Staying Well in Isolation

Whether, shielded, vulnerable, quarantined or in a local lockdown, Covid 19 means that a good many of us have and will be in isolation at some point. Since human beings are by nature sociable, isolation (beyond the odd pamper evening or man shed moment) is unwelcome and unwanted. Solitary confinement is after all considered a very harsh form of punishment. For those of us locked down and confined with families, small children, teenagers or seniors in relatively small spaces, the converse is also true. Loss of personal space and autonomy coupled with conflicting agendas and expectations can be stressful, tiring and fraught with anxiety. Here are some practical, proven steps we can take and pass on, to ensure we stay well and stay sane.

Soap and Water-
It probably goes without saying that handwashing is paramount in the fight against Covid 19. The virus has an outer layer that once breached with soap and hot water renders it harmless and kills it. Hand gels with more than 70% alcohol do the same thing but are hard on hands if used repeatedly. Use soap that lathers but not dish soap since this too, when used neat, strips the helpful oils from your hands.
Health workers have been advised on returning home to; strip off their clothes by the door, put them in the washing machine and then go directly to shower. Washing with soap and water seems ridiculously simple and easy to forget but it really can be the difference between life and death.

Food-
During an outbreak, food should be taken from its outer packaging and fresh food should be washed. Freezing will not kill Covid 19 but heating it to above 200 degrees centigrade will. Remember that supermarket produce is handled many times and fruit and vegetables can be flown from far away and on the shelf in less than 48 hours.

It's tempting in isolation to console ourselves with food because we are: bored, stressed, anxious and fed up. We eat not to fuel our bodies but to; occupy, distract, comfort and reward ourselves. When so much seems out of our control and with so many activities denied us, we seek to satisfy our needs and appetites by eating.

Humans are programmed when stressed, to eat food high in sugars (for fight or flight) and high in fats and carbs (to create long term energy reserves). Our undernourished hunter-gatherer ancestor's survival depended on this programming, not so for us. So, whilst a little bit of what you fancy may do you good, it's estimated that the average weight gain during lockdown this year, in the UK, was 1 stone per adult.(Imagine 7 bags of sugar on your

kitchen counter, imagine how much they weigh. Now imagine all that weight being transferred to your own body!)

The advice is to eat a balanced and varied diet. Drink water and stay hydrated, our bodies are over 60% water and to stay healthy we should be drinking 2.5 to 3.5 litres of water a day. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, some lean animal protein and a small amount of dairy produce and carbohydrates. This approach is not just important in terms of weight but also for your bodily organs, skin, brain and your immune system.

Anything that we take into our bodies becomes a part of us. The food we eat is a big determiner of how fit and strong we are. There are currently no vaccines widely available to help us fight Covid 19, we have to rely on our bodies to fight it. Eat with that in mind.

Take the time to really enjoy what you eat. Turn off the TV and lap-top, put your food on a plate (even fruit or snacks) be aware of the size of portion. Enjoy how the food looks and smells before you ever get it to your mouth. Eat slowly and savour each mouthful. Try to chew your food well, before swallowing and be aware of the textures and the tastes. In this way, not only do you get the most pleasure from your food, but you are more likely to eat less. Eat mindfully and remember, 'You are what you eat".

Routine and Healthy habits-
During lockdown many found themselves still in their night clothes at 3 o clock in the afternoon, bedtimes started later, and morning routines were ditched. Human beings have evolved to be active in daylight hours and sleep at night, we are creatures of habit. Studies show that people who work night shifts for instance, have increased risk of certain cancers, as well as metabolic problems, heart disease, ulcers, gastrointestinal problems, and obesity. They also risk mental health problems such as depression, alongside a decrease in wellbeing and happiness.

Establishing and maintaining a routine is crucial to physical and mental health. Setting your alarm to get up, showering and dressing will prepare you for positive and constructive activities. Listing jobs that must be done and activities that you like to do, will add purpose to your time. Dividing that list into daily tasks and ticking each task off as you do them, will raise awareness of your accomplishments (no matter how small). This enhances your sense of self-worth and personal satisfaction.

Be sure schedule 'up times' of social contact where you talk to friends and family, 'Zoom', 'What's App' or if appropriate talk to a next-door neighbour whilst socially distanced. You can tell them your plans or show them, what you have accomplished that day and get lots of positive (feel good) feedback. If it is safe to hug, get a hug because being touched and held is very nourishing for us all, it lets us know we are loved and acknowledged, just for being us.

Exercise-
Stay active in lockdown. Keeping the blood pumping around your body and your muscles and skeleton active are more important than you might realise. You will have heard the saying, "Use it or lose it" human beings evolved to; walk and bend and stretch and lift and

generally be active. When we neglect our body's needs, we quickly lose these abilities and our health suffers (see previous article Exercise is Medicine)

Exercise does not have to involve squats and lunges, Lycra and weights or hours on a treadmill. 30 minutes moderate exercise a day will keep you fit. You could march whilst you mow, salsa whilst you sweep or just dance like no one is watching. Do something you enjoy; gardening, cleaning, and decorating are good exercise. Try walking around your house whilst talking on your phone. It doesn't matter what you do but as Nike says "Just Do It."

Sleep -
Neuroscientists and sleep researchers are only recently, fully understanding the power and importance of sleep. When we sleep, our bodies digest food, grow body tissues, repair cells, restore energy, and release molecules like hormones and proteins. Our brains store new information and get rid of toxic waste, whilst nerve cells communicate and reorganise. This all supports healthy brain functions such as learning, memory, problem solving, creativity, decision making, focus and concentration. Not surprisingly, sleep deprivation has a massive impact on physical health and mental wellbeing. Most adult humans should aim to have at least 6 hours sleep and function best on 8 hours sleep. Depression, anxiety, and stress; alongside obesity and many physical diseases are linked to lack of sleep. Anyone who thinks sleeping is a waste of their life couldn't be more wrong. So, make sure your bedroom is at the right temperature, your bed is comfortable and inviting and that all brain stimulants (lights and screens, phones and music) are switched off 30 minutes before bedtime. Have a bath, drink a soothing (non-caffeinated) drink, get a lovely bedtime routine and aim for 8 hours sleep.

Lock down and isolation can be tough. It can also be an opportunity to try new activities and learn more about ourselves. Looking after our health should not be optional. Taking care of our health has never been more important, it is part of caring for ourselves and it could be crucial if we get Covid 19.

You could choose to see Lockdown as the opportunity to get healthy, fit, and productive. Locking down could really free you up.

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