

MENTAL WELL-BEING AT TIMES OF COVID-19

As the coronavirus pandemic has unfolded, ordinary life has been put on pause. Stay-inside for elderly and vulnerable, travel restrictions, school closings, shop and business closings, and social distancing have created a level of social isolation previously unseen in Malta and across the globe. Fear has placed additional stressors 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 are necessary and designed to protect the community, particularly the most vulnerable individuals. However, this pandemic and the associated changes, including serious financial implications, can have profound consequences for our mental health.

Traumatic or stressful experiences 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 are more edgy, irritable, or angry; helpless; nervous or anxious; hopeless, sad, or depressed. Sleep may be disrupted and less refreshing. Practicing social distancing may leave you feeling lonely or isolated. If you are at home with children, you may have less patience than before.

Those who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19—older individuals and people with medical comorbidities or immune-compromised systems—who need to be especially stringent in following guidelines from the health authorities, may be the very people whose mental health may suffer the most. Individuals with a pre-existing mental health condition, such as an anxiety disorder, are also at heightened risk for poor mental health outcomes as a result of coronavirus.

It is important that as a population, we learn how to protect our mental health during this stressful and ever-changing situation, while also following the guidelines set by health authorities to protect our physical health. Here are some strategies that can be used during these challenging times to protect your and others' mental health.

Create structure

- Create a daily schedule for you and your family. Feelings of uncertainty can lead to increased mental health symptoms.

- Try to limit the amount of time you spend watching, reading, or listening to the news. Get your information on the coronavirus outbreak from a trusted source, once or twice a day.
- Make space for activities and conversations that have nothing to do with the outbreak.

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.
- Maintain an exercise routine. Exercise at home or try using an online workout video. Use exercise equipment that you may have at home.

Support--and create--your community

- Create a virtual support group and check in with those around you – family, relatives, friends, neighbours. There are many options for connecting, including video conferencing software, such as Skype, Zoom, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Facetime. During this time of isolation, connecting face-to-face (online) is more important than ever. If you can't stream, then calling and texting is important.
- Crises offer a time for community cohesion and social solidarity, and volunteering is one way to not only help others, but yourself as well. Science has repeatedly shown that volunteering can improve mental health. Check out organizations and local councils that may require volunteers to help others. Direct contact with your neighbours who live alone in your community can save lives.
- If you have children, talk to them honestly about what is going on in an age-appropriate manner. Help kids express their feelings and creativity in a positive way, whether playing, drawing, or helping out with household chores.

Take care of your spirit

- You may find support and solace in opportunities for worship in streaming or recorded services. 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.
- Try meditation, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or another mindfulness or relaxation technique. Check out internet or phone apps for guided meditation exercises. 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 are currently in mental health treatment, continue with your current plan, being mindful of approaches to minimize contact with others. Consider reaching out to a mental health professional even if you haven't before. Make sure you have ongoing access to any medications you need.
- Ask about video or phone call appointments for follow-up or therapy. Regulations have been temporarily relaxed to allow telephone consultation and video conferencing. Contact your GP or mental health team and ask about remote services.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol, particularly if you have a pre-existing mental health or substance use disorder. Look for support if necessary.
- The need for social distancing may make it difficult to see symptoms of depression in others. The opportunities that we usually have to notice that friends, family, and colleagues are struggling with a problem are no longer there.
- Child abuse or intimate partner violence may worsen. Contact your support team regularly. Be aware of symptoms of depression, such as persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, or changes in sleep and weight.

Conclusion

Remember that the emotions you may be experiencing are normal reactions to difficult circumstances. Accept that things are different right now and everyone is adjusting. Prioritize what's most important and know that it's okay to let some things go right now.

Be kind to yourself and others. Try to stay positive and use this time to spend more time with your children or spouse, try things you've been putting off, such as taking an online class, learning a new skill, or getting in touch with your forgotten hobbies and your creativity.

It can be hard to think past what is going on today, let alone in a week or in six months. Do not be afraid to daydream about the future and what is on the horizon. Remember that this is temporary, and things will return to normal.

Remember Help is available 24/7– Call 1770 Mental wellbeing Helpline