

# Stay mentally fit during Covid-19

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have mood problems. The new realities of working from home, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues take time to get used to. Adapting to lifestyle changes and managing the fear of contracting the virus are challenging for all of us. They can be particularly difficult for people with mental health conditions.

It is important not only to consider our physical health during such challenging times but also to pay attention to our mental health. It is normal to feel worried, stressed, and anxious when we are facing uncertainty. However, the sooner we take care of our mental health, the healthier and better equipped we will be, to cope with the current situation. Let me share with you some tips during this challenging time.

## Tips for dealing with changes

Keep informed about the latest situation and news is important, however, too much will be harmful to ourselves. Minimise newsfeeds and reduce how much you watch, read, or listen to news that makes you feel anxious or distressed. We can set a specific time of the day to seek the latest information and focus on other activities other than that period. I suggest we get information, advice, and recommendations from local and international authorities only. Some false and misleading contents on social media may provoke negative feelings. Moreover, be aware of how much time you spend in front of a screen every day. Make sure that you take regular breaks from on-screen activities.

Although most of us are having new realities, we can make new daily routines. For example, having regular mealtime with healthy food, allocating time for working, resting, exercising and

doing things we enjoy. Keeping regular contact with people close to us by telephone and online channels can provide some support to each other.

If your family members or friends have mood problems, give support to them, and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening to them. I want to emphasise what we not to say things like *“it’s all in your head”*, *“calm down”* or *“stop stressing”* since feeling depressed or anxious is not a choice. On the other hand, we can use positive speech such as saying *“you are not alone”*, *“although I may not understand exactly how you feel, I care about you and want to help”* and *“tell me what I can do to help you”*. We can also encourage them to speak with a mental health professional.

## When to seek help?

Seek help from a mental health professional if you have these symptoms: dramatic changes in sleep and appetite, decline in personal care, recent social withdrawal, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed, an unusual drop in school, work, and social functioning, problems with concentration, memory or logical thought and speech, loss of motivation or desire to participate in any activity, suicidal idea or deliberate self-harm.

## How to manage children at home?

During the pandemic, many schools are temporarily closed and sending home classwork or posting assignments online for kids to complete. Parents do not need to spend seven or eight hours a day to instruct children, but it is a good idea to set aside some time each day to work on school assignments. This will add a little bit of structure to the day while also keeping students in a mindset that encourages learning.



Apart from completing school assignments, quick and easy kid crafts can be made using items that probably already have around the house. Creative interaction between parents and young children not only provides cognitive benefits but also creates a unique bonding experience. Moreover, these interactions usually bring fun for the entire family. While it is important to avoid crowds and maintain social distancing, getting outside in the open air is a great way for kids and their parents to expel some energy. Try going for a walk or taking a hike on those lovely days.

During this challenging time, I encourage everyone to express their own feelings and gratitude, pay more attention to ourselves and do not let the fear of being labelled with a mental illness prevent you from seeking help.

## About the author

Dr Ivan Chow is a family medicine specialist with interest in epidemiology and biostatistics. He has a passion in helping people in areas like chronic illness and mental health.