



Strategies for Healthy Living Through COVID-19

Emily Culligan, B.A., Tyshawn Thompson, B.A., Tracie Pasold, Ph.D.,
Lindsay Phillips, Psy.D., ABPP

Self-quarantining during the COVID-19 pandemic has been influential on our lives in many ways. Staying inside of our homes with the exception of essential travel for take-out or grocery supplies has compromised many of our daily routines and severely constricted our social lives. During times of increased stress, we may tend to engage in unhealthy ways of existing as part of attempting to cope. The strategies that tend to be unhealthy are ones that offer quick relief, which is what makes them so appealing. However, these options typically offer only temporary relief, making it necessary to engage in them repeatedly which will be detrimental in the long run. Trying our best to maintain healthy functioning across domains of life is imperative in maintaining a sense of normalcy and positive well-being which will aid in limiting the negative impact as we make our way through this difficult time.

There are many areas that encompass a healthy lifestyle, including physical activity, eating habits, food preparation, and self-care. Here are some tips you may find useful as you navigate maintaining a healthy lifestyle while quarantined.

Physical Activity/Exercise:

You may now find it difficult to engage in physical activity following the closures of exercise facilities such as gyms, yoga studios, and other athletic centers. This might mean that you no longer have access to your preferred exercise equipment, the setting you typically exercise in, or exercise classes. Creativity and flexibility in making modifications to allow continuation of physical activity can be helpful during this time. Try some online workout videos or go for a walk or hike outside. Simply getting outside can help contribute to positive feelings too. You may even try out a new type of physical activity and find that you enjoy it. Being sedentary has negative implications for both physical and psychological health, so get moving!

Eating Habits:

You might find yourself engaging in “emotional eating,” using food as a coping skill during these times of great stress and emotions. Many are struggling with increased boredom, which is another experience that triggers eating. Eating influences brain chemistry, giving us temporary relief from emotion states which is one reason we indulge in this behavior. Below are some strategies to maintain eating more effectively:

- Attending to hunger cues is key. If you are feeling hungry, take a few moments to determine what is driving the hunger. When did I last eat? Is this hunger sensation being driven by emotions rather than by my physical need for food? Am I sufficiently hydrated? Need for hydration can cue hunger sensations. Am I tired? Fatigue can lead to eating to increase energy.
- Keep your meal and snack times at regular intervals throughout the day to prevent becoming overly hungry. Utilize portion control while eating.
- Try to identify some alternative behaviors or activities that will help you cope with your emotions rather than eating, such as working on a puzzle, going for a walk, taking a bath, or

watching some television. Distraction from nonphysical hunger sensations is an effective way to avoid eating. Devise a list of distracting activities that you find rewarding and entertaining. Be creative and open-minded!

- If you feel that you need to eat to cope with your emotions or stress, it may be helpful to identify what type of food you are craving before you begin eating (i.e., crunchy, salty, sweet, etc.) to prevent over-eating of many different foods in an attempt to soothe an unidentified craving. In doing so, try to only eat enough to satisfy this urge. You might find it beneficial to portion a certain amount of the food you desire.

Food Preparation:

Cooking and baking are fun activities that you may use during this time, especially if you have children who enjoy cooking and baking. This can be a very enjoyable and positive activity for you. Consider choosing recipes with healthy ingredients in them. When baking, you may consider freezing some of the baked goods so you do not feel obligated to consume them all at once. Utilize appropriate portioning when cooking and baking. It may help to half recipes if you are cooking or baking for only yourself or yourself and one other person.

Self-Care:

It is important to be realistic in your expectations. Strive to devote time to each of the areas of your life, such as work tasks, home tasks, physical activity, and down time. At the end of each day, acknowledge what you have achieved and be kind to yourself in accepting what you have not gotten done. Throughout the day, attend to your emotions by acknowledging them and attempting to process and express them in an effort to be proactive in giving them the attention they need. Remind yourself that self-quarantining and social distancing during a pandemic do not require you to be productive during this time. There is no obligation to change your weight, go on a diet, or engage in excessive exercise simply because you have more free time available. Allow yourself to occasionally indulge in your cravings and eat something that simply tastes good. Allow yourself to sit down and watch some television. Although you likely have lost some of the structure of your typical day, work to maintain healthy routines. Remember that this is a temporary situation and your sense of normalcy will return. Eat meals and snacks when you would if it were a typical day. Engage in physical activity as you usually do and consider new physical activities if ones you used to enjoy are not available. Try to keep these aspects of your life as “normal” as possible. Engage in self-talk that is encouraging and prevents hopelessness or helplessness, such as, “Hang in there; this too shall pass!”

For more information and tips on mental health challenges during the pandemic, see

<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/>

The above suggestions are not intended to substitute for professional help. One resource on healthy eating can be accessed here: <https://nutrition.org/making-health-and-nutrition-a-priority-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/>. If you struggle with an eating disorder, the current situation can be exceptionally challenging. Make seeking support a priority. The following link provides options for coping and assistance: <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/covid-19-resources-page>

If you feel you would benefit from assistance in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our [Psychologist Locator](#). During this time of social distancing, many psychologists are working with people remotely via videoconferencing.