

MENTAL WELLBEING DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

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Social distancing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in our recent history and it has affected society globally. It is understandable that there is broad anxiety around the new situation in which we find ourselves.

This is expected as the uncertainty about how the virus and the national State of Disaster that has been implemented, will play out. Added to remote working and school and social shut down, this is a time of strain. Are you prepared to assess and optimise your mental wellbeing in the time of COVID-19?

Dr Mosima Mabunda, Head of Wellness at Discovery Vitality says: “While we do not attempt to address clinical mental illness, Vitality suggests a holistic approach through which we can maintain good mental wellbeing.”

“For instance, we advocate healthy eating which can assist with sleep and mood. Exercise and movement can help to ease certain symptoms of mild depression. Positive effects result from as little as 15 minutes a day of low-intensity exercise (like housework or taking a walk), gentle stretching and moving,” she says.

“Exercising outdoors has also been shown to supporting recovery from Seasonal Affective Disorder – a form of mood disorder that is linked to the colder months of the year when daylight hours are limited. I have no doubt it can help us now. Remember, you can still walk or jog, however, limit contact and walk or work out from a safe distance of at least 2m away from the nearest person,” says Mabunda.

WHO recommendations to global society

The World Health Organisation recognises the added stress that is being felt around isolation, change and health impacts. They suggest the following:

- that we remain empathetic to all those who are affected, in and from any country.
- try to avoid stigma around people who are
- collate your social media, television and radio news around the virus at certain times of the day if this is causing you to go to one or two trusted sources which offer practical steps and facts.
- check in on those who might need your help, like elderly neighbours and relatives.
- share positive and hopeful
- honour caretakers and healthcare workers supporting people affected with covid-19 in your
- For healthcare workers, remember that stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak. Managing your mental health and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is as important as managing your physical

Dr Mabunda adds that there are six areas you can assess and improve mental wellbeing where possible.

Sleep

“Healthy sleep patterns are a fundamental part of living a healthy lifestyle. While the regular routine of life is interrupted right now, sleep is still as important to your health as good nutrition, regular exercise and other healthy habits,” she says.

Practice good “sleep hygiene” – a range of healthy sleep habits that promote both better sleep quality and duration. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and American Psychiatric Association recommend the following hours of sleep for each age group:

Adults (18 – 60 years) 7-9 hours

Older adults (65+ years) 7 – 8 hours

Teens (13 – 18 years) 8 – 10 hours per 24 hours

Primary school (6 – 12 years) 9 – 10 hours per 24 hours

Pre-school (3 – 5 years) 10 – 13 hours per 24 hours (including naps)

Toddler (1 – 2 years) 11 – 14 hours per 24 hours (including naps)

Infant (4 – 12 months)

12 – 16 hours per 24 hours (including naps)

“It’s no surprise that virtually all bodily systems are impacted by poor or inadequate sleep. Good sleep is a buffer against common infections and illnesses, against chronic illnesses, general stressors and mood disorders,” she adds.

Healthy behaviours for excellent sleep

- Consistency is Wake up and go to sleep at the same time, both on weekdays and weekends, especially if you are working from home and have children to mind.
- Try to go to sleep when you are sleepy, and not when you are just
- Schedule sleep to allow for at least seven (or more) hours of
- Minimise excessive time spent in
- If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed and try again when you are feeling
- Once you’ve woken up from sleep, do not stay awake in bed for more than 10 minutes.
- Create a relaxing bed-time This can include relaxation techniques, like a warm bath, relaxing reading, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness practices, meditation, yoga and breathing techniques.

Alcohol abuse

“It may be tempting to reach for a glass of wine as the days are quieter and less social. However, this sort of distancing from society can quickly create pattern of drinking too much alcohol too often, or to episodes of binge drinking,” says Mabunda.

Research shows that drinking alcohol in excess harms your health and relationships. Alcohol abuse is associated with an increased risk of early death, morbidity (illness that results from alcohol abuse) and disability. This also has significant economic consequences.

“Even drinking moderately every day still poses a great risk to your health, behaviour and relationships and it increases your risk for alcohol-use disorder. As a general rule: The more alcohol you consume and the longer you keep doing it, the greater your level of risk,” Mabunda says.

Consider the effects around injury, harm to children, and your health at a time when we are winding down to slow the spread of a virus. Don’t add another factor which could put you at risk, says Mabunda. Alcohol affects your immunity, or the ability to fight off an illness.

Personal wellbeing

“Wellbeing refers to the way we feel, how we function on a personal and social level, and how we evaluate our lives as a whole. Of course, this is being tested by South Africans and citizens around the world who are social distancing to avoid the COVID-19 spreading.

“But wellbeing refers to more than our sense of momentary happiness. It’s about the degree to which we feel a sense of purpose and in control of our circumstances. It’s also about our level of mental and physical health and how these dictate our overall health, longevity, lifestyle behaviours, sense of social connectedness and productivity. And, studies show that higher levels of psychological wellbeing may be linked with a reduced risk of mortality and disease,” says Mabunda.

Consider that wellbeing is measured at a national level by some countries. It is affected by our emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, relational, spiritual and vocational wellbeing or wellbeing at work. The current state of social distancing means that all of these are now being tested.

How then, to ensure it is as balanced as possible? “Positive Psychology is the scientific study of the positive emotions and personal strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive – those qualities that optimise our sense of wellbeing,” says Mabunda.

“At the heart of this science is a belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. Positive Psychology suggests that living the good life involves more than avoiding or undoing problems. It focuses on developing our strengths in the face of challenges, rather than focusing only on what is wrong so that it can be ‘fixed’,” she says.

Some of the ways to do this are to practise optimism and gratitude. “Yes, we are confined to our homes, but it is precious time with loved ones or even for introspection. Both optimism and gratitude translate to physical good health too,” she says.

Resilience

“Stress is the body’s physical, mental or emotional response to some form of change. It’s a normal part of life, and the human body is designed to experience and react to stress. Without some level of stress humans would not thrive or succeed. But, it can also be negative in its effect when we face intense and continuous stress which overwhelms the adaptive response,” says Mabunda.

The antidote to stress is resilience, or your ability to bounce back from pain, hardship, failure. “We cannot always avoid stressful situations and, in fact, some forms of stress are good for us. Eustress is an adaptive and healthy experience of stress that may encourage personal growth, productivity and motivation,” she says.

There are opportunities during COVID-19 pandemic which can assist with creating eustress. “Now is the time to work in a quiet space, focus and spend time doing things we enjoy, but don’t always have or make time for.”

Resilience can ease stress and improve wellbeing

“We are not all born resilient. It is built in us. Building resilience takes practice, just like building and developing any muscle’s strength and stamina. Be patient and remember that slow and steady change may help to ease life’s challenges in a sustainable way. Be intentional, be mindful, be proactive and ask for help in practising your resilience,” says Mabunda.

Start with small, manageable efforts towards changing your approach to the stressors in your life.

Every person is unique. We face dynamic situations and have our own needs and preferences. Find the tools that you can integrate into your life to build resilience:

- Make a plan to deal with the issue or issues causing you to feel stressed, be they financial or related to the relationships in your life
- Know yourself – know your personal warning signs and triggers for
- Practise mindfulness and relaxation techniques to manage the effects of stress and increase your overall sense of wellbeing. These include:
 - Yoga
 - Deep breathing
 - Guided imagery
 - Meditation
- Exercise regularly
- Eat healthily
- Develop good sleeping habits and ensure your sleep quality and quantity are optimal
- Find a sense of purpose and Doing so gives context and hope, and also reflects that your life is about far more than the current situation you are facing.
- Set meaningful goals
- Ask for help. There is much support available when you reach out to:
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Your doctor, therapist or psychiatrist
 - Your employee wellness programme
 - Your HR manager

- Practise This may improve your overall wellbeing, and help to relieve the effects of stress. You have control over how you engage with and manage your stressors.
- Learn and grow from your Failing mindfully can be a powerful tool in your personal growth, and in building your ability to bounce back.

Anxiety

“No matter how hard we try, some of us experience excessive, exaggerated anxiety and worry. You need to know that generalised anxiety disorder is a condition characterised by feelings of recurrent and prolonged anxiety that influence our ability to function at work, in studies, in relationships and in life in general. This persistent anxiety is accompanied by a prolonging of the body’s stress response, with a negative effect on our mental and physical health,” says Mabunda.

Consult with your doctor or psychiatrist, virtually if you have to, to discuss methods of coping. While medicine can help to ease and reduce the symptoms, approaches like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are also available. This is a form of therapy has evidence-based proof of success in the treatment anxiety as it can give us cognitive and behavioural tools to help manage anxiety, regulate and reposition stress responses, thought patterns and behavioural responses.”

Depression

“Everyone experiences low moods to a greater or lesser extent. Feeling sad, down or blue can be a normal and appropriate responses to the loss of a loved one, loss of employment and other challenging life events. These times of feeling down generally resolve and we move on. They are temporary feelings and part of our normal mood fluctuations and short-lived emotional responses to everyday challenges,” says Mabunda.

“While feeling sad is an integral part of depression, it is not the same as depression. Depression is, in fact, a common mental health disorder that, globally, is experienced by more than 264 million people of all ages. It’s important that we are able to recognise the difference between sad emotions and a depression so that we can process both in a healthy way,” she says.

Signs and symptoms of depression?

- Depression is defined by intense feelings of despair and hopelessness, and feeling continuously burdened by
- People who are depressed may experience depressive symptoms differently to one another. Their experience of depression may include:
 - A heightened sense of emptiness

- Intense anger
 - Prolonged sadness, perhaps with unexplained crying
 - Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt
 - Ongoing irritability
 - Obsessive thoughts
 - A loss of interest in daily activities
 - Significant changes in appetite or weight
 - Feeling pessimistic and indifferent
 - A loss of energy and persistent lethargy
 - Changes in sleep quality and sleep patterns
 - Self-loathing or reckless behaviour
 - Concentration problems and indecisiveness
 - Slowed thoughts
 - Recurring thoughts of death and suicide
 - Unexplained aches and pains
 - Reduced physical movement
- Both moderate and severe depression can be a serious health
 - Depression changes how we think, feel and function in our daily activities and can affect our ability to work and study, to eat healthily or to sleep well and to enjoy It can make getting through the day feel overwhelming.

We encourage you to speak to people who you trust and to be proactive in getting support. Contact your doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist for support if you, or a family member or friend or colleague, if you are concerned that you may have depression, says Mabunda.

There are medical and psychological interventions which can assist people who are depressed. First, this must be diagnosed by a healthcare professional. “Mindfulness practices (for mild symptoms of depression) that promote being fully present in the moment and integrate that awareness into everyday life. Journaling, to clear the mind and better understand thoughts and feelings. And there are a range of apps, like Calm and Headspace,” says Mabunda.

In this trying time, please reach out to support groups like SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group). It is a non-profit organisation that can give support for various challenges. They offer support groups as well as free telephonic counselling 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



Visit the Vitality at Home page

(<https://www.discovery.co.za/vitality/vitality-at-home-exercise-nutrition-health>) for more ideas on how to stay healthy and rewarded at home.

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