

Keeping Your Distance to Stay Safe

From the American Psychological Association



With the number of COVID-19 cases increasing every day, psychologists offer insights on how to separate yourself from others, while still getting the social support you need.

Around the world, public officials are asking people who have contracted or been exposed to the new coronavirus to practice social distancing, quarantine or isolation measures in an effort to slow disease's spread.

Social distancing means keeping a safe distance (approximately 6 feet) from others and avoiding gathering spaces such as schools, churches, concert halls and public transportation.

Quarantine involves avoiding contact with others if a person has been exposed to coronavirus to see if they become ill.

Isolation involves separating an individual who has contracted COVID-19 to prevent them from spreading it to others.

Spending days or weeks at home with limited resources, stimulation and social contact can take a toll on mental health. Though controlled studies on interventions to reduce the psychological risks of quarantine and isolation are lacking, psychologists have established best practices for handling these challenging circumstances.

Here is a summary of research on social distancing, quarantine and isolation, as well as recommendations on how people can cope if asked to take such measures.

What to Expect

People asked to stay home due to illness, exposure or active community spread of COVID-19 will likely be cut off from their regular routines for at least two weeks, the estimated incubation period for the virus.

Common sources of stress during this period include a drop in meaningful activities, sensory stimuli and social engagement; financial strain from being unable to work; and a lack of access to typical coping strategies such as going to the gym or attending religious services.

Psychologists' research has found that during a period of social distancing, quarantine or isolation, you may experience:

Fear and anxiety

You may feel anxious or worried about yourself or your family members contracting COVID-19 or spreading it to others. It's also normal to have concerns about obtaining food and personal supplies, taking time off work or fulfilling family care obligations. Some people may have trouble sleeping or focusing on daily tasks.

Depression and boredom

A hiatus from work and other meaningful activities interrupts your daily routine and may result in feelings of sadness or low mood. Extended periods of time spent at home can also cause feelings of boredom and loneliness.

Anger, frustration or irritability

The loss of agency and personal freedom associated with isolation and quarantine can often feel frustrating. You may also experience anger or resentment toward those who have issued quarantine or isolation orders or if you feel you were exposed to the virus because of another person's negligence.

Stigmatization

If you are sick or have been exposed to someone who has COVID-19, you may feel stigmatized by others who fear they will contract the illness if they interact with you.

Vulnerable Populations

People with pre-existing mental health conditions and health-care workers helping with the response to the coronavirus may have an increased risk of experiencing psychological distress when they engage in social distancing, quarantine or isolation. People with disabilities who require specialized diets, medical supplies, assistance from caregivers and other accommodations are also at risk for psychological challenges

during a pandemic because of the increased difficulties in receiving the care they require.

How to Cope

Fortunately, psychological research also points to ways to manage these difficult conditions. Before social distancing, quarantine or isolation orders are enacted, experts recommend planning ahead by considering how you might spend your time, who you can contact for psychosocial support and how you can address any physical or mental health needs you or your family may have.

Limit news consumption to reliable sources

It's important to obtain accurate and timely public health information regarding COVID-19, but too much exposure to media coverage of the virus can lead to increased feelings of fear and anxiety. Psychologists recommend balancing time spent on news and social media with other activities unrelated to quarantine or isolation, such as reading, listening to music or learning a new language. Trusted organizations—including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the World Health Organization—are ideal sources of information on the virus.

Create and follow a daily routine

Maintaining a daily routine can help both adults and children preserve a sense of order and purpose in their lives despite the unfamiliarity of isolation and quarantine. Try to include regular daily activities, such as work, exercise or learning, even if they must be executed remotely. Integrate other healthy pastimes as needed.

Stay virtually connected with others

Your face-to-face interactions may be limited, but psychologists suggest using phone calls, text messages, video chat and social media to access social support networks. If you're feeling sad or anxious, use these conversations as an opportunity to discuss your experience and associated emotions. Reach out to those you know who are in a similar situation. Facebook groups have already formed to facilitate communication and support among individuals asked to quarantine.

Relying on pets for emotional support is another way to stay connected. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend restricting contact with pets if you contract COVID-19 until the risks of transmission between humans and animals are better understood.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Get enough sleep, eat well and exercise in your home when you are physically capable of doing so. Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way to cope with the stresses of isolation and quarantine. If needed, consider telehealth options for psychotherapy. If you already have a psychologist, contact them ahead of a potential quarantine to see if they can continue your sessions using phone-based or online delivery.

Use psychological strategies to manage stress and stay positive

Examine your worries and aim to be realistic in your assessment of the actual concern as well as your ability to cope. Try not to catastrophize; instead focus on what you can do and accept the things you can't change. One way to do this is to keep a daily gratitude journal. You may also choose to download smartphone applications that deliver mindfulness and relaxation exercises. For example, PTSD Coach is a free application developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD and the Department of Defense's National Center for Telehealth and Technology. It contains coping and resilience resources such as exercises for deep breathing, positive imagery, muscle relaxation and more.

Focusing on the altruistic reasons for social distancing, quarantine or isolation can also help mitigate psychological distress. Remember that by taking such measures, you are reducing the possibility of transmitting COVID-19 and protecting those who are most vulnerable.

What Happens Next

Following a period of quarantine or isolation, you may feel mixed emotions, including relief and gratitude, frustration or anger towards people who worry you may infect them with the virus, or even feelings of personal growth and increased spirituality. It's also normal to feel anxious, but if you experience symptoms of extreme stress, such as ongoing trouble sleeping, inability to carry out daily routines, or an increase in alcohol or drug use, seek help from a health-care provider.