or resourcefulness. The list is endless.

While you haven't lived through a pandemic before, you may have been through and coped with difficult times in the past.

What personal strengths helped you then, or what could you muster up now to face these challenges?

You can play to the strengths you already have, or cultivate some new ones to help you encounter this marathon's unexpected twists and turns.

3. Build or maintain your resilience by taking extra care of your body

Having your energy tank be as full as possible will help you get through this difficult time, so make sure that you top it up regularly. Here's how:

Try to **create and maintain a positive routine** of healthy eating, good sleep, and adequate exercise, all of which provide the essential fuel for both your body and mind. If you're isolating with your household, work together to find ways of eating, sleeping and moving well.

Seek medical attention early for any health concerns, coronavirus-related or otherwise. If you have chronic physical or mental health issues, **continue to treat them via telehealth if possible.**

Don't forget to move. **Physical activity** can be a valuable tool to help you remain calm and continue to maximise your health during this time.

Be mindful of alcohol and drugs, which might provide a temporary sense of relief, but if taken to excess, could create more problems for you.

Take care of yourself so you can care for others. If you ignore your own needs, you risk burning out.

4. Keep stress at bay in helpful ways

Being in isolation can feel overwhelming, and if you've been diagnosed with the coronavirus, thinking too far ahead or wondering when it will end may make it harder to keep going. **Here's what you can do instead:**

▶ Focus on just getting to the next bit - like getting through one day at a time or breaking up tasks into smaller and more manageable parts.

▶ Keep your thoughts in check and challenge them so you can think in a more balanced, realistic, and helpful way.

▶ Structure your daily activities to give yourself a break from worry and shift your attention to something else.

▶ If you're stressed about a problem that can be fixed, don't delay taking manageable steps to address it. Putting things off tends to make anxiety worse.

▶ If you're isolating with your household, be aware of how individuals' stress levels can affect each other. Try to aim for a calm environment at home.

5. Create opportunities to experience positive emotions

It's natural for your mood to dip at different points throughout isolation. To prevent negativity from spiralling further, you can level out your mood by deliberately finding ways to increase positive emotions.

Every day, plan, schedule, and make sure you do:

☑ at least one activity that is **fun, pleasurable, relaxing or enjoyable**, and

☑ at least one activity that gives you a sense of **productivity, achievement, meaning or satisfaction**.

It doesn't matter how big or small these activities are, the important thing is that they bring you a sense of joy - even if only for a few minutes.

Isolation has probably gotten in the way of you doing the things you usually do. If you can, be flexible and creative in finding alternatives. This will help boost your mood so that you can persevere more easily. If you're caring for others, give yourself permission to do things that will lift your mood.

6. Keep an eye on what you watch, read, and follow

It's worrying to read statistics of infections, deaths, and outbreaks. It's distressing to see global images of sick people, overrun hospitals, and coffins. And it's tiring to be bombarded with people's arguments and opinions on social media.

There are two extremes of managing your exposure to the media, **both of which can be unhelpful in the long run**: avoiding the media altogether or checking for news obsessively.

Instead, try to **strike a balance** where you **consume enough so you can keep up-to-date, follow health advice, and modify your plans if needed**, but not so much that you feel completely drained and overwhelmed every time you turn on the TV or pick up your phone. If you're isolating with your household, you may like to decide together on when you'll watch the news for updates. Encourage one another to strike a balance with media consumption.

7. Balance what you think and talk about

Similarly, **try to strike a balance** between acknowledging the current reality of living in isolation and focusing on other important or meaningful aspects of your life. If you're isolating with your household, consider putting a limit on 'COVID chat'. Make a deliberate effort to talk about other things, like what you're looking forward to when isolation finishes.

It's normal to think and talk about COVID-19 a lot, especially when you're stuck in your home or a hotel, but try not to let it consume your thoughts or dominate all of your social interactions. **Consciously shifting your thoughts** and focusing on other things can help you stay level headed and preserve a feeling of normality.

8. Stay connected and continue to strengthen your relationships

It's natural to grieve the lost freedom to socialise, hang out, and see our loved ones face-to-face.

▶ If you are isolating with others, invest in strengthening relationships within your household. Spend quality time with them, plan enjoyable activities, and do what you can to take your mind off the difficulties you are all facing.

▶ Keep in touch via phone and video calls, regularly. Even if you aren't feeling particularly lonely, having regular contact with others can prevent you from feeling vulnerable to isolation.

▶ Be creative in how you socialise. Have a videocall with one friend, write letters to another, and organise group trivia or a virtual games night with family.

▶ If you're caring for others, prioritise 'me time' by connecting online/by phone, with those outside of your household when you can. Remember, self-care is not selfish.

9. Take extra good care of yourself while in lockdown

No matter how long you have to isolate for, not being able to leave your home or a hotel room can be incredibly challenging.

Be kind and compassionate with yourself and those you live with. If you are living alone, staying connected is even more crucial. **Take one day at a time, or even one hour at a time** when the going gets tough. If you're isolating with your household, keep in mind how your needs may differ to those around you.

Experiment with different strategies and keep doing what works well for you and your household. It is especially important that you invest in your mental health.

10. Cheer yourself on, but reach out for support when you need to

It's important to be kind and to cheer yourself on as you continue to endure this incredibly challenging and uncertain time.

Look for small wins each day, like tasks you've achieved or tricky situations you got through. Give yourself praise, reassurance, and encouragement regularly. If you're caring for others, don't hesitate to ask for extra support during this challenging time.

However, be honest with yourself if you're struggling. **No one is supposed to tough this out on their own**, so if you need a bit of a boost, don't delay reaching out for some support. It can be a bit easier to keep going when others are alongside you.

Share how you feel with a family member, friend, colleague, your GP or a mental health clinician, and do this early on so that you don't run out of steam on your own.

If you feel like you need more support coping with self-isolation:

- Explore our free online tools to help you cope with different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic here: https://covid19.thiswayup.org.au

- Make a time to chat with your GP - self-isolation can be extra hard to deal with if you have a pre-existing mental health condition, so work with your clinician around staying well and preventing relapse.

- Consider doing an online self-help course to learn practical strategies for dealing with stress, anxiety, and low mood - you can find a range of scientifically-supported courses here: https://thiswayup.org.au/courses/

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To access additional tools for coping with stress and anxiety during COVID-19, please visit our website.

https://thiswayup.org.au/covid-19/

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