Conference Board of Canada Article

Insulating for Isolation: A Mental Health Checklist for Getting Through Quarantine

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The seasonal influenza that surfaces each year has a mortality rate of 0.01 per cent and kills tens of thousands. Many get a flu shot, hope for the best, and seldom give it another thought, unless they’re part of a vulnerable population (seniors, those with pre-existing conditions) in which any kind of illness has the potential to be life-threatening.

While COVID-19 is about 20 times the strength of influenza, the risk of dying is still statistically low for most of the population. However, this virus warrants prudence.

Potential quarantine risk

One age-old strategy for preventing the spread of a virus is to quarantine people at-risk of becoming infected or who are known to be infected. If it’s unclear who may be at risk, then community-targeted quarantines may be enforced, as well as self-quarantine efforts.

There is a lot of advice available online and in the media for how to protect against catching a virus like COVID-19. There is also advice and checklist for what food and household products to stockpile for a specific quarantine period.

“What’s not being talked about enough is how to insulate for isolation—how to prepare yourself emotionally and psychologically for a 14-day-plus quarantine. The number of days can vary, depending on the circumstances and situation and whether it’s self-quarantine or direction from health officials to minimize virus transmission.”

Without being mentally prepared, the reality of spending two or more weeks alone can be a frightening prospect. When was the last time you spent two weeks alone with little to no human interaction and lack of structure? Most of us take for granted our freedom to move and our social interactions. Taking that away for an extended period can lead to feelings of isolation—even in a remote work situation.

NASA has done research on the effects of isolation on human beings and concluded that to mitigate risk, it’s prudent to put in place cognitive strategies that can assist in reframing and managing the period of isolation. One core point is the longer a person feels isolated and struggling, the higher the risk this experience can have a negative impact on the mind and body.

Preparing for an extended period of isolation

In the movie Cast Away, Tom Hanks provides some insight into how a person in the absence of human interaction can become unsettled, anxious, and lonely. The difference between Hanks’ character and most who are quarantined is the person in quarantine often has some knowledge of when they will be “released,” provided they’re healthy enough.
Coaching tips for insulating for isolation

One way to build mental readiness and resiliency for isolation is to have a plan. The following are strategies to help you cope and to support your mental health to mitigate the negative impacts of feeling isolated.

- **Name the situation**—Acknowledge that you’re in a medical quarantine for X number of days and accept that your core job is to take care of your physical and mental health, and anyone else who happens to be with you. Ask questions if you’re unclear about the quarantine process. If you’re at home, call for medical assistance when necessary, such as if you’re having trouble breathing.
- **Structure your daily routine**—Write out your daily routine. Be specific when you’ll get up, go to bed, eat, shower, dress and clean. Keep your mind focused and busy by controlling what you can.
- **Set daily goals**—If you’re feeling well, set daily goals such as writing a letter, reading a book, watching a documentary or doing some work, or have a daily purpose that requires your attention. Evaluate your success, and if you slip, refocus and start the next day with a new goal.
- **Daily journal**—Writing out thoughts and feelings is an excellent way to process them.
- **Move**—Exercise is helpful for assisting the body to cope with stress.
- **Humour**—Laughter is great medicine. Look for old movies and opportunities that can help you laugh and have a bit of fun.
- **Positive self-talk**—It can be easier to have negative thinking than positive. Focus energy on positive thinking and cut out negative thoughts. Practice being grateful for what you have that’s good for you.
- **Meditation**—One way to relax the mind is to practice meditation. It’s easy to learn, and wonderful for mental health.
- **Make daily social connection dates**—Set times for when you’ll Facetime, Skype, talk and text people you care about. A core pillar for mental health is social connections.
- **Leverage support systems**—If you’re struggling or having a hard time and are not sure who to talk to, call an employee and family assistance department, if available, or a crisis or nurse line to share your feelings. It’s important to remember that just because you may not know the other person on the line doesn’t mean they don’t care.

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