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Ten Ways to Protect Your Mental Health

HSE Psychologist Dr Cáit Verling has shared her Top Ten Ways to Protect Your Mental Health" for older people cocooning during Covid 19

This is a stressful and uncertain time for all of us, but especially for older people.
A pandemic, as well as government requirements to cocoon, mean that you can feel isolated, and you can lose the ability to do the things that usually help you feel happy and calm. You can feel that you have no control over your own life!
But there are things you can do to mind your mental health while cocooning – these things can make a big difference!

1)   Acknowledge your feelings
It is normal to feel more anxious, stressed and insecure at the moment. Your life has changed very suddenly, and it is normal to feel affected by this. Be gentle on yourself, it is OK to not feel OK.

2)   Try to have a sleep/wake routine similar to the one you usually have.
A routine will help you feel secure and give a structure to your day. It may seem simple, but regular bedtimes and wakeup times mean you get enough sleep at the right time, which is important for your mental health. Avoid news or social media about the Coronavirus prior to going to bed.

3)   Have a daily routine
A plan for your day can help you feel hopeful and give you a sense of purpose. Make sure you get dressed in the morning, and it can be even better to get dressed as if you were going out to something special! Do some enjoyable things each day – these will be different for everyone, but can include reading, gardening, doing small chores in the house, writing letters, etc. Break any work you are doing with regular rest and relaxation times.

4)   Eat well
Eating well is important in order to help you stay healthy and energetic.   Make sure you eat regular healthy meals. Nominate someone in your family or friends circle to bring you groceries safely, or use the community supports available to make sure you have enough healthy food to eat.   Anxiety can affect your appetite, sometimes causing nausea or stomach upset. If this is a problem for you, try to eat smaller meals more frequently.

5)   Stay healthy and active
Exercise is so important for your mental health. If you have a garden, spend time outside, even just walking or doing small garden tasks. If you don't have a garden, open the window - fresh air can make you feel more invigorated! There are many guided exercises online, for

example on YouTube, which are designed especially for older people, and these might be very helpful.

6) Stay in touch

It is very difficult for older people to be out of touch with family and friends. You can still connect with them. Try to have social time every day, either by phone or online. It's possible to have a video chat with your whole family online using various apps – seeing the faces of our loved ones can bring a sense of calm. Feeling connected makes us feel better during times of stress.

7) Manage your news and social media use

Listening to, or watching, a lot of news about the Coronavirus can cause increased stress and anxiety. Decide which news bulletin to watch or listen to and keep a limit on it. Try to avoid accessing information about the virus on social media – the source of the information may not be reliable and may be inaccurate.

8) Breathing and relaxation -

Breathing and relaxation is a really effective way of managing stress and anxiety. Taking some time each day to do some breathing exercises, guided relaxation, or meditation, can bring down your heart rate and reduce feelings of anxiety. There are lots of guided breathing and relaxation exercises available on YouTube, and Beaumont Hospital also has a large selection that you can access online. If you are not used to doing these it may take some time to get used to doing them, so it's helpful to spend a few minutes every day practicing them so you can use them when you need to.

9) Being aware of the power of our thoughts

When it comes to stress and anxiety, our thoughts are very powerful. Anxious thoughts can lead to anxious feelings, BUT, thinking positively and more rationally can reduce those anxious feelings. We all have thoughts which run through our minds continually, although many of us are not aware of this. These thoughts are powerful, and can really have an impact on how we feel! Some ways we can change our thoughts to manage our anxiety are:

10) Accept and choose to think helpfully

Acceptance: Accepting where we are at instead of fighting against it can be helpful, as well as accepting ourselves as we are and knowing we are good enough!

Isolation v's protection: Instead of seeing cocooning as isolation, we can see it as protecting and minding outselves. The Irish term for cocooning 'ag clutharú', literally means, 'cosying'. If we see our homes as safe and protective, instead of isolated, can reduce our feelings of stress and fear.

Control v's choice: Although cocooning does not feel like a choice, you can tell yourself that you do have choices about how to spend your day. Once you make that shift, it will reduce the feeling that you have no power.

Using 'positive self talk': Giving ourselves positive messages by thinking positively sounds too good to be true! But research shows that the more positively we think, the better we feel.

During this difficult time, it can be useful to tell yourself, 'I can cope with this', 'this will pass' or similar thoughts that will help you feel more hopeful.