

Health Advice: 5 Mental Health Tips for Cabin Fever



By Kay Hutchison

Here in the UK, we are probably a bit ahead of the US in terms of the scale of the pandemic. Over the weekend in the UK, all but the essential shops have been closing, people are stocking up with supplies like never before and the Government is urging social distancing and self-isolation. We even have unprecedented daily news conferences with our Prime Minister live on the BBC at 5 P.M. each evening. Such is the increased focus on the spread of Covid-19, the pubs have all been shut – and that never happened in World War II. It's a worrying time and people are going to have to accept normal life is, at best, going to be on hold for a while – and 'by a while', it seems that might be 12 weeks, or even 12 months.

But it's perhaps also worth trying to keep some perspective during this stressful time. Clearly, we all need to heed the official advice on what we can do to reduce the transmission of the virus and to help protect our communities. We all need to stay home as much as possible and avoid unnecessary contact. But, perhaps in staying home, it's also a unique opportunity to change the way we think about our lives, to slow down, to go with the flow and, possibly, even help improve our mental health in the long term.

So, whilst fully acknowledging the challenges of the epidemic, here are a few pieces of health advice about making the most of where we are. Five therapies beginning with 'S':

SLOW DOWN

You now have a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to slow everything down. The strictures are gone, just let it all go. I'm not saying do nothing, I'm saying take everything at a slower pace – you have the time. Take time over the simple things in life. Eating, walking, cooking, sleeping (have a lie in if you feel like it). Find a gentler pace, one more fitting to today's new 'normal'. Perhaps turn off all the notifications on your devices and just check in with things a few times during the day.

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SORT YOUR DAY

Even if you aren't working and having to look after children it's worth trying to have a degree of routine, a schedule. Nothing too rigid but it's worthwhile to set out rough times for Working – Eating – Sleeping – Exercising – Relaxing – and having Fun. As part of that too, perhaps deciding to just catch up on the news once a day, any more might just be too depressing.

Even if you're still having to work, you're not likely to be expected to work 24/7 as before. Find a new routine that works in this new normal. Organise yourself so that you're not at a loose end, tempted to binge-watch box-sets or the news, or to eat incessantly. Schedule in a walk if you can, preferably in nature – but of course always at a safe distance from others. The government guidelines say 6 feet away. Agreeing times for preparing food and eating and drinking will pay dividends and don't forget your immunity levels will be best served by eating lots of health-giving fruit and vegetables, drinking lots of cleansing spring water with lemon juice and avoiding excessive alcohol consumption.

SILENCE

Be willing to welcome silence into your day, and even being completely alone. We've become used to incessant noise, music, traffic, phone conversations, but it's not a natural way of being. I once went on a ten-day silent retreat which, at first, was quite terrifying. Imagine being silent each moment of every day, no talking, not even looking at anyone, learning to eat in silence and learning to meditate for hours at a time. And yet, soon, I discovered that things settled, I slowed down, there was a sense of relief. I began to eat more slowly, chewing the food more appreciatively, enjoying the taste sensations, and helping my digestion by doing some of the work first. By the end of the retreat I had changed. I had experienced inner peace for the first time. I'm not advocating a prolonged retreat but instead, an attitude that doesn't see silence as a threat, as something lacking. More as something

new and pleasurable – a special time for yourself.

We tend to see being alone as a negative. If you are self-isolating, try to find joy in being on your own. Many people who live alone are probably at an advantage at this time as they are naturally used to being self-sufficient and enjoying their own company. Enjoy this moment in the world to do what you want, when you want. It won't last forever!

But, that said, of course we do all need connections. There are plenty of technologies to help: Facetime, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc, or even the old-fashioned telephone. Use them to reach out to others, at times like these they'll be even more willing than usual to hear from you, even if it's just a short call to say hello. In this last week I have seen a veritable explosion of opportunities to connect with people willing to help with this altered state of socialisation.

SLEEP

As the pressures of society are changing it's a great opportunity to make time for a good night's sleep. You've possibly always thought taking a slow, relaxed approach to going to bed was a good idea but never quite managed it. Now might be the time to try. Put down the digital devices in the early evening, ignore the news headlines, take a bath, go to bed with some light reading, perhaps even listening to a guided meditation or some soothing music. We seldom have the time to do these things when we're busy with work. Now you have a good reason – an excuse to give yourself some real attention.

SELF-HEALING

There's one simple, no-cost, practice we can do which will help us and our bodies through this time. Slow and gentle breathing. In for a count of 6, hold it for 2, then breath out for 6. Notice the cool, clean air as you breathe in, the warmer air as you breath out. Spend up to 20 minutes each day

actively calming the mind – the ‘child’s pose’ in yoga is very helpful, a posture that we used as children to calm ourselves and hide from the world.

And, just occasionally, perhaps be willing to give yourself a well-deserved break, just snuggling up with a favourite classic film (Little Miss Sunshine, Pretty Woman, It’s a Wonderful Life, Serendipity, The Vow).

Yes, it’s a worrying time, but there does seem to be light at the end of the tunnel. The crisis will pass. So, perhaps, it’s a great opportunity to do things differently and reconnect with your inner self. Give yourself a little therapy!

Kay Hutchison is the author of My Life in 37 Therapies, Published by RedDoor Books. With her work and personal life in crisis Kay Hutchison found herself living alone, with little connection with the outside world – no TV, no internet, no job, adrift from the comfort of family and home-life. At first she was very anxious, unable to sleep, constantly on edge. Over time, with the help of a range of therapies, she gradually recovered. This is her story. The audiobook narrated by Kay is also out this month on all major platforms. For information on mental health issues and the Covid epidemic see [Nami.org/covid-19](https://www.nami.org/covid-19) The National Alliance on Mental Illness is an organisation that’s set up to provide help and assistance to everyone in the US.