

How to look after your family's mental health when you're stuck indoors

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With schools closing and many adults working from home, families are going to be cooped up. It's easy to get cabin fever when children who are used to running around the playground and hanging out with friends are stuck indoors with their parents.

Here are our tips for keeping everyone's spirits up as much as possible as we self-isolate.

Exercise

It's suddenly much harder to move around, but it's important to stay physically active, not just for your body, but for your mental health, too.

Walking – the current advice is that it's OK to walk outdoors as long as you stay two metres away from other people. (Going outside doesn't increase the risk – only being close to other people or touching things they've coughed over.) The advice about moving around may change slightly, so keep up to date with the [latest guidance from the NHS](#). If you are lucky enough to have a garden, spend time there, maybe doing some exercise, maybe pulling up some weeds or tidying.

Home-made gym – the [NHS website](#) has lots of ideas for exercises that need no more equipment than a chair, a pillow or a sofa.

Yoga – one of the few forms of exercise that requires almost no space. There are hundreds of free online yoga tutorials on YouTube. [Yoga with Adrienne](#) is the most popular series. Parent Zone's resident yogi strongly recommends [Cole Chance](#): her workouts, for beginners to more advanced practitioners, take from 10 minutes upwards and target all parts of the body and different times of day and moods.

Dancing – all you need is some good music. We've had mandatory dance breaks at Parent Zone. Take five minutes away from your screens. Get the kids to show you their best moves.

Routine

Mental health experts agree that it's important to maintain a routine in the days of isolation, or everything can blur into sameness. Mark out different parts of the day for different activities. Agree a schedule with your kids, so they know when it's time to do some gaming, when they need to move about, when they need to make food or be helpful, when they need to sleep.

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Eat well and stay hydrated

It's currently difficult to find certain foods in some supermarkets, but there are already lots of ideas online for meals to make with store-cupboard

staples. Eat a balanced diet. Get children involved in planning meals and in helping to prepare them. Make sure everyone drinks lots of water, too.

Sleep

This is related to exercise – we all tend to sleep better if we've been physically active. So try to fit some exercise into every day. Try some evening yoga to calm you down. And now is definitely the time to enforce a no-screens-before-bed rule.

Ration your intake of information

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has [some excellent advice](#), including to avoid looking at the news constantly – limit yourself to a couple of times a day. (A constant stream of updates can be very disorientating.) Consider where you're getting your information from. Is it sensationalised? Is it actually helpful? [The NHS website](#), [the UK government's information](#), and the [WHO](#) are all good places to start.

The WHO also recommends sharing good news – if you hear about a successful vaccine trial, for example, or a slowing infection rate.

This is the time to be mindful about your social media use. Are you really concentrating when you pick up your phone? Could you wait another hour before you look?

Be kind to yourself and have fun

The coronavirus pandemic is like nothing we have ever known – but it doesn't all have to be bad.

Give yourself treats; pamper yourself. If you love box sets, settle yourself in for a couple. (We're going to be publishing a guide to some of our favourites.) Attack that pile of books you've been meaning to read. If you like jigsaw puzzles but you're usually too busy, use the time you'd normally spend on your commute to amuse yourself.

Play games with your kids that you haven't played since you were a child. Or take the opportunity to play one of their favourites – maybe you'll discover a love of Minecraft or Fortnite. We don't give ourselves permission

to play enough, as adults, so now is the perfect time to rediscover play, with your children.

Also make plans with your family for the things you're going to do when this is all over.

Do something creative

Whether it's drawing, writing, playing music, knitting, or building a bus out of cardboard boxes, you can lose yourself in creative activity, experiencing a supercharged state of concentration and freedom that's been described as "flow". It doesn't matter how rubbish the end product is (though you probably have to want it to be good) – it's all about the process.

Learn something new. Use the time you've got to learn, perhaps with your children. There will be lots of resources online – both sent by schools and provided by other bodies, such as the BBC. (We'll be doing a roundup of these too.)

Work with your kids on whatever they're learning – and don't forget all the useful life-skills that aren't covered by the curriculum. Learn to bake bread together; teach them to cook eggs in six different ways. Learn an instrument or a language, or do a project together about something that interests you both.

Connect

This is probably the most important thing of all. Human beings are profoundly social and this pandemic is requiring us to stop socialising. Just because we're not in the same physical space as other people, though, it doesn't mean we can't be with them in other ways. Take time to keep in touch.

There's lots of research to show that people who volunteer are happier than those who don't. Help people in the community who can't get out. There are all sorts of neighbourhood schemes springing up.

Celebrate healthcare workers, supermarket workers and all those who are keeping us going. In Spain, whole streets have come out onto their balconies to applaud supermarket workers as they lock up for the night.

If you're still anxious

Try everything above and if none of that works, do something you can control. Write down what you're worried about – in a diary, say – and put it away.

Practise meditation (lots of courses online) and deep breathing. Focus on helping others.

Reassuring children

Again, the [WHO](#) has very helpful advice, including:

Encourage children to express their feelings. If they feel anxious, they should be able to say so.

Provide them with information. Be honest, but be sure to emphasise the positive: they are not likely to die, more people have recovered from the virus than have passed away.

If they are in a high-risk group, keep them socially isolated and assure them that you are doing everything to protect them and that if you follow the rules together, there is no reason for them to be infected.

And of course, remember that children may need extra love and attention. Keep them close!