

Surviving Social Distancing

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Recommendations made by public health officials to “social distance” ourselves to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have resulted in drastic changes to the lives of many around the world. While we are repeatedly assured that these drastic measures are necessary to combat this virus and save millions of lives, the implications of these policies haven’t been fully explained.

What are mostly being described as “inconvenient” or “unfortunate” byproducts of recent shutdowns are actually far more, serious than officials are letting on. Many are so serious that they are much more likely to lead to a significant loss of life than the COVID-19 virus.

Risks of Social Distancing

Like any medical advice or treatment, the public needs to be informed about any associated risks and equipped with information about how to minimize them. This information is critical in protecting the public and helping them prepare and take preventative actions. Some of the biggest risks Americans are being exposed to right now include:

- Social isolation and loneliness which [doubles](#) your risk of dying from any cause
- Unemployment which increases your risk of dying by [63%](#)
- Mental health conditions, which have a [14.3%](#) mortality rate
- [Substance use disorders](#), which cause over [67,000](#) overdoses in the US each year
- An economic crash like the one in 2008, which caused [45,000 suicides](#)
- High levels of stress, which can [double](#) your risk of dying

The ways that COVID-19 is disrupting the routines, livelihoods, and lives of the American public are significant. While the current public health initiative will lower the COVID-19 death toll, it still puts American lives at risk.

Please do not assume that COVID-19 is the most imminent risk to your health and the health of those you care about. The social, economic, and psychological risks of COVID-19 and the way it is being combatted are far more serious than the risks of the virus itself (which has a 3.4% mortality rate). Take additional precautions to protect yourself from these risks in the weeks and months to come.

Warning Signs

Risks are reduced by early detection. Knowing the warning signs and symptoms of mental health issues help people take early action that can significantly improve their symptoms and reduce their risks. Monitor yourself and those you care about for these warning signs:

- Being more tired, unmotivated, or uninterested in things, activities or people
- Finding it hard to focus on or complete basic tasks or activities
- Neglecting your hygiene, health or other important routines
- Being more irritable, moody, sensitive or on-edge
- Changes in your eating or sleeping patterns
- [Excessive drinking](#), drug use or misuse of prescription medication
- Feeling a loss of control over your behaviors (ie binge eating or porn)
- Feeling excessively worried, nervous, or restless
- Experiencing panic attacks (heart racing, trouble breathing, or feeling shaky/dizzy)
- Getting stuck in thought patterns that scare or upset you (ie paranoia)
- Thoughts of harming yourself or wishing you were dead

Precautions and Protections

The media has bombarded the public with precautionary measures we can all take to protect against contracting the COVID-19. These are ways you can be proactive about minimizing your risk. Many of these protective actions are centered around ways you can structure your daily routine to make time for activities that will be good for your physical and mental health. These include:

- 1. Jumpstart your day:** While it might seem appealing to sleep in until noon, wear pajamas and stay in bed all day, too many days of this can derail your productivity and even lead to depression. Set yourself up first thing by setting an alarm and sticking to a morning routine similar to the one you had before.
- 2. Be active:** An active lifestyle is good for both your physical and mental health. It boosts your mood, your productivity, and gives you more energy. If you normally work out at the gym and can't do so, adapt your workout to something you can do from home. If you can exercise outside, there are additional benefits for your health, as the sun triggers your brain to release chemicals that help improve your mood and stay energized.

3. **Stay connected:** Everyone will need to make a bigger effort to stay socially connected, especially for those who live alone. Make a point to reach out more frequently to people. Consider a phone call or facetime instead of texting or using social media, as these have more of a positive impact on your mental health and provide an opportunity for a more meaningful connection.
4. **Stay positive:** A positive mindset can be hard to maintain during a time when the media is flooded with scary COVID-19 headlines. If this affects you, limit your exposure to it by only checking the news once a day. Same with social media, which can also have a negative impact on your mental health. Instead, seek out messages you find encouraging or inspiring. Also consider starting a meditation routine, which is a proven way to improve your mental health, and can help you learn how to distance yourself from negative thoughts.
5. **Goals and projects:** Time doesn't have to be your enemy. In fact, it could be an opportunity to invest in goals or projects that you've meant to get started on or to explore the interests you have. Being intentional about using your time well will help you avoid unhealthy behaviors or timewasters. Also, working towards growth or improvement helps you to remain hopeful, guarding against some of the negative thoughts that can creep up along with stress, anxiety or depression.

More Resources

If you or someone you care about is struggling with mental health issues, reach out for help. Most therapists have transitioned to providing online therapy and sites like *Psychology Today* can help you find a therapist and you can use the filters to narrow down to therapists with specific specialties or who are in-network with your insurance. If you are in a mental health crisis, call the 24-hour suicide prevention hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or call 911 for immediate help.

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<https://www.substanceabuse.com/our-experts/hailey-shafir-lpcs/>

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