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## Maintaining Peace of Mind in the Time of COVID-19

It's been three weeks since the state of California issued "shelter in place" orders to its 40 million residents. Since then thirty-nine other states have followed suit, bringing the total number of states with stay at home orders to 40. It is estimated so far that 297,000 million US citizens have been ordered to stay in--a whopping 90 percent of the country's population.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has made the unimaginable, a reality, in a very short period of time. The experiences we are all sharing can only be described as novel, as in the adjective meaning new, interesting or unusual. This brings us to an old Chinese curse: *may you live in interesting times*. Who will argue these times are not interesting?

As hundreds of millions of us in the US and more than a billion people across the globe remain largely confined to our homes for an extended period of time, we can develop new routines and strategies to maintain our peace of mind.

In New York City, Derek and his partner make sure they go to bed and wake up at the same time. Each night, no matter the weather, the couple takes a long walk before retiring for the evening. With this routine, the pair keeps a sense of normalcy.

Here we offer some of our favorite suggestions for your self-isolation routine.

### Physically Isolate but Stay Connected

A big part of staying grounded through social distancing is staying socially connected. Physical isolation from others does not have to mean social isolation.

How perfect that available technology today allows us to stay in touch with anyone, at any time. Online groups, social media, videoconferencing via Zoom, Google Hangout, Skype and FaceTime are saving the day. Maybe some of us find that we are more in touch with family and friends than ever before.

The prevalence of online support from our trusted sources is also skyrocketing. Messages from our health care practitioners, spiritual teachers, friends, and other important social groups abound. They are true gems, shining ever more brightly because of their necessity.

Take time, too, to think of who can you help by being in touch? Who can use a friendly ear or even just a short note to let them know you are thinking of them?



## **Eat Right**

The best thing you can do at the moment for yourself, and for society, is remain healthy. These are epic times and you are a part of it. For an exercise in self-exploration, consider your daily decisions as epic as well. When we are dealing with intense emotions (grief and fear may be common now) the decision to eat a healthy lunch, as opposed to snacking on junk food, for example, takes on extra importance.

Mealtime is the perfect time to exercise judgment. In an effort to minimize over-eating, there are several hacks. First, keep regular meal times. Eat at a properly set table, and eat only when in this dining area. Start with a small portion of food and take more only if you are not full. Try these foods that combat stress.

On the flip side, now is not the time to make harsh demands of yourself. If you gorged yourself on your stockpile of carby foods within the first day of your quarantine, give yourself a break. We are facing something unprecedented here, and we are all doing our best. Particularly, if you are someone who has issues with food, now is not the time to be overly demanding of yourself. In the words of body positivity advocate Megan Jayne Crabbe, "it's OK if your body changes because your routine has."

## **Start Your Day Right**

An excellent way to start the day is to center yourself, before checking social media, and tuning into the news. This can take the form of meditation, stretching, breathing exercises, or taking a walk. Even if only for a minute, close your eyes and flood yourself with positive intentions and images. Take it a step further and offer the world your beautiful thoughts.

Before connecting with the rest of the world, first nourish yourself with a good breakfast and a cup of hot tea or coffee. This type of self-discipline helps you feel strong, allowing you to calmly digest the day's news, at your pace, when you are ready. It also puts you in a position to help others who may need your compassion that day.

Again, stay flexible with yourself. These are unpredictable times, some days simply getting up and out of bed deserves an acknowledgment.

## **Less News, More Music**

While staying informed is essential in a pandemic, being glued to the TV or the Internet is counterproductive. Set aside dedicated time to read the news and peruse social media. The media we consume is powerful as is the food we eat. News and media organizations are tasked with creating an enormous body of content in the forms of articles, video, and social media posts, much of it with headlines designed to grab our attention—often through sensationalism and fear. You don't have to read all of it.

In addition to limiting your time spent consuming media, also choose your sources wisely. Be mindful of how you feel when you watch videos or read articles or posts. If you feel enraged, polarized, scared, or confused perhaps it's the integrity of the content you're taking in.

To stay informed, going directly to the source can also be useful. Be sure to check facts with the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization directly.

On the flip side, DO take in plenty of music. "When we satisfy our desire to eat, sleep, or reproduce, our brain releases dopamine—the "feel-good" neurochemical involved when we experience pleasure and reward. Turns out this same chemical is released when listening to music" according to an article in Psychology Today.

## **Take it from an Astronaut**

Who better to advise on dealing with isolation than someone who lived for a year in space?

In these days of COVID-19 astronauts are stepping up to share their advice.

"When you are living and working in the same place for days on end, work can have a way of taking over everything if you let it," retired NASA astronaut Scott Kelly says in his now well-read New York Times article. "I deliberately paced myself because I knew I was in it for the long haul — just like we all are today," he says.

To maintain a healthy pace, Kelly recommends carving out time for non-work activities and one could argue this includes working on yourself. So be sure to always give yourself a break.

"You can be successful in confinement if you are intentional about your actions and deliberate about caring for your team," according to astronaut Ann McClain. "When we work together, we will continue to be #EarthStrong."

People from all corners of the earth are sharing an extraordinary journey together, changing our personal lives and transforming our societies. Striving to maintain a peaceful mind does not mean you must become the Buddha, it simply means you seek balance when you feel overwhelmed or disturbed. The gift of great trials is that they always inspire us to let our humanity and ingenuity flourish. Use the time now to develop your healthiest self by remembering the words of an ancient Chinese adage, *He who returns from a journey is not the same as he who left?*

## The Importance of Practicing Daily Meditation

For many of us, the word meditation conjures up images of people sitting serenely on the floor, with hands neatly postured on the lap. Although some will argue there is a strict definition of what meditation is, there are many ways to achieve a meditative state- and not all of them require one to be seated or even have the eyes shut.

Meditation engages the mind with the goal of transforming intrapersonal consciousness. It is more than sustained concentration, although that is an element. In a deep state of meditation, a person potentially enters into a state where mundane thoughts wither. The mind receives training to 'see things as they are.' This doesn't change the nature of physical reality, but meditation has the power to favorably influence reactions and responses to outside events, as well as to personal 'inner events.'

Arriving at a thought-free, peaceful state is a tall order. It is OK if thoughts arise and quickly pass. The mind tends toward restless mental action. In these cases, it is important to not react negatively to your thoughts. Simply let the mind flow, without judgment or force. Two common meditation techniques include concentrating on maintaining a steady, rhythmic breathing pattern or visualizing something pleasant.

Beginners can start with the goal of sitting comfortably for five minutes and gradually increase the amount of time from there. Experienced sitters may practice for an hour at a time, but even five to twenty minutes is sufficient. Forcing oneself to sit for long periods of time can cause frustration, which defeats the purpose of meditating. Take into consideration the appropriate length of time for the mind and the body to engage. Sticking to a manageable timetable helps condition and discipline the mind.

Walking meditation is great for those who prefer to indulge their senses. What differentiates it from an ordinary walk is the intention. These walks intentionally encourage the mind to remain constantly aware of itself. The gait of the walk is deliberate. Concentration is focused on the sights, sounds and smells of the surrounding area. Keeping silent is key. If unwanted thoughts pop up, rely on the eyes, ear, and nose to take your consciousness to a quieter state of mind.

The benefits of meditation include a reduction in stress levels. And with a reduction in daily stress comes a whole host of positive things. The immune system strengthens, sleep comes easily and deeply, cravings for addictive substances lessen and relationships improve.

Another benefit is the opportunity to learn more about oneself. Sitting, walking, or staring, without distractions, can let a person experience latent thoughts or emotions. Without outside influences, the mind

can freely examine itself. This process of self-discovery brings to light our strengths and weaknesses. This is why meditation is a life-long practice producing different results in each person.

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## Stress Busting Foods

The foods that you eat play a crucial role in your overall well-being as well as your ability to handle stress.

Over 1400 chemical changes occur as stress hormones, such as cortisone, sap important nutrients such as B vitamins, vitamin C and magnesium from the body.

Here are three foods that can replenish your supply of these nutrients and enhance your ability to manage stress:



**Cauliflower**—Cauliflower and other cruciferous vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage, and kale are chock full of stress-relieving B vitamins. Cauliflower is also one of the very best sources of vitamin B5 or pantothenic acid.

Pantothenic acid helps turn carbohydrates and fats into usable energy and improves your ability to respond to stress by supporting your adrenal glands. Fatigue, listlessness, numbness, and tingling or burning pain in the feet are all indications that you may need more vitamin B5 in your diet.

**Salmon**—Salmon is a healthy and delicious way to get your dose of B vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids. Vitamin B12 supports the production of red blood cells, allows nerve cells to develop properly and is essential to the synthesis of the happy brain chemical serotonin.

Among the many benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, a 2003 study published in *Diabetes & Metabolism* found that a diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids significantly reduced the stress response and kept the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine in check.

**Blackberries**—Blackberries are jam-packed with Vitamin C, calcium and magnesium. Vitamin C has shown to be a powerful stress reducer that can lower blood pressure and return cortisol levels to normal faster when taken during periods of stress.

Magnesium and calcium act together to help regulate the body's nerves and muscle tone. When there is too little magnesium in your diet, nerve cells can become over-activated and can trigger muscle tension, muscle soreness, muscle spasms, muscle cramps, and muscle fatigue.

Blackberries have more than double the amounts of vitamin C, calcium and magnesium than their popular cousin, the blueberry.

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