

# How to avoid bad habits during social distancing and isolation

[Clifton Mark](#) · CBC Life · Posted: Mar 21, 2020 2:06 PM ET | Last Updated: March 21

For the time being, most Canadians are facing some level of social isolation, from basic social distancing practices to quarantine. While these measures are necessary, the combination of isolation, disruptions to the normal structure of our lives, and a constant stream of worrying news from the outside world can make for challenging times. In these kinds of circumstances, our first impulse might be to pour ourselves a drink, fire up the Xbox, or let Netflix autoplay and have its way with us for a few days.

To help us understand how to avoid these pitfalls and maintain a healthy lifestyle in the coming weeks, we reached out to [Dr. Jonathan Stea](#), a clinical psychologist who specializes in mental health and substance abuse, and Evan Newton, an addictions counsellor at [Bellwood Health Services](#). They agree that the situation facing Canadians is likely to lead to some difficult emotions such as boredom, anxiety, sadness, and anger, and have offered some advice for coping with these feelings and for staying on track in the weeks ahead.

## Sleep well, eat well, and exercise

Stea says, "Social distancing practices and quarantine recommendations from health authorities need to be respected and followed because they are the absolute right public health interventions for the greater good." Even if we can't follow our normal routines, there's still important work to do. "During these times, self-care is paramount," says Stea, "do your best to get adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise, as well as to reduce boredom by maintaining (where possible) your hobbies and leisure activities." This may involve some creativity and resourcefulness given the circumstances, but an overall healthy lifestyle is the foundation for coping with all of life's challenges

Newton singles out physical exercise as especially important. "Research shows exercise has a huge effect on mental health. 20-25 minutes of intense cardiovascular exercise goes a long way to helping us stay sane and feel good. Also, if you get it done, this means you've kind of earned your Netflix and what-not."

## Stay social (remotely)

"Social distancing doesn't have to mean being disconnected," says Newton. He recommends you stay in touch with your friends and loved ones and really anyone else who you could reach out to. This is one situation where you and your friends around the world will be facing a similar situation. "We're a social species and we benefit from that support."

Even though we should stay physically apart, it's never been easier to be remotely connected. This doesn't just mean texts and phone calls. Lots of activities, from games to group hangouts can be moved online.

## Manage your media consumption

It's essential to stay informed about current public health recommendations. However, constant pandemic coverage and online fear-mongering could become counterproductive. To avoid being taken in by misinformation, Stea recommends focusing on trusted health authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Health Canada, and the Centre for Disease Control. Newton advises limiting the time you spend on news or social media.

## Set goals and make a plan

One of the best ways to avoid going off the rails is to lay down rails in the first place. Newton recommends setting out some simple goals you'd like to accomplish and a basic schedule for doing it. "I try to look at this as an opportunity. There are so many books I want to read and projects I want to work on," he says. When you're setting goals, he advises, "Be specific and be concrete. If your goal is not attainable, you'll start to not do it, then start beating yourself up over it, leading to all-or-nothing thinking."

## Know your behaviour patterns

"Each person has their own unique set of unhelpful behaviour patterns that they might sometimes act out during times of stress," says Stea. Some people may escape into video games, others might reach for the

wine. "Be honest with yourself," says Newton, "ask what behaviours you want to avoid, and which ones you have a propensity toward."

Since our behaviours come in patterns, there are usually signs that the behaviours we really want to avoid might be around the corner. Newton explained this in terms of his work treating addiction, "When we're trying to avoid relapse, it's not just about not drinking... it's about living right." Relapse is usually preceded by other signs that are part of an overall pattern. It could be going out more, staying up late, or even not cleaning the cat litter. Tune into these patterns so you can recognize and address them in good time.

### **Know and manage your thought patterns**

This isn't just about behaviour, the combination of isolation and stress can lead to unhelpful thought patterns. "It's easy to get mired in your thoughts," says Newton. "A lot of mental health conditions are positive feedback loops. Anxiety leads to avoidance which creates more anxiety. Depression leads to rumination, which makes you more depressed. If you're not actively trying to break out of them, they'll self-perpetuate." Getting out of the house, working, socializing are just the kinds of things that break these patterns, so disruption to these activities can make us more vulnerable. This is one reason to try to impose some kind of new structure on your life. But it also means you should pay extra attention to your feelings and thoughts.

If you think you notice some signs of a negative pattern of thought or behaviour, Stea says it's time to think about "a way to throw a wrench into the pattern to alter its course." This could mean talking through your issues with a trusted family member or friend or mental health professional. In other cases, it might do the trick to just make a point to exercise and get the endorphins flowing regularly. Either way, pay attention to your actions and your thoughts and act early.

### **Build accountability**

Part of the reason people are more effective in a good work environment is that they feel visible and accountable to others. At some level, you know that other people in the workplace will notice if you disappear into a social media scroll-hole for three hours.

Newton says that setting up some accountability in other areas of your life also works. If you're planning on spending the next few weeks studying a new language or fixing up the garage, post it on social media. For other goals, it might be more helpful to enlist the people close to you. If you're worried about drinking too much or letting your fitness slide, Newton recommends asking the people close to you to keep an eye on your behaviour and to come down (gently) on you when you fall out of line. Just knowing someone else is watching can go a long way to keeping you on track.

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