

How to keep up wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Advice from the World Wellbeing Panel (WWP)

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Abstract:

The isolation and social distancing measures many countries have been embracing over the last weeks are having an important impact on individuals' mental health and well-being. In the latest World Wellbeing Panel, we asked 26 experts on how to maintain well-being during this time. This piece presents the advice from those experts. Although isolation measures are being relaxed, many countries still keep important restriction on social interactions. The experts conclude that it is important to maintain social interactions (with special emphasis to giving to others), develop strategies to deal with negative thinking, reflect on own life and future, structure the day to include health habits, and face the fear.

Introduction

The World Wellbeing Panel (WWP) promotes wellbeing as the ultimate purpose of all major decision makers, particularly government. It routinely asked questions of relevance to wellbeing policy of its panel of 50 world experts.

The latest World Wellbeing Panel (WWP) survey asked for advice on “How to maintain well-being during isolation while facing huge emotional stress from the threat of the COVID-19 virus”

Twenty-six members of the panel responded, representing professors in many sciences (economics, psychology, philosophy) and areas (Europe, the Americas, Asia, Oceania). Some experts talked about what social isolation does, but most about what people can do that helps their wellbeing.

Stefano Bartolini points out that we do have knowledge of lengthy social isolation among well-prepared groups, namely astronauts and small groups of polar scientists. Studies on the show that isolation often provokes a sort of “psychological hibernation”. People find it difficult to remember things or perform certain tasks. Other effects include depression, concentration difficulty, sleep disorders (sleeping too much or too little) and irritability: astronauts spend arguing up to 30% of their time. Most polar adventures of the 19th century ended in riots, madness, suicides, and cannibalism.” (e.g., Suedfeld and Steel, 2000; Mays and Beattie, 2016; and Haddelsey, 2018)

So social isolation extended for many months has serious mental health and eventually physical health implications, even among groups like scientists and astronauts who are well prepared for them.

What can one do though in isolation? We discuss the suggestions thematically.

Social Interactions

Almost everybody in the panel emphasized the important of maintaining social contacts with friends and family. Ruut Veenhoven thus says “research on effects of coping with disasters suggest that social contacts help.” (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2008 and Butler et al., 2009) and Jordi Quoidbach points to the quantity and quality of our social relationships being one of the most important predictor of happiness (for example, Harris and Vazire, 2019)

Specific suggestions:

- Make an effort with phone and internet.
- Chat with available people closer by, like the neighbors [Maarten Vendrik].
- Develop closeness/communication rituals, like a story-telling session every night at dinner or sharing "the best and the worst" of each person's day. Ritualising time for sharing stories, gripes, and information helps keep people close and give people something to look forward to [Gigi Foster].
- Make it a point to meet at least someone each day! [Francesco Sarracino].
- Giving is better than receiving, even during lock down (for example, Liu and Aaker, 2008 and Meier and Stutzer, 2007). So, think how you can help those in worse circumstances [Christian Krekel]. Look for volunteers in your neighborhood or friends circle to help who can do online teaching [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell]. Volunteer or help a neighbor [Daniel Haybron]. Look to social and environmental problems [Maurizio Pugno, citing Fleurbaey and Schwandt, 2015]

Ways to deal with negative thinking

The astronaut data tells us negative thinking starts to creep in and is hard to avoid.

Some tips though:

- Assuming one is fortunate enough to be healthy and have sufficient financial security, then people can tell themselves that they are given the gift of quality time with family and loved ones [Ori Heffetz]. Via the internet one can “reconnect” [Arthur Grimes].
- Actively avoid hearing too much bad news, especially for individual with a more neurotic personality; and think about "exit" strategy when negative thoughts start to populate somebody's mind [Eugenio Proto]. More generally, just don't read too much news [Ori Heffetz, Heinz Welsch, Maarten Vendrik]. Limit oneself to checking the news at one or two particular times a day helps cement such habits.
- Avoid informing yourself about the most gruesome details of the sanitary and social effects of the disease. [Maurizio Pugno].
- Stay away from passive social media use which has been found to be negatively associated with SWB” [Anke Plagnol](Verduyn et al., 2017)
- Distract yourself. Emphasize what you can control, not what is out of your control. Look for gratifications. Try to look beyond the obviously available ones (sex, food, good movies,

music and readings.). Learn something new, it's plenty of online activities now. Try to have fun. Humor and laughing are the best medicine. [Stefano Bartolini]

- Improve your house [or garden], as house quality also increase happiness. [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell, Ruut Veenhoven]
- Get outside - Even just a few minutes outside can help reduce feelings of isolation and claustrophobia. Do something physical every day. [Daniel Benjamin]
- Practicing arts: Art is a tool to maintain intersubjective experience and getting the sense of "doing something now". So, make art and share with others. [Alpaslan Akay]

Organize your day

One of the most successful ingredients of cognitive behavioral therapy against many mental health problems are tips on how to form routines that give one a sense of control (Christopher Boyce).

- Maintain a strict daily time structure (working in home office, sport activities, leisure time, fixed time to get up and to go to bed) [Ronnie Schoe, Maarten Vendrik, Francesco Sarracino].
- Maintain diaries that emphasize the positive, such as writing down every day 5 nice things you have seen others do [Paul Frijters].

Face the fear

Cognitive behavioural routines have found out anxiety can be reduced by facing fears in the sense of putting them in perspective and seeing them as normal and something that can ultimately be accepted.

- Find out what the threat of Covid-19 to your personal health (and to that of your family members). This helps detaching from the fear. [Maurizio Pugno]
- One can train oneself to be comfortable with the idea of death so that one cannot be frightened too much by the prospect of it. To those who do not believe in afterlives, viewing death as a normal part of life helps. What helps is the realization that human minds change continuously, including our memories, our identities, and our skills, such that our ""old selves"" die a little every day anyway, making death seem less dramatic. [Paul Frijters]
- Optimism and positive thinking (as well as material comfort) can help in dealing with the crisis. [Rainer Winkelmann]

Work on the future and on oneself

”Prepare for life after the epidemic” [Ruut Veenhoven].

- Reflect about one's beliefs of what contributes to personal well-being, i.e. the personal well-being of oneself and of others [Alois Stutzer].

- Observe ourselves, understand the fragility of life, and develop meaning in life, such as from small things that they ignore in their normal life [Alpaslan Akay].
- Think about what was wrong with your life before the pandemic, and plan what to do now and in the future to remedy it. Focus on: healthy lifestyle and importance of close relationships [Maurizio Pugno].
- Think about how you want to live and what kind of society you want to live in, and want the next generations to live in, and how you can help to make that happen. What matters I “love, family, community, doing something worthwhile, appreciating the beauty around us” [Daniel Haybron].

Healthy habits

The literature has widely recognized the importance of maintaining healthy habit as exercising, eating healthily and trying to sleep regularly (for example, Groeger, Zijlstra, and Dijk, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2007; Wheaton et al., 2012; and Mujcic and Oswald, 2016).

- Continue to eat healthily and exercise - Both to feel better and keep your immune system strong [Daniel Benjamin]. On top of this, prioritize sleep [Gigi Foster]. Exercise in particular in green spaces [Christian Krekel].
- Eat healthy as obesity negatively correlates with happiness [Katsaiti, 2021]. On those countries where you can go out, it is very important to go to sport and with less pollution this should increase happiness [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell].
- Do low intensity exercise (jogging, biking) which gives your brain small injections of dopamine that improve your mood [Stefano Bartolini].

Conclusions

The long-term effects of this episode on life satisfaction as well as the individuals’ behavioral changes to adapt to it will depend on the length of the social distancing. The impact of this episode on individuals’ well-being will also depend on the health impact (final mortality and morbidity), the economic consequences (notably through unemployment and poverty), and the age and personality of each individual. It is now premature to make predictions of the long-term effects of this period of huge uncertainty and fear lived with social isolation. The experts conclude that in order to minimize the negative effect of this experience, it is important to maintain social interactions (with special emphasis to giving to others), develop strategies to deal with negative thinking, reflect on own life and future, structure the day to include health habits, and face the fear.

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List of WWP Respondents

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