

10 ways to promote good psychological health in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are programmed to be alert to dangers and risks in our environments, so it's very common to have worries and concerns, especially in these unprecedented, demanding times. However, if we are not well equipped with resources to manage the various demands and resulting emotional strain, we may experience longer-term adverse health impacts.

There is a great deal of evidence which can help us develop tactics to manage the current threats and promote good psychological wellbeing. The supportive strategies below draw upon research insights to give some practical, evidence-based actions we can take to help us cope with the demands that Covid-19 has brought.

1. Take control

Autonomy (or freedom to control things around us) is one of our basic psychological needs. There are many things we cannot control at the moment, but also some things we can. Studies have shown that when people think things are uncontrollable, they don't try to work through a problem and develop solutions for themselves. So spend some time figuring out what you can and can't control. Try to let go of those things you cannot control, and take simple actions towards those things you can.

2. Think about others

When we feel under threat, different people engage in different types of coping responses. Research has shown that 'empathic responding' (where we cope by considering the impact on others) is the most useful one. This is because people who do that are more likely to carry out productive health behaviours – like washing their hands and using a face mask. So, try to consider how the pandemic is impacting other people, and what small things you can do to keep yourself and others safe.

3. Reach out and connect

Social connection and a sense of belonging are fundamental to our wellbeing. Friends, colleagues and family can all provide social support, and research shows that social support can 'buffer' (or protect) you from the negative impact of demands. Just reaching out and talking is very valuable at uncertain times, and increased effort will be needed to overcome the isolation felt due to social distancing. Both informational support (practical help and resources) and emotional support (sharing feelings and anxieties) are important.

Also, whilst tools like Zoom and MS Teams are helpful for keeping work communications going, don't underestimate the importance of informal communication. Whilst working from home, you will be missing out on all the side conversations you have in the lifts or in the queue for coffee, and these are the vital 'social glue' that hold teams together. Try and create new opportunities for this informal socialising e.g. quizzes, bake offs, fun challenges, or simply a WhatsApp group where people can access non-work related chat and support.

4. Work towards small goals

Feeling a sense of purpose and being able to achieve things is another one of our basic psychological needs. This may feel difficult currently, but even taking small steps towards a goal can give us this sense that we are learning new skills and getting things done. Pay attention to one thing at a time, as research shows that multi-tasking is less productive in the long run.

5. Focus on the present

When we feel under threat, we often think in terms of 'What if...?'s and find ourselves in a spiral of 'catastrophising', unhelpful thoughts. Paying attention to specifics can help you focus on the here and now, and studies have shown that raising your awareness of the present and 'savouring the moment' directly enhances wellbeing. Some people find mindfulness practices or meditation useful, or equally just taking a walk and noticing the world around you is a good start.

6. Set boundaries

Studies have shown that those who work remotely can suffer through a lack of boundary setting. Too much flexibility without discipline over routine, and work and personal life can merge together, meaning people do not benefit from switching off at the end of a busy day. Overuse of technology too, can lead people into the "always on" trap, and wellbeing and personal relationships can suffer. Try to maintain clear boundaries around your working location and times at home, communicate these clearly to your colleagues and your household.

7. Take breaks

Research has shown that taking breaks is crucial for productivity, and, particularly if you sit down to work, it's important to change your position regularly. Take a short break every 1-2 hours and try to focus on active or social connection, to give yourself some respite from work. It's also a good idea to stand up and stretch for 5 minutes every half hour. Try setting an alarm on your phone to remind you to take regular breaks.

8. Remember healthy behaviours

Keeping active as far as possible is important for your physical and mental health. Consciously plan in active time each day, even a walk to the shops or running up and down the stairs is good. Proximity to the kitchen and boredom can mean people snack more regularly, so keep an eye on your diet, keep well hydrated, and limit alcohol intake. Getting a good night's sleep is also crucial for wellbeing, so try to stick to a healthy bedtime routine and get at least 7 hours sleep per night.

9. See the positives

There are some positives that have come with the changes. e.g. a slower pace of life, an increased sense of community, benefits for the natural world. It's not always easy to see the upside, and different people will have different views. However, limiting your consumption of news and social media, and spending a little time each day to find the positives in your situation will help. Practicing gratitude like this has been shown to improve psychological health and wellbeing.

10. Practice compassion.

Be kind to yourself and other people. These are difficult and uncertain times for everyone so it's unlikely that we can perform at the same level as before all the time. Many people put unnecessary amounts of pressure on themselves and 'beat themselves up' if they don't manage to achieve what they set out to do. Try to reduce your expectations, give gentle advice to yourself like you would a good friend, and encourage others to do the same.

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www.babelprojects.co.uk

getintouch@babelprojects.co.uk