

COVID-19: Looking after your mental health

A guide for people living with lung disease and lung cancer

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As the impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) is being felt across the country, particularly by people who are living with a lung disease or lung cancer, Lung Foundation Australia, in collaboration with Clinical Psychologist Debra Sandford, offers the following advice on looking after your mental health during this time.

“Humans are social creatures and we are not used to social distancing. The difficult part of social distancing is that we can start to feel disconnected from each other. As a result, it’s normal to start to have feelings of isolation, loneliness and sadness.” -
Debra Sandford, Clinical Psychologist

There isn’t a stereotypical way for people to react to this unprecedented situation. For many, their lives for the foreseeable future will be greatly affected by COVID-19 either emotionally, physically or financially, or all three, and it’s normal to develop feelings of anxiousness, distress, fear and even anger.

Now is the time to prioritise both your physical and mental health. The following information aims to equip you with strategies to cope with feelings that might arise while you are social distancing and self-isolating.

**Please note the following advice is of a general nature and is not meant to replace individual counselling, therapy and/or medical or mental health advice.*

Tips for coping with self-isolation and social distancing

Maintain perspective

If you are feeling anxious or worried about the current situation, remember health professionals, governing officials and researchers are working tirelessly to help those in need, slow the spread of the disease and find a cure. This is a global issue which means the best minds are working to solve it.

Limit media intake

It’s important to keep up-to-date with new announcements, but don’t let the 24/7 news cycle control your life. Know when to switch off - repeated exposure can increase feelings of anxiety for most people.

Debra recommends, "Check the news in the morning, perhaps just half an hour to catch up with what's happened overnight and then again listen to the evening news. It's important to disconnect during the day to give yourself a break from the 24/7 news cycle."

Choose reliable media outlets

There is a lot of information out there, whether it be on the television, radio or online. Make sure the information you are accessing is from a reputable source. If you use the internet, only look at reliable sources of information that are updated regularly, such as the Australian Government Department of Health website.

Follow government advice

The Australian Government is regularly updating its advice on how to protect ourselves during this time. It can feel overwhelming when the advice is changing almost daily. If you have a smart phone, consider downloading the Australian Government app, *Coronavirus Australia*, to receive notifications with new and important announcements, so you don't have to rely on constantly checking for updates. Remember, the advice is aimed to protect you and your loved ones.

Stay connected

Don't let physical distancing turn into emotional distancing. Stay in touch with your friends and family regularly though the telephone or online via video calls or social media. You can try modern means like Zoom or Facetime so you can see each other's faces, or you can make a telephone call. Whichever way you do it, try and make time to connect with someone at least once a day.

Health and wellbeing

Focus on keeping yourself well physically which will help improve your mental wellbeing. Regularly drink water and eat healthy and nourishing food to fuel your body and try and keep your body moving. Now might be the time to talk to your GP or exercise physiologist about a home-based exercise program. Also try to maintain a regular sleeping pattern, as this will help you maintain your normal routine and feel more at ease.

"If you are struggling to exercise because of your health, try sitting out in the fresh air and getting some sunshine. This will help you feel a bit better and it will definitely help with your sleep routine," Debra says.

Maintain routine

Try and maintain your normal day-to-day routine as much as possible. If you typically go out for a coffee with friends, consider making a coffee at home and telephoning or video calling each other to catch up. In stressful times, we cope better with support from those close to us.

"As tempting as it is, don't stay in your jammies. Wake up when you normally would and get dressed for the day. Try and keep as much of a normal routine as possible. Perhaps use this time to complete jobs around the house that you will be proud of, such as tidying the kitchen cupboards," Debra says.

If you are working from home, try and set up a dedicated workspace and treat it like you would a normal day in the office. Remember to take regular breaks and keep normal work hours. Maintaining a healthy work/life balance is key.

Tips for living with others

For most people, COVID-19 social distancing restrictions means spending more time at home with your family or housemates than you typically would. Equip yourself early with the tools to manage household politics, as conflict in the home can take a toll on your mental health. Below are a few suggestions for reducing tensions in the household.

Set rules and boundaries

Get all the household members to come together when everyone is feeling calm and discuss rules or boundaries each of you may have that will make life easier during this time. It might be having a designated "quiet hour" or developing a roster of chores.

Connect

Schedule time each day to focus on making the most of each other's company. Perhaps sit down for a meal, play a board game or watch a television show - whatever it is, make it an activity that everyone enjoys.

Create a happy environment

This is a challenging time for everyone. Bolster each other up with positivity and check in on your loved one's mental health regularly. If you are feeling stressed or angry, walk away and calm down before confronting someone.

"It's likely you or your loved one may have a shorter temper than usual; this is quite normal when people become stressed. Under these circumstances give each other space to cool off and come back together when you are both calmer to discuss the issue," Debra says.

Above all, be respectful of and patient with one another. For many of us, our lifestyle has changed drastically, and this is unfamiliar territory, so try to help each other through it.

Techniques to reduce anxiety and stress

When you are feeling anxious or stressed, you may find yourself breathing quicker. While slow deep breathing techniques are useful for most people, they may not be relaxing for someone with a lung condition. Below is another technique which you may find helpful.

The five senses exercise

The goal of this exercise is to calm your mind by using your five senses to focus on your environment instead of your thoughts.

- First, notice 5 things that you can see. Look around you and become aware of your environment. Try to pick out something that you wouldn't usually notice.
- Second, notice 4 things you can feel. Bring your attention to the things that you're currently feeling, such as the texture of your clothing or the smooth surface of the table you're resting your hands on.

- Third, notice 3 things that you can hear. Listen for and notice things in the background that you don't normally notice. It could be the birds chirping outside or an appliance humming in the next room.
- Fourth, notice 2 things you can smell. Bring attention to scents that you usually filter out, either pleasant or unpleasant. Catch a whiff of the pine trees outside or food cooking in the kitchen.
- Finally, notice 1 thing you can taste. Take a sip of a drink, chew gum, or notice the current taste in your mouth.

"The more descriptive information you include during this exercise the better it will work. It also usually works better if you can talk out loud because your ear will hear your voice and create a feedback loop which helps your mind to come back to the present moment. This exercise can be shortened or lengthened until you notice you are feeling calmer. To shorten the exercise just name 3 things you can see, hear and feel, and repeat until you feel calmer. To lengthen, name 5 things you can see, hear and feel adding in smell and taste if appropriate and keep repeating until you feel calmer," Debra advises.

For this exercise it doesn't matter whether you are breathing slowly, rapidly or in short bursts, just focus on your body and the space you are in. If you are looking for more mindfulness techniques, perhaps try a meditation class on YouTube.

Things to keep in mind

- Remind yourself that this is a temporary situation. Staying at home is not a punishment, it's to protect yourself and those around you by slowing the spread of the virus.
- Take time to be grateful for the small things, like the sunshine or catching up with an old friend on the telephone.
- Focus on the things that you can control such as maintaining good hand hygiene, practicing social distancing, limiting negative news consumption and treating yourself and others with kindness.
- Make time for activities you enjoy such as reading a good book, watching a new TV show or tending to your garden.
- Above all, be kind to yourself.

Seek support

People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms. If you need to talk to someone, reach out to a support service such as Lifeline on **13 11 14**, who provide 24-hour support to listen to how you are feeling and offer you information and advice.

If you would like to hear more from Debra, we have recorded a webinar which is available on our YouTube channel, Lung Foundation Australia.

We're here for you

Remember our Information and Support Centre staff are available to connect you with resources and support services to help you during this time. Also keep an eye on our website and Facebook page for the latest updates. Our Information and Support Centre is open Monday to Friday 8:00am-4:30pm (AEST). To contact us please freecall **1800 654 301**.