

Right side up while inside out

HSE Clinical Psychologist Dr Lasairíona McGuinness discusses Minding our minds and bodies during covid-19

We are creatures of habit, we crave consistency, structure and familiarity. We've all lost our usual routines, some of us are doing new tasks while others have lost their job. In a small or larger way, covid-19 has upheaved our lives and placed us in unknown territory.

While we might feel alone, the truth is we're all in this pandemic together - everyone is impacted and no-one is left out.

Feeling anxious and worry is natural during this unsettling and uncertain time. These feelings may be unpleasant, but it is good to know that we need a healthy amount of anxiety to drive us into action so that we are kept alert, safe and well. Of course, it isn't just anxiety that we are feeling, there are bound to be lots of other emotions too, like low mood, frustration, guilt, or even shame, and for some of us, we may even find moments of contentment or joy, to name a few.

As we get used to and find our way through this new normal, how can we manage our mental health in our socially limited bubbles, in a world that has largely become unpredictable?

Minding our emotions

Emotions love themselves. Like in the film *Inside Out*, our emotions have personalities, and they look for ways to grow. So how do we ensure that we don't over indulge or overfeed them?

It is good to know that research shows naming how we feel can help to regulate our emotions (for example, saying "I am feeling anxious right now"). Sharing how we feel with those we trust and listening to our loved ones can also have positive effects on our emotion systems, both in our minds and bodies.

It may help to ask yourself questions about the thoughts you are having, as this might help stop the emotion spiralling. If you are finding it difficult under the restrictions to see a loved one, you might find yourself thinking 'will I ever see them again? What if something goes wrong, how will I make sure they are ok?' or if you've lost your job you might find yourself thinking 'how will I ever get a job again?' That would be a very normal reaction. But it might help to ask yourself; am I imagining the worst happening? Am I jumping to conclusions? Do I have all the facts?

It is normal to be curious. For some of us that might mean scrolling endlessly through our social media feeds for news updates, or turning on the television to watch the news at every hour. But if we do too much of this, it can fuel anxiety and maintain it for longer.

And when we look for information, we must mind ourselves and access accurate information, rather than relying on interpretations. Websites like hse.ie or the national broadcaster and other sources are more reliable than social media posts and forwarded messages.

Be kind to yourself

We need to protect ourselves, now more than ever. If you feel ill you should get medical advice.

Please do your best to sleep well, be careful not to over or under-sleep compared to your usual sleep pattern. The recommendation is normally seven to eight hours per night.

Make sure to exercise every day, within the government restrictions. Eat and drink healthily everyday (avoid too much alcohol, the occasional treat is fine, but keep unhealthy food as the exception, and please avoid recreational drugs).

It's good to make sure everyone in the house is taking care of themselves physically too (showering, brushing our teeth, wearing clean clothes).

We like treats. We like to plan and have something to look forward to. Even if that simply means holding off on watching a film you have been looking forward to, until the weekend, as a Saturday night treat.

Feed your brain

We've excellent problem solving skills and creativity, and we can use these to keep our brains and bodies alive and active. Doing small tasks or activities each day can increase our sense of being in control, of mastery, and feelings of joy. Even rewarding ourselves for completing a small task may go a long way in terms of prolonging positive emotions.

Be a social animal while isolating

Last but not least, we're social animals, not social isolation animals and maintaining social connection helps us physically and psychologically. Luckily never before has it been as easy to do this via technology. Pick up the phone, set up a video call, write a postcard or letter, communicating with people we care about will help them, and us feel better.

This too shall pass

It is good to remember that this situation is temporary and in a state of flux. In the middle of all of the uncertainty in our daily lives, what is certain right now, is that this situation is only temporary.

ENDS

Notes to Editor

*Photo available on request

*Text can be used in full or as part of a larger feature for print or online.

