

It works for astronauts on the space station and in Antarctica, why not in COVID-19 quarantine?

The psychology of isolated and confined environments (ICES) on how to survive a challenging period of confinement.

We all respond differently to isolation at home. Whether you're an introvert and relish the opportunity to stay in, or an extrovert who dreads the idea of confinement, isolation poses a challenge for us all, especially over extended periods. This is not surprising as humans are fundamentally social creatures. In these times, when a haven can quickly turn into a prison, it's important to think ahead about implementing a variety of strategies as possible to keep us stimulated, relaxed and connected with others – i.e. healthy. We can look to research done to support the work of Mars researchers, Antarctic expeditioners and Submariners - who spend weeks to years in isolated and confined environments - for insight into tried and tested coping methods. While it is a well-studied phenomenon, forethought and preparation is a key element to successfully overcoming the struggle of isolation in any context. Ultimately remember – if you're finding it harder than usual to cope with what's going on around you, this is a normal reaction to an abnormal environment.

This list is designed so as time goes on, you can keep coming back to try new ideas or revisit methods you haven't used for a while, to make isolation an easier and a potentially transformative experience.

Self-care – If you take care of yourself, you're prepared to weather the storm.

- Sleep, diet and exercise routines stabilize your brain's circadian rhythm, reduce low moods and build energy and motivation towards tasks which make you feel good.
- Use YouTube to do a yoga/gym work out in your lounge room at a regular time. If permitted, go for a brisk walk/run around the block.
- Eat the healthiest food you can get and try to have some diversity in your meals.
- Sleep is the best measure of stress. Read up and act on "[Sleep Hygiene](#)". Negative changes in your sleeping pattern like wakeups or day/night switching can be warning signs to use more self-care strategies or get in contact with someone for help.
- Meditation is powerful stuff. Try out *Headspace*, *Calm*, *Smiling Mind* or *Insight Timer* on your phone to start learning.

Social contact – We all need time with others.

- We are social creatures. Video call your family and friends regularly. Have regular group chats via webcam. Walk them around your house, show them what you're doing. Texting is good, but seeing faces is better.
- Need social activities? Use the internet. Play multi-player games, online board games with family, watch movies together while texting/webcamming to share the experience. Games are more mentally stimulating than movies as they are an interactive experience.
- Join online communities even for the short term. Get involved with a **Reddit** community you find interesting. There is a community (or "sub") for everything you could possibly have an interest in. Join a **Meetup** online group and find people to chat with.
- **IMPORTANT: If you're isolated with others, be extra considerate of each other.** Even partners, kids & best friends. We all need breaks from each other and tempers get short, especially when stressed and stuck together 24/7. Be compassionate, talk out conflicts and have time apart even if it's just doing activities in separate rooms. Being stuck together can be as hard as being isolated, even for married couples and astronauts– we all struggle with this - it's completely normal. Part of managing this is also recognizing and asserting your own needs, as well as making a space for others to do the same. This allows everyone to have an understanding of expectations of one another, and less likely to inadvertently annoy those around us (or be annoyed by them!)

Positive distraction – Spend your time doing things you enjoy to give that time meaning.

Researchers have consistently shown that when an activity is perceived as meaningful it has powerful positive effects on our mood and wellbeing.

- Use passive media to relax (TV shows, books) and active media to keep yourself stimulated.
- Looking for something with a bit more positivity than watching the news? **TED Talks** are a great way to see humanities ability to better itself and overcome obstacles.
- Learn a new skill. With **YouTube, Coursera** & the rest of the internet it's easy & doesn't need to cost you anything. Always wanted to learn how to cook? Get the basics from **YouTube** videos then jump on one of **Reddit's** cooking "subs" (communities) and ask questions of others with the same interest. Or what about Drawing? Painting? Making electronic music? Sewing? World history? Coding? Juggling? Card Tricks? Playing rock guitar? Hobbies which require a single item (like a guitar) are great. The list is endless, and you can learn it off the internet!
- Journaling can be really helpful to give this once in a lifetime experience meaning for you. It can also provide an interesting point to reflect on in the future once this situation has passed.
- Online games aren't just for kids. There are phone apps like **Words with friends** or **Chess with friends** letting you share a game with a friend from afar. Play a whole game or a move per day. **Steam** also has lots of electronic board games for download. Never really played computer games? Try **Stardew Valley** on your phone. Or if you want to avoid computers use your webcam to play a card game, boardgame or charades.
- Do those longstanding jobs you've put off. Have you been wanting to sort out that mess in the garage for years? Or is this the chance to finally write that article? Feeling productive is very protective for your mood at the end of the day. Try writing a "to-do" list and tick things off along the way for that extra sense of satisfaction. (Tip: Make sure there is an 'easy win' each day to keep the motivation up if some of the tasks are going to take longer to get done).
- **Put it all together. Don't invest in just ONE of these.** Pick several activities for your day. Use passive media for breaks. Inject online social contact in the middle. Keep a vague routine (mainly sleeping/eating/exercising) but mix it up to keep life interesting. Don't let your routine become so fixed that it becomes stale. That stale feeling means, "change it up!"

Minimize static environments – Bring change into your environment.

- Make your environment reflect how you WANT to feel, rather than how you DO feel.
- Is it too quiet? Leave music on and experiment with new types of music. Miss the sounds of people? Turn on the TV or radio instead and leave it on in the background. Try not to only watch the News though.
- Spend time in a Garden or on a Balcony. Fix it up, add a vegetable patch or flowers. Even an indoor house-plant has benefits! Green scenery improves your mood and cognition. Even just put a chair out there and get that little bit of wind on your face. Returned astronauts comment on how much they missed the simple sensation of wind. There is increasing research about the value of Vitamin N (nature)!
- Sight, smell, taste, touch...try to find new inputs for each of your senses.
- **Keep your environment feeling "new" in some way.** Just moving the furniture around, reorganizing shelves, changing the temperature or switching art around on the walls can help battle the "sameness" which takes a toll when you're cooped up for long periods.

Supporting Kids!! – Managing Children in isolation seems overwhelming but with a few ideas you'll be one step ahead of them. It doesn't even require expensive technology.

- If you're stuck at home with kids, feeling in control is key. Use a soft routine if needed. Morning & afternoon activities with break times like they have at school.
- Move activities into the garden or onto the balcony if you can to change up the "sameness".
- Build a fort! Building materials can be anything, let their imagination guide their design.
- Art can be indoors or outdoors. Get paints and large cardboard boxes. Let the kids create their own town complete with stores, banks, houses in the lounge room.
- That same paint can be used to create murals on old bedsheets or tablecloths. Turn the dining table into "art space" for a few hours a day.

- Challenge them to write a story! Younger kids can draw a picture about their character's adventure. Then put it all together into a 'book' to remember this time together.
- Kids love to cook. Teach them how to make something yum and then everyone can enjoy the product! Decorate food with them as well. Two activities for the price of one!
- Family movie time never gets old.
- There are many kid-friendly online gaming communities (**Minecraft, Roblox**) for children of all ages. Unfamiliar with them? Read the parental recommendations or better yet, why not try playing with them? **Minecraft** is like **LEGO** but in a computer game and is as engaging for hundreds of thousands of adults as it is for children. Just don't forget to put in place boundaries and balance with lots of no-screen time.
- Google search "kids online courses", "kids educational games" or "printable board games".
- Set up an internet party with your children's friends via webcam. They can show each other their art projects, log into an online game together or even play charades. Exploring and playing together online is a great way to elicit a sense of "normality"
- Physical movement is just as important for kids! Ask your kids to join you in your daily yoga session, play a ball game in the garden, get out that old skipping rope, or YouTube kids workout sessions.
- If you have a partner at home, try to allocate designated "you time" for each of you to allow space for self-care
- Be kind to yourself – it's okay if your routine is softer than normal, or there is slightly more screen time, or there are days when the kids (and you!) don't get out of their pyjamas. Set the emotional tone for the household by being flexible, whilst maintaining appropriate boundaries.

What about when things go back to normal?

The likelihood is that you're already looking forward to 'when things go back to normal' – aren't we all? It's tempting to think that once restrictions are relaxed, things will go back exactly the way they were. However, it's unlikely that this will be the case. The large-scale and prolonged impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will change aspects of the ways we function at an individual, relationship, and societal level. Again, this is not a bad thing – but we need to be ready that things will have changed, and in ways we might not have expected. It might take a while for people to feel comfortable mixing freely again. Or, we might find ourselves being overloaded by the increase in noise and activity that has been absent for so long. We may even find that some of the interests that we used to have in common with friends and family have changed. Don't be worried by this. We will find a way to negotiate these challenges, and maybe some of the changes will stick – and for the better!

Final thoughts and resources

For more information on positive gaming for mental health, visit <https://checkpointorg.com>

If you find yourself stuck and in a low mood, get moving - go have a shower or engage in some physical activity. The tactile stimulation/activation is good for forcing your brain to change gear. Once you're clean and dressed, or have got back from your workout, look at this list again for a different idea or just get some fresh air out a window, stand outside or go for a walk.

Most of all, be kind to yourself, listen to your body and when it's starting to feel "dull, static and depressing" or there's too much "sameness" - do something new - try a new strategy and keep presenting your brain with "newness" to keep it engaged and happy.

Never forget that help is out there!

Mental Health resources in Australia:

- Lifeline Australia 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 <https://www.beyondblue.org.au>
- CranaPLUS 1800 805 391 <https://crana.org.au/>
- Black Dog Institute <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au>
- Mood Gym – Online cognitive behavioural program <https://moodgym.com.au>
- [This Way Up – Online cognitive behavioural program https://thiswayup.org.au/](https://thiswayup.org.au/) (free until XXX)
- Centre for Clinical Interventions <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself>

(Checkpointorg.com has a great list of international resources as well)

One final point - the research is really clear – through challenge and adversity there is opportunity for growth. This challenge is one that can help us develop new skills, explore new interests, and reconnect with ourselves and our values. It won't be easy, but it can be transformative.

Good luck to you all out there! :)

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