

A Student's Guide to Wellness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a far reaching impact on the lives of millions of people. As we adjust to the 'new normal' of social distancing, we are also seeing many changes in our lifestyles and home life. Some people may experience fear, anxiety, depressed mood or other mental health symptoms. These reactions are natural responses to an unprecedented situation.

Although these feelings are normal, there are steps you can take to promote wellness in your life during this difficult period. Certain lifestyle factors can promote well-being and even reduce the impact of stress and mental health issues in our lives (Walsh, 2011). Below you will learn about some of these lifestyle factors along with tips on how to build on them in your life.

1. Sleep

Good quality sleep contributes to physical and psychological health. A good night's sleep energizes you and gets you ready for the day, improves your memory and reasoning, heightens your concentration and focus, and helps with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Sleep has also been shown to improve cardiovascular health, to reduce inflammation, and to help your body repair itself. The average adult requires 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night to obtain the benefits.

General tips and strategies for improving sleep quality:

Sleep Hygiene: Sleep hygiene means having a daily routine that contributes to and maintains the quality of your sleep.

- Maintain a sleep schedule: Go to bed at the same time each night and get out of bed at the same time each morning, even on the weekends.
- Practice a relaxing bedtime ritual. Have a wind down activity before bedtime.
- Exercise daily.
- Drink water during the day and avoid large meals before bed (i.e. after 9PM).
- Ensure your bedroom is a sleep inducing environment.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol before bed, as they can interfere with sleep.
- Avoid screens before bed.
- Avoid naps, which can interfere with your sleep schedule.

Stimulus Control: Stimulus control means using your bed for sleep and sex and nothing else. Building this association improves your sleep because it makes being in bed a signal to your brain for sleepiness. Stimulus control is like forming a habit, and like all habits it might take time and practice to lock it in.

- Go to bed only when you feel tired and sleepy.
- If you are lying in bed awake or tossing and turning, get out of bed and do something soothing.
- Don't stare at the clock and calculate how much sleep you would be getting.
- When you feel tired, try to fall asleep again. If you don't succeed after ~15-30 minutes, get up again.
- When you wake up in the morning, get out of bed immediately.
- Avoid doing any other activities in bed i.e. playing on your phone, eating, watching television etc.

2. Relaxation and Stress Management

When you are stressed your body releases the stress hormone cortisol; chronic exposure to cortisol can take a major toll on both your psychological and physical well-being. Ongoing self-management with relaxation practices can play a major role in managing stress. There are many ways to relax:

- Deep breathing: Promotes an effective balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body. Take a deep breath from your belly, count to 4 as you inhale, pause, then exhale counting to 4, then pause. Continue for 5-10 minutes for effect.
- Meditation practice: A practice of focused attention and non-judgment of experience in the present moment. Many people report these practices to be relaxing.
 - [Tenpercent](#) - scroll to the bottom for guided meditations.
 - There are also various meditation apps including [Meditation Studio App](#), [Calm](#), and [Mindfulness](#).
- Yoga: A body-based practice of relaxation and mindful awareness.
 - In Edmonton, Metta Yoga, Navina Yoga, Shala Ashtanga Yoga Centre are offering online classes.
 - There are also yoga apps like [Down Dog](#), [Track Yoga](#), [5 Minute Yoga](#).
- Tai Chi and Qi Gong: Eastern mindful movement practices that combine meditation and exercise. E.g. [Videos](#), and apps like [7 minute Chi](#), and [Tai Chi Chuan](#).
- Progressive muscle relaxation: Systematically tensing and relaxing your muscles helps you identify and alleviate tension in your body. [Audio](#).

3. Altruism

Altruistic service and contribution to others has been shown to have beneficial effects for both the giver and receiver. Giving can promote your happiness as well as your mental and spiritual health. Spending time and resources to help others can be a key aspect of positive psychological and social health. Here are some ways to contribute during these times:

- Connect virtually with family and close friends. Providing much needed social support can be rewarding.
- Help out family, friends, and/or neighbours who are in self-isolation by delivering groceries, medicine etc.
- Contribute to public health by following the [guidelines](#) for self-distancing and self-isolation as outlined by the Government of Alberta. Advocate for others to follow these guidelines as well.
- Contribute and/or volunteer with community groups such as [YEG community response](#).
- Volunteer to help with the COVID crisis either in person or virtually: [Volunteer Connector](#).
- Donate [blood](#).
- Use your own unique skills and talents to connect and share with others.

4. Exercise

Exercise is a key component of well-being. Physical activity can contribute to both physical and mental resilience, improved mood and sleep as well as stress reduction. Regular exercise routines have been disrupted with gyms closing and physical distancing in place. It's tempting to spend all day on the couch bingeing Netflix. Now more than ever, it's important to stay active. The good news is that there are plenty of exercise options still available.

- As long as you are engaging in physical distancing guidelines, it's okay to go outside. Go for a run, bike ride, or take the family dog for a walk. You can go alone or with a member of your household. Or, walk while connecting with friends virtually!
- If you're new to working out at home, find some online guides to get you started. There are options regardless of what kind of room or equipment you have. Planks, squats, and chair dips can be done in small spaces. Get some more use out of your textbooks and use them as weights! [WHO](#). [Healthline](#).
- YouTube has lots of options for fitness classes—from yoga to HIIT to kickboxing and more. Check out a variety of exercises and find your favourite. Or, if you feel like you're getting bored, pick a new type of exercise each week.
- Many companies are eliminating their subscription fees to help make physical activity more accessible. Check out this [at-home fitness](#) site with hundreds of videos.
- If you're missing the feeling of a live exercise class, many trainers and gyms have begun streaming their classes online at little or no cost. [Yeg Fitness](#) is compiling a list of local companies hosting virtual classes.
- Set yourself up for success! Just like any habit, it will take time to get used to working out at home.
 - Remember that some exercise is better than nothing—try not to get frustrated if you aren't initially working out as frequently as you would like.
 - Schedule workouts into your calendar like they're appointments. This will likely be more helpful than saying to yourself, "I'll try to work out today."
 - Figure out what helps you feel motivated—is it a new playlist that helps you feel pumped up? Changing into your favourite workout gear? Find out what works and repeat.

If you have health concerns or respiratory issues, it is important to speak to a medical professional about what kinds of physical activity are appropriate.

5. Social Supports & Relationships

Humans are social beings. For thousands of years, people have relied on each other for survival. Nurturing strong social connections is an important component of our well-being. Physical distancing and the closures of schools and workplaces have disrupted the way we interact, and it's normal to feel isolated or lonely. However, even in this period of physical separation, we can maintain social connection.

- Communicate regularly with friends and family. Even though you can't see them in person, you can still call, text, or take advantage of programs like Zoom, Google Hangouts, and FaceTime.
- Have a movie night with friends. [Netflix Party](#) is a new Chrome extension that allows you and your friends to watch a movie together and chat at the same time.
- Is there a book you've been meaning to read? Try organizing a book club.
- Set up regular virtual coffee dates with friends and family.
- Enjoy shows like 'Nailed It'? Pick a recipe and challenge your friends to some friendly competition and see who can create the best looking baked treats!
- Plan a fancy dinner night - dress up in your best clothes, light some candles, and enjoy a virtual meal with friends.
- Take turns hosting a virtual trivia night.
- Many classic games such as Monopoly have apps or online versions, making them a great option for having fun with friends.
- Some companies include directions for how to play their game [online](#).
- Complex multiplayer games can also be played [online](#).
- Check in with yourself frequently and assess how you're doing. If you're having a tough time, ask others to reach out regularly.

6. Spend Time in Nature

Many people turn to nature as a way to recharge, recenter, and cope with major life stressors. Spending time outdoors is a great way to boost your mood, which can be helpful when we're feeling stressed or disconnected from our loved ones. Although going camping or visiting provincial parks may not be an option right now, there are still ways to soak up nature:

- Go for a walk around your neighbourhood. Try to identify trees or plants that you may have been too busy to notice before. Be sure to spend time outside responsibly and practice physical distancing if other people are around.
- Identify any ways in which nature is available to you - do you have a backyard? Balcony? Porch? Meditating in these spaces may help you to savour that time with nature.
- Try bringing parts of your exercise routine outside. Even in a small space, you can still do squats!
- If you love animals, spend time with your pet, or borrow a pet from family or friends. Some people are even using this time as an opportunity to foster animals.
- Bring the outside in. Try starting an indoor garden. If you don't have a green thumb, get artsy! You can draw, paint, or even embroider your favourite parts of nature. Also, there's nothing wrong with fake plants.
- Listen to nature soundscapes on YouTube or meditation apps. Doing dishes feels a lot more relaxing when it's to the sound of a roaring campfire or calm ocean waves.

7. Religious and Spiritual Involvement

In the face of uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation some may find comfort in their spirituality. Research shows that spirituality can help people cope with stress and illness and also promote mental health. People often reflect on life and meaning during difficult times. COVID-19 can offer moments to reconnect with religious practices, reflect on our personal values, pray, meditate, or develop our sense of connectedness with others. Most importantly, it offers us an opportunity to further our development. Here are some tips on how:

- Take time to pray, meditate, or reflect with a focus on what is most important in your life.
- Set aside time for spiritual rituals or actions each day.
- Try meditating or reflecting on things you are grateful for in your life. Write in a "[Gratitude Journal](#)".
- Read a spiritual text, look for themes or quotes that resonate with you and write them down.
- Many places of worship are offering services online. Contact your place of worship and inquire into online or virtual services.
- Try setting an intention each day that aligns with your values. Find a word or phrase that resonates with you (e.g., may I show kindness to myself and others) and find ways to enact this value through the day. Check out this resource on [intention setting](#).
- Follow your local church, spiritual leader, or personal hero on social media.
- Plan to speak with a spiritual leader or group (e.g., priest, youth group).
 - Consider reaching out to the [Interfaith Chaplains' Association](#).
 - [First Peoples' House](#) remains open to provide services and be in contact during this time.
- Take time to reflect on what is important in your life. If you need some help, check out this [worksheet](#).

8. Recreation/Hobbies

Social distancing likely means we've had to adjust some or several of our hobbies. As we spend an increasing number of hours indoors and in isolation it can become more and more difficult to experience positive feelings like joy, curiosity, or interest. It is important to pay attention to our behavior. Engaging in fun activities can help us feel better. Research has shown that positive emotions can protect our mental health, bolster our creativity, and make us more resilient to stress. Below are some simple tips and resources that can help get you started:

- Make a list of **any** activity you may want to try or do while at home. Be creative and try to modify activities to accommodate the physical distancing restrictions. If you need help, here is a [list of 365 activities](#) to get you started.
- Make a recreation schedule. At the beginning of each week, intentionally plan activities that you enjoy doing and protect this time. This [sheet](#) can help you plan your days.
- Plan activities that give you a sense of **Achievement**, **Connectedness** with others, and **Enjoyment (ACE)**. Here is a video that elaborates on [ACE activities](#).
- Try a new hobby for 7 days. Is there an activity that you have been meaning to try but have put off? Try it out for 7 days and see what happens!
- Read a book you have at home or check one out online. Don't have many books at home? No problem, try the e-books at [Edmonton Public Library](#).
- Reserve time for play. Whether it's having a virtual board game night with friends or working on a puzzle with partners or roommates, play is an essential component of positive emotions.
- Remember, it is completely okay to relax and at times not do ANYTHING. Be kind to yourself during these moments as we all need them.

9. Diet/Nutrition

Let's face it, Kraft Dinner and Mr. Noodles are delicious and cheap, but not the healthiest. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all facing unique challenges when it comes to meeting our nutritional needs. We may be more likely to overeat, under eat or eat junk food. During a pandemic, going to the grocery store can be a stressful experience and so this is an opportunity to improve our shopping skills and use our pantries more efficiently! There is now a great deal of evidence suggesting that a balanced and nutritious diet can improve our mental health. Here are some tips to help:

- The [Campus Food Bank](#) remains open on Wednesdays and Thursdays. If you are struggling to access basic food necessities, do not hesitate to access this resource.
- Make a list of everything in your pantry and fridge. Use these ingredients to experiment with recipes you have never made before.
- Schedule three meals per day and try your best to eat at scheduled mealtimes.
- Challenge yourself to drink 8 glasses (8 oz) of water per day.
- Try your best to eat a variety of foods each day and follow the [Canada Food Guide](#).
- Check out this information from the [World Health Organization](#) on nutrition and health during COVID-19.
- Read through these [helpful tips](#) published by Harvard School of Public Health.
- There are many websites that can help you budget while grocery shopping and make delicious meals. [Budget bytes](#) is a website that can help you use the products in your pantry and save money!

9. Diet/Nutrition *continued...*

- When going to the grocery store prepare in advance by making a list. In this [YouTube Video](#), a family doctor covers some helpful tips for being safe when handling groceries.
- It is natural to overeat or undereat in times of stress. Be kind to yourself during these moments and plan your meals to decrease binge eating or stress eating.
- Take this opportunity to hone your cooking skills. Cooking can be a fun activity and an important life skill. Follow your favorite chef on YouTube or social media and experiment.

Keep these strategies in mind as we continue through the COVID-19 pandemic. Remember that wellness looks different for different people. If something helps you that is not included in the above sections, great! Share your strategies with friends and family. We're all in this together. Above all, remember to be kind and compassionate with yourself and others during this time.

Other Resources

If you feel like you are struggling and could use professional help, you are not alone. Counselling and Clinical Services is currently offering supportive counselling via telephone. To set up an appointment, call 780-492-5205. If you are in crisis or need of immediate support, please phone ACCESS 24/7 at 780-424-2424 or the 24 Hour Distress Line at 780-482-4357.

For more resources, check out "[How Are Students Handling Things During Covid-19?](#)" and "[How Do I Cope with Stress and Anxiety of a Pandemic?](#)"

Source Article

Walsh, R. (2011). Lifestyle and mental health. *American Psychologist*, 66(7), 579–592. doi:10.1037/a0021769.

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

