

Self Care and COVID-19: Getting Ready for the Marathon

Intentional planning goes a long way to staying mentally healthy amid a crisis.

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You've likely heard it before as you've begun any number of ambitious tasks, "This is a marathon, not a sprint." Rarely has this sentiment been more fitting than it is in light of the worldwide effort to stop the [COVID-19](#) virus.

It's human to react emotionally to changes and situations that are outside of our control. Because of this, there are large emotions floating around everywhere right now. Disappointment over real and significant losses (postponed weddings, missed senior semesters, years-in-the-making events cancelled, trips and experiences of a life time foregone, and more) is palpable and real. When compared to the loss of life and spreading illness, it's easy to feel guilty for grieving losses like these. Adding insult to injury, [fear](#) and [anxiety](#) are natural responses to a global pandemic.

The response to this weird mix of strong emotions is complex. Some people have gotten right down to business, made plans, executed them, and posted them on social media for everyone to see. Others feel paralyzed by fear or anxiety, finding

themselves unable to do much of anything other than check and recheck the news. Other responses fall everywhere in between.

In many ways, technology is our savior. It's allowing us to stay connected and informed. For many, it's allowing work to continue, albeit from home. While we are more than fortunate that this is the case, it's also important to continue to be aware of the fact that, at the end of the day, we live in bodies that are impacted by huge changes in the way that we move about (or don't) in the world.

And so, we must remember, that we are, in these early days of adapting to social/physical distancing guidelines and efforts to stop the virus, preparing for a marathon, not a sprint. We must take a long view of how to prepare for the days, weeks, and months ahead in order to thrive in this time. If we don't, we'll use all of our energy and resources at the beginning of the race and find ourselves wanting later.

Given that this is a marathon without a set finish line, it's especially important that we do the work of psychological preparation with intention. Just as we're washing our hands, resisting touching our faces, and keeping 6 feet between us, it's important to tend to our mental hygiene. To that end, here are some tips and ideas.

Work through, rather than denying, your big feelings.* Resist the temptation to deny or simply react out of your feelings, dumping them into your surroundings. Instead, name them. Find safe ways of expressing them (journal, get in your car and yell or cry, talk them out with a friend or therapist, draw them, dance them, run them out) and feel them all the way through. Unresolved emotions lead to all

manner of difficulty and health issues. Don't start this marathon at a disadvantage. Address and work through your feelings.

Take breaks from the media (including social media). While it is crucial that we all know what we need to do to stop the pandemic, it is imperative that we take breaks from the constantly shifting news. It'll all still be there when we return from our breaks.

If you are part of a group at particular risk or who is responsible for keeping the public updated, perhaps you can create a schedule with others where one person at a time is in touch with news/media for a predetermined period of time, rotating through the group so that all members get breaks throughout the day. For the rest of us, setting aside time for rest and recreation away from our screens and the news will go a long way toward keeping us healthy.

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This is also true for our engagement with social media. With research illuminating a causal relationship between social media use and anxiety and [depression](#) in even "normal" times, it is important to consider taking breaks while we are sequestered in our homes. (see reference below) Finding ways of using technology to connect is different from scrolling through endless peoples' feeds. In general, there's less of a risk to our mental health in using platforms that connect us to embodied others in real-time than that which results from watching the curated lives of others in social media spaces.

Increase self-awareness and resist the tendency to compare. There are as many ways of handling difficult situations as there are humans. It's easy, right now, to

see what others are doing (and how they are seemingly thriving) and to compare ourselves to them. This is a time to work diligently to tend to your relationship with your self. Ask your self what activities are life-giving and self-soothing to you and schedule them on your calendar. Determine what kind of routines will work best for your unique self and commit to these rather than trying to squeeze yourself into those suggested by others. Make check-ins with your self a regular part of every day and reread the section above on not comparing yourself to others. It's a life-saving tip.

Tend to your physical body. Move as much as you can. Give your eyes breaks from screens. Get ready for the day in the morning as you would if you were going out. Get sleep. Hydrate. Try some new spices in your food or an entirely new recipe. We are sensual beings and require stimulation.

Tend to your physical space. Consider creating zones in your home for work/school, recreation, and rest. Don't do all three on the couch or from bed. Work to have at least one space in your home that is restful to be in. Make it clutter-free and calm. Include some picture books, candles, soft furnishings, and anything else that would help you regulate and visit this space often (without your phone or tablet). Infuse your larger space with smells and kinesthetic offerings. Rely on eye-level lighting instead of overhead.

Connect as you can. [Social isolation](#) can have a huge impact on even the most die-hard [introvert](#). Use your technology to connect you with those you know and with diverse platforms for entertainment. Google hangouts are easy to create and free. Use them to host a happy hour, book discussion, or simple check-in. Many artists and yogis are offering streamed concerts and classes. If shelter in place

guidelines are not yet enacted in your city, connect with a friend with a walk six feet apart or sit around a fire pit at that same distance.

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Tend to your mental health and self care.** The psychological part of marathon prep is real. Pacing ourselves is a must in this work. Be gentle with yourself as you work through these days and come back to these tips often. If you notice yourself feeling overly agitated, losing interest in life, withdrawing from relationships, eating or [sleeping](#) too much or too little, or experiencing other symptoms of depression or anxiety, reach out to a therapist near you (many are doing telehealth) or call the NAMI crisis line at 800-950-NAMI.

References

<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/social-media-use-increases-depression-and-loneliness>

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