

## **Social Isolation in the Age of COVID-19 - A Toolkit for Everyone**

By Arin Jayes

In the fourth week of the coronavirus stay-at-home order, many of us are feeling the long-term effects of social distancing, a strategy that the CDC has recommended in order to curb the spread of COVID-19. While social distancing is incredibly important to protect individuals with compromised immune systems from succumbing to COVID-19, it is also creating a forced period of social isolation that is challenging to adapt to.

Research indicates that living a socially isolated life has enormous health consequences, frequently contributing to worsening chronic disease burden, depression and anxiety, and functional and cognitive decline. Social isolation leads to changes on a cellular level that can create chronic inflammation, making lonely people more susceptible to conditions such as heart disease, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease. A 2015 meta-analysis, which included 70 studies of 3.4 million participants, found that lonely individuals had a 26% higher risk of premature death—or 32% if they lived alone. Loneliness kills. It poses a greater threat to health than obesity, and its life-shortening effects are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Aguillard, 2020).

As many in the brain injury community are pointing out, the current lockdown mirrors previous experiences with social isolation during recovery. In her article for *Curbed*, TBI survivor Amanda Chicago Lewis writes, “As I’ve been watching everyone else living in the way that I have been living for the past two years, what’s occurred to me is that the adjustment period is the hardest period. Now that I’ve sort of adjusted to a quieter life, and a smaller life, I developed this understanding that the initial phase where you take something away is really scary and really difficult. It gets better, though. Humans have this bananas ability to adjust.”

How do we adjust to this new normal? Here are ten strategies for maintaining your physical, emotional, and social health during the COVID-19 epidemic:

### **1. Maintain a daily routine.**

In a world of constant change and uncertainty, preserving a daily schedule is an essential grounding practice. Free tools such as Google Calendar allow you to set reminders for everything from wakeup times to telehealth appointments. Breaking your day into steps instead of a list of tasks make it less overwhelming. Visual reminders, such as sticky notes in places that you typically frequent, can provide additional prompting. Even though our external world is chaotic, our internal world doesn't have to be.

### **2. Stay connected to the natural world.**

Social distancing does not mean we must spend every waking moment indoors. March 19<sup>th</sup> marked the Spring Equinox, signaling a new season of vigorous growth as plants awaken from winter dormancy. Witnessing the seasons is a way to mark the passage of time, breaking the monotony of social distancing. Christine Smith writes “the garden shows us that the world will still be here even when all structures we’ve erected are threatened or fall apart. Gardening feeds and nourishes us when we do not possess the funds to enter a grocery store. It reminds us that we

will not wash away in the tumult of the moment, that we too are strong and competent and that we can take care of ourselves, our communities and our families.” Whether it is through gardening, sitting outside away from crowds, or visiting nature trails, take advantage of the healing properties of the natural world.

### **3. Practice deep breathing and relaxation exercises.**

The stress of COVID-19 news can manifest itself both emotionally and physically. Relaxation techniques developed from yoga and mindfulness practices can be helpful for releasing body tension. “8-4-7” is a common technique that you can practice anywhere: 1) exhale deeply through the mouth for 8 seconds, 2) inhale through the nose for 4 seconds, 3) hold breath for 7 seconds, 3) repeat. [Progressive Muscle Relaxation \(PMR\)](#) is a therapeutic technique designed to teach people to tell the difference between tense and relaxed muscles. Apps such as Calm and Headspace also have exercises for practicing deep breathing and relaxation.

### **4. Learn something new.**

Now is the perfect time to learn about a new subject, acquire a new skill, and get in touch with your creative side. Getting in touch with our creativity doesn’t require talent or passion; it requires curiosity. In her book *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*, Elizabeth Gilbert asserts that curiosity is powerful because it is accessible to everyone. “Following the scavenger hunt of curiosity can lead you to amazing, unexpected places. It may even eventually lead you to your passion – albeit through a strangle, untraceable passageway of back alleys, underground caves, and secret doors.” In addition, organizations like the [Public Library Association](#) are offering free or reduced pricing to webinars or trainings.

### **5. Technology is your greatest ally.**

Hundreds of websites, podcasts, and streaming services have developed free or reduced offerings during COVID-19. Many support groups, such as AA and NA, are offering online zoom room meetings for members. You can use websites like Netflix Party to watch a movie with others or JackboxTV to play games with friends. Family members and caregivers can schedule weekly calls through Zoom Room or Google Hangout to keep in touch with older adults quarantined in long-term care facilities. [Naomi Cahn](#) has more tips for keeping older adults connected with tech during COVID-19.

### **6. Focus on the present moment.**

It is overwhelming to prepare for an uncertain future during a pandemic. While the future is out of our control, our present moment is not. Mindfulness can change the way our brain activates and responds to stimuli, which may improve our resilience. Eleanor Morgan discusses how focusing on one bodily sensation, such as your breath moving in and out of your nostrils, the insula is activated – “a small region tucked away deep within each hemisphere of the brain. The insulae are thought to be where we read our physical state and instigate feelings that will make us take action, like feeling hungry then eating, to keep an internal balance. When the insulae are activated, the amygdala (the part of the brain responsible for anxious responses) settles down and

our stress hormones begin to shut off. Our heart rates go down, along with our blood pressure.” In other words, we can’t control the future but we can focus on the present moment, which can have long-lasting positive effects on our neurological health.

### **7. Create a nest.**

Amanda Chicago Lewis explains that even small acts such as making the bed and doing the dishes can have a positive influence on your mindset. “These are things that sound almost dumb in retrospect. But after I started making the changes, I started physically feeling how much easier it was to exist in a space that was more calming and better organized. It made a huge difference in my time at home.” If we must adapt to spending a large amount of time indoors, small acts can help make the space more comfortable.

### **8. Ask for help.**

The world is full of uncertainty and we all must become more comfortable with asking for help. Talk with a loved one that you trust to come up with a plan for how to support each other. Would a family member be willing to be on speed dial? Is there a member of your community or church who is able to do a weekly check-in phone call? Think about what it is that you need right now to feel okay and utilize your support network to help you. Also keep hotlines on hand like the [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) or [Baltimore Crisis Response](#) to utilize in times of crisis.

### **9. Feed your body and your mind.**

Social isolation is also impacting the way that we shop for and eat food. For individuals living with disordered eating, social isolation can be particularly challenging. Just as we structure our lives with routine, maintaining normal eating is crucial. Normal eating looks different for everyone. Ellyn Satter writes, “Normal Eating is going to the table hungry and eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like and eat it and truly get enough of it – not just stop eating because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to give some thought to your food selection so you get nutritious food, but not being so wary and restrictive that you miss out on enjoyable food... In short, normal eating flexible. It varies in response to your hunger, your schedule, your proximity to food and your feelings.” If you are struggling gaining access to healthy food during this pandemic, call 211 to utilize community resources such as food banks to supplement your groceries.

### **10. Utilize or engage in mutual aid.**

Many communities are practicing mutual aid in order to survive COVID-19. Mutual aid is when communities take on the responsibility of caring for one another rather than forcing individuals to fend for themselves. Distinct from charity, mutual aid creates symbiotic relationships within communities where individuals offer material goods, services, and other forms of assistance to each other. Services you can offer to serve your community can involve delivering food to homebound individuals, walking people’s dogs, or creating cloth masks. If you need help, mutual aid groups can offer you volunteer services free of charge. Learn more about the concept of mutual aid and how it is helping communities during COVID-19 by clicking [here](#).

What strategies are you using to adjust to this new reality? Are there other strategies not listed here that you would recommend? Drop us a line at [info@biamd.org](mailto:info@biamd.org) or message us on Facebook and Instagram. We would like to hear your stories and strategies, especially from TBI survivors with lived experience of social isolation.

## REFERENCES

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