

10 tips for coping during a pandemic, from a psychotherapist and expert patient

Turns out that those of us living with chronic illness have a head start in some areas when it comes to adapting to these challenging times. We are used to living outside of the conventional world for varying periods of time, some of us were already housebound. Whether you are in self-isolation, working from home or having to keep working on the front line, there are many skills and insights we have that can help, so here goes:

1) Uncertainty is life:

This is a very hard lesson to learn, but the reality is that planning, effort and hope cannot stop bad things happening to us. Life throws up challenges, some of them completely life-changing and accepting this can allow us to be free to adapt by letting go of how we wish things were. This is relevant now more than ever as we now all face day to day uncertainty, with no time-frame for when things might go back to more familiar routines. Allow each day to unfold, let go of the mind's tendency to leap forward, all we know for certain is where we are right now.

2) Movement is necessary:

Human beings need movement, without it we lose muscle mass, our mental health is compromised and our immune system affected. Exercise boosts mood, assists managing stress, helps us keep good sleep patterns and our bodies balanced, so finding new ways to move is vital at the moment. Those of us who have learned to self-manage pain do anything from gentle stretches & yoga right through to cardio and weight training at home. There are countless free resources available online, some of which need no equipment at all; go out for walks if you live near green space that allow social distancing and home dancing is always a joyous option! Whatever your fitness level and ability some daily movement will help.

3) Emotions need to flow:

This health crisis is bringing up strong emotions for us all. Fear and anxiety are a natural response to the information, or lack of it, that we are receiving. You may be feeling the loss of contact with loved ones or colleagues; sadness at cancelled events; anger at being told what to do; frustration at things you've worked so hard for being lost. All these emotions are real, valid and need safe expression otherwise they can build up and affect mood and functioning. Allow yourself time to talk or write about how you feel, being careful not to direct them at others, then come back to what you can take control of right now: a list of activities you enjoy, a call to a loved one, etc. then tell yourself: 'I am ok now, I have done all I can.' If your mental health is being severely impacted consider counselling.

4) Resistance is unhealthy:

Wishing things were different is understandable but resisting what is happening, whether in denial or getting stuck in anger, not only wastes your energy it also increases stress hormones such as cortisol, which in turn lower your immune responses, and no one needs that right now. Try to engage with what is happening for you TODAY, are you at home with loved ones, warm

and safe? Is the sun shining through your window, do you have something good to eat for lunch? Do what you need in terms of planning for the next couple of days, then let go and be where you are.

5) Living in the present moment is transformative:

People who make the shift to living more mindfully (when our bigger picture can be isolation and uncertainty) report heightened awareness of detail, more enjoyment of small pleasures and greater engagement with what is happening right now. There are many routes to this centred, balanced state. You can start by sitting still with your feet on the floor, closing your eyes and noticing your breathing for a minute or two. You might observe that there are small noises you weren't previously aware of, sensations in the body, you will hopefully be able to observe the calm that lies somewhere within us all. You will also notice that the mind wanders off, wanting us to worry, to check for danger. This is normal but not always helpful, you can learn to bring your attention back to the present. See resources below.

6) Novel ways of socializing can be a lifeline:

When we can't go out, attend social events and interact with others 1:1, our human need for connection must be fed in new ways otherwise our mood will be negatively affected. Reflect on how much interaction you need - even introverts need some contact with others - and devise regular ways to meet your needs. Private social media groups; online discussion threads; listening to podcasts, video call dinner parties; more frequent telephone calls; distanced walks; joining groups in your area of interest, even churches are holding online services at the moment. Many people tell me that they are already having more social interaction than usual because of this crisis. Reach out - you can be sure others will feel the same and be grateful for the contact.

7) Acceptance is key:

Underpinning many of these points is the idea that we can resist what is, or we can accept it: we do have a choice. This doesn't mean that we like it or think it's a good thing, it means that we are being realistic. An extreme example is that if I accept that I have an incurable pain condition, I am more likely to take positive steps to help myself. If I am stuck in resistance and denial and wanting it to be different then I am using my energy up and may stay stuck. I have to grieve my losses, let my sadness and anger out, then I can move forward letting go of the burden of needing things I can't change to be different. I can start to live again in my new circumstances and do what I need to take care of myself. We don't have clear timeframes for lockdown so we have to learn to take life day by day.

8) A new focus can be transformative:

Many of us now have more time on our hands in some way, not having to commute or not being able to do usual social activities. Depending on your personality, you may welcome this, or find it horrifying. If you are feeling ok but are bored and frustrated now might be the time to develop an interest or skill you have never got round to before. Make a quick list on paper of the 10 jobs you would have had if you could have done anything in life. Don't think too much, just write

them down. Reflect on the list, what elements do they have in common, what's missing from your current life? If there is a lot of creative jobs on your list you may benefit from doing some painting or writing, for example.

9) Slower living has many benefits:

Rest and relaxation are commodities that a lot of modern adults don't have a lot of. Now we will be forced to spend more time at home, even if we are caring for children, we have the chance to experience a slower more balanced life for a time: to stop and notice; to reflect and get in touch with who we really are. Slowing down and being in the moment can open up the creativity we all have somewhere within us and calm our nervous systems. Engaging with the moment to moment pleasures even in a restricted life can bring great benefits, try focusing with the curiosity that young children have an abundance of: look and listen deeply to what is all around you.

10) Now is the time for gratitude:

Before you get angry, I don't mean we should pretend that this situation is ok, it's the exact opposite. Reflecting on what we are grateful for right now can help us to talk more to our loved ones; engage with what we want to spend our time on; value the health we do have & nurture it; notice and engage with the small pleasure's life can bring. If we are alive and safe there is a lot to be grateful for and learning to appreciate things while we have them, rather than taking them for granted, is a great life-enhancing skill.

Take care of yourself in the coming weeks. People who live with chronic illness adapt to a very different life of permanent restriction and can be great role models for the life of temporary change and uncertainty we are all facing now. You will now understand some of the hidden challenges of invisible illness maybe for the first time and appreciate how truly amazing humans can be, how our victories may seem smaller but are no less valid, and we will be grateful for the increased empathy. Take care. Get in touch if you feel some online counselling might help.

If you are really struggling with all this and are experiencing desperation call the Samaritans free 24/7/365 days a year on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org.

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