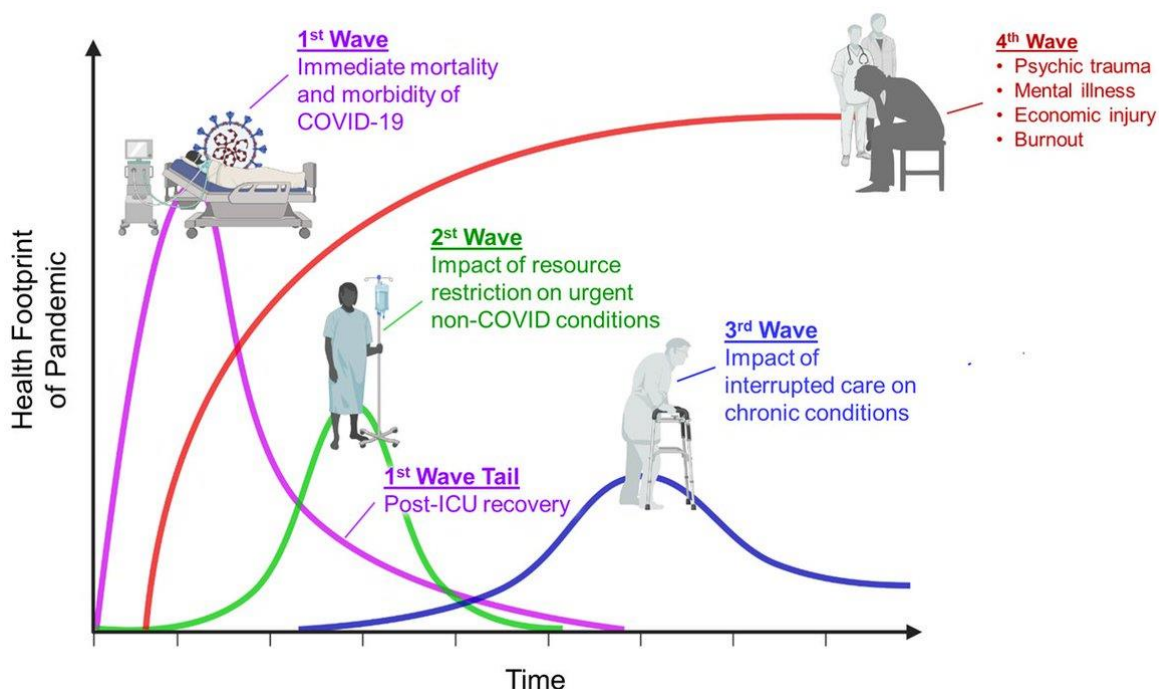


MENTAL WELL-BEING IN THE TRANSITION PHASE OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic put ordinary life on pause in March 2020. Stay-inside for most families, the elderly and the vulnerable, voluntary lock-down for residents in institutions, travel restrictions, school closures, shop and business closings, a complete ban on group activities such as sports and fitness activities, cinemas, restaurants and bars, and even church services and rigorous social distancing have created unprecedented levels of social isolation in Malta and across the globe. Fear and uncertainty placed additional stress on an already anxious and sensitized population. The practices recommended by Public Health Authorities aligned with advice of the European Centre for Disease Control, the World Health Organization and numerous colleagues in public health institutes abroad were necessary to protect the community, particularly the most vulnerable individuals.

The outcome is for all to see, with a strategic test, trace, isolate, treat and support approach that has achieved outstanding recognition at local and international level. However, as in any pandemic, beyond the infection control process there are well-researched associated changes in the entire health system and serious financial implications that can have profound consequences for mental health and well-being.



Traumatic or stressful experiences, such as what we have lived through during the past few months, put individuals at greater risk for not only poor physical

health but poor mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. You may notice that you or others around you have become more edgy, irritable, or angry; helpless; nervous or anxious; sad, depressed or even hopeless. You may find yourself frequently worrying about little things or possible calamities. Sleep may be disrupted and less refreshing. Practising social distancing and wearing a mask or visor when you go out may leave you feeling lonely or isolated or continuously tense and anxious. You may notice that you have less patience than before, even with loved ones.

Those who are especially vulnerable to a possible COVID-19 infection - older individuals, persons with disabilities and people with medical comorbidities or immune-compromised systems—who needed to be especially stringent in following guidelines from the health authorities, may be the very people whose mental health and well-being is suffering the most. Individuals with a pre-existing mental health condition, are also at heightened risk for poorer mental health outcomes as a result of missed appointments or failure to seek help due to fear from coronavirus infection, or simply because services were not available, or so perceived.

It is therefore now very important that as a population, we learn how to protect our mental health and well-being during this transition phase of COVID-19, while following the guidelines set by health authorities to protect our physical health. It is also important to acknowledge that the ever-changing daily situation both locally and abroad can be more stressful for some. Here are some basic strategies that can be used during these challenging times to protect your mental health and that of the people around you.

Create structure

- Whether you are still at home or returning to work/school, create a routine schedule for you and your family whilst allowing space for some flexibility
- Feelings of uncertainty can lead to increased mental health symptoms.
- Limit the amount of time you spend browsing the internet, using social media, watching, reading, or listening to news on COVID 19.
- Get your information on the coronavirus transition from trusted sources, once or twice a day and avoid speculation.
- Widen your interests. Make space for activities and conversations that have nothing to do with the corona virus.

Maintain your physical health

- Protect your sleep. Good quality, sufficient sleep not only helps to support your immune system but also helps you to better manage stress and regulate emotions. Adults should aim for 7–9 hours, while children and teenagers need even more.
- Try to eat at regular times and opt for nutritious foods whenever possible. Some people may crave junk food or sugary snacks and be tempted to snack mindlessly when stressed or bored, and others may skip meals altogether. Experiment with new recipes and surprise yourself and/or your family.
- Take up or maintain an exercise routine. Exercise and fresh air are extremely helpful. Use exercise equipment that you may have at home, if you cannot find time to exercise outdoors and/or are still cautious to return to the gym. Make sure that at the very least you find time to take a brisk walk outside once or twice a week. Enjoy swimming with your family away from crowds.

Support--and create--your community

- Support those around you – family, relatives, friends, neighbours. There are many options for connecting that we have discovered during the difficult days of the pandemic, including video conferencing software. During this time of transition, connecting face-to-face (online), calling or texting can support those who are finding the transition phase of COVID-19 challenging. However, you may now visit your vulnerable relatives, from time to time, ensuring that you follow public health advice, practising good respiratory and hand hygiene, staying at least 2 meters away, and wearing a visor or mask where indicated.
- The pandemic crisis was a time for community cohesion and social solidarity. Initiatives such as grocery deliveries and running errands for the vulnerable, community building and volunteering should continue and expand. Science has repeatedly shown that volunteering not only helps others, but yourself as well with beneficial effects on mental health. Inform yourself about organizations, local councils and parishes that may require volunteers to help others. Direct contact with your neighbours who live alone in your community can make a great difference to them. Wear a mask or visor whenever this is indicated. Elderly and vulnerable volunteers need to avoid large gatherings and direct contact with many people.

- Talk to children and grandchildren honestly about what is going on in an age-appropriate manner. Many weeks away from schooling and friends has had its effect on children. Help children to express their feelings, emotions and creativity in a positive way, whether playing, drawing, or helping out with household chores. Most importantly be there for them. They will need to know that there will at least be something they can be sure of in this still uncertain reality.

Take care of your spirit and inner self

- You may find support and solace in opportunities for worship. If prayer is an important part of your life, make time for it. Stay connected to your religious community through phone calls, emails, and video chats even now that regular worship services have resumed. Do not feel bad about yourself if you still feel afraid to attend or find the measures you need to comply with too much. This is a very normal feeling. Give yourself time to adjust.
- Meditation, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and other mindfulness or relaxation techniques discovered during the pandemic will still be useful. Mindfulness can help lower blood pressure, reduce stress, support your immune system, and protect brain health.

Continue or seek out social care and mental health treatment if you feel you need it

- If you are already in treatment for any mental health disorder, continue with your current plan. Make sure you have ongoing access to any medications you need. Do not stop prescription medication. If you are not feeling that you are doing well or if you have missed on appointments, make contact with your caring team. Ask about video or phone call appointments for follow-up or therapy if you still find it anxious to visit them in person.
- Be aware of symptoms of depression in yourself, in relatives and friends, such as persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, or changes in sleep and weight.
- Be aware that prolonged periods of heightened stress such as the COVID-19 pandemic can cause anxiety with symptoms such as shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, digestive issues, fatigue, and even muscle pain. Symptoms may vary in intensity and severity.
- Social distancing may make it difficult to see symptoms of depression or anxiety in others, so use every opportunity to reach out or helping others to reach out. Friends, family, and colleagues may be struggling with a

problem which may be more difficult to notice. Consider seeking or recommending professional mental health if indicated. Options include speaking to the family doctor or the health centre or contacting helpline 1770.

- Do not use drugs (including prescription drugs) or alcohol as self-medication for stress or anxiety. Look for help and support if necessary.
- Child abuse or intimate partner violence may have worsened in the past months. Contact a support service if you have experienced this.

Conclusion

Remember that emotions are normal reactions to circumstances. Accept that persons react in different ways to emotions and stress and adjusting to new realities can take time and energy. It is important to prioritize and focus most on those matters that require your urgent attention. It is okay to postpone decisions that you are not ready to take.

Be kind to yourself and others. Try to stay positive and use your time well. Continue to focus on your children, spouse, and loved ones. Surround yourself with positive people. Do not forget new skills and ways of working that you have learnt. Find new or continue with your hobbies and give yourself time to relax and be creative.

It can be hard to think past what your COVID-19 experience has been, but now is the time to get on with your life whilst still taking precautions. Practise good respiratory and hand hygiene, wear a mask or visor when indicated, and respect social distances. Follow public health advice and guidelines. Keep yourself updated from trusted sources as you get on with your life. The transition phase of COVID-19 is an opportunity to adjust your lifestyle in the way which you feel is best and safest for you. Do not feel pressurised. Keep your feet on the ground but do not be afraid to daydream about the future and what is on the horizon. Remember that this is temporary, and things will get better.