

Quarantine Fatigue Is Real—Here's How to Keep Up Social Distancing Anyway

Psychologists share tips on how to make staying home a bit easier—even when you want to get out.

By **Leah Groth**

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On March 11, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and just days later, the US government launched a campaign to slow the spread of COVID-19 by urging all non-essential workers to stay home and maintain social distancing rules.

For the most part, people in the US have been compliant with the recommendations set forth by the government and health organizations—staying indoors, wearing face masks, maintaining a six-foot distance from everyone outside of immediate family—but in recent weeks experts have noticed a disturbing regression dubbed "quarantine fatigue," in which people, regardless of what their local government says, have been slipping back into pre-pandemic social habits.

There's evidence to support that social slide: Researchers at the University of Maryland, in conjunction with the Maryland Transportation Institute (MTI), collected cellphone location data from across the US and found that 48 states have seen a reduction in their social distancing index—a measurement that records compliance with government restrictions and guidelines to help contain the coronavirus outbreak. Overall, researchers have noticed people taking more non-work trips, more out-of-state and out-of-county trips, and traveling longer distances overall.

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This loosening of social distancing behavior, as researchers describe it, could have a devastating impact on the progress the US has already made in trying to flatten

the curve—and it's important for people to continue social distancing recommendations, even as the country begins to slowly open up.

Still, it's important to recognize that social isolation can take a toll. "A few days of being at home with family seemed exciting, but after a few weeks the excitement wears off and it becomes obvious that many areas of life are on hold, and no matter what the effort, progress is not possible," Paula Zimbrea, MD, FAPA, FACLP a Yale Medicine psychiatrist, tells *Health*.

Psychotherapist Paul Hokemeyer, PhD, author of *Fragile Power*, explains that quarantine fatigue stems from that emotional exhaustion the pandemic has placed on our lives. "I'm hearing from all of my clients that they are exhausted from the sheltering in place rules. They feel unkempt. They're bored. They're broke. They want to divorce their partner and give away their children," he says. "This pandemic has elevated the notion of powerlessness and uncertainty to a level we've never before experienced."

But overall, these are all natural feelings, says Dr. Hokemeyer. Austin Hall, MD, medical director for the UNC Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health agrees. "Quarantine fatigue is a completely reasonable response in the context of so much change and uncertainty," he says. "The COVID-19 crisis has transformed so many aspects of our lives in a short time. Many of us, probably most of us, are experiencing it. We need to acknowledge it as normal and forgive ourselves and each other when it hinders our ability to cope." But how can we continue to cope, even when it starts feeling harder and harder to stay inside? We asked the experts for tips on how to deal with quarantine fatigue in the healthiest ways possible.

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1. Remember: This will pass.

"When times are difficult, we think they will last forever, but they don't," says Dr. Hokemeyer. "Everything changes." He suggests focusing on the truth that a "long-term strategy that entails short term discomfort is better." In the context of COVID-19, that means that all of our social-distancing right now is the best possible

situation for long-term public health. “An ounce of prevention is worth 20 tons of a cure,” says Dr. Hokemeyer.

2. Try to live one day at a time.

Think of your life in 24-hour periods, suggests Dr. Hokemeyer—thinking of your time inside in terms of days rather than weeks can make it feel more manageable. “Set up a routine. Get up the same time of day. Take a shower, put on makeup or shave, put on an outfit that makes you feel good. Articulate 2 goals that you want to accomplish that day and do them,” Dr. Hokemeyer says. Then—and this is important—after your workday is done, log off. “Close things down in the evening and lose yourself in a feel-good book or binge [a funny tv show].”

3. Use this time to take up journaling.

Journaling is a great tool during any trying time, but especially right now, says Dr. Hokemeyer. “Keep a journal of the roller coaster,” he urges, suggesting writing your thoughts down every day. “Then at the end of the week go back and go over them,” he says. “You’ll see a pattern to this all rather than being consumed by the chaos you feel in it. In this order, you’ll regain a sense of agency and power.”

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4. Make new friends. (Seriously.)

Just because you are social distancing, doesn’t mean you can’t make new friends or develop relationships. “Reach out to [at least] one person...who is slightly outside your immediate circle of friends and family. Keep expanding this circle,” says Dr. Hokemeyer. “Now more than ever we need to connect to each other through kindness.”

5. Think about your life plan.

There is no better time to reevaluate your life goals. "Articulate three goals each in the personal, professional and spiritual areas of your life in the next year," says Dr. Hokemeyer. "By creating a plan for your future you'll be able to tolerate the discomfort of the present." To that end, now could also be a great time to think about things you weren't happy with, pre-pandemic, and make a vow to switch up that way of thinking when you're able to resume your daily life.

6. Keep using technology to your advantage.

Because some degree of physical distancing will remain a necessary part of our lives for the foreseeable future, Dr. Hall encourages everyone to continue using technology as a communication tool. "Technology cannot adequately replace human contact, but it is nevertheless remarkable that most of us have such robust digital tools to use to stay connected with each other," he says. "We should use that technology to limit our social distancing, appreciating that if this outbreak had occurred even just 10 years ago, we would have likely felt much more isolated from each other."

Not sure where else to start other than a daily phone call to your parents or siblings? Dr. Zimbrea recommends looking to the people around you, including the media, to keep things interesting. "The media is full of examples, from zoom parties to playing tennis with your neighbor, opera singing on balconies," she says.

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7. Focus on surviving, not thriving right now.

"We can't maintain perfection in all areas of our lives in this crisis and shouldn't be striving for it," says Dr. Hall. "If you are emotionally exhausted from the efforts needed to maintain physical distancing, then forgive yourself if you relax your self-expectations in other areas of your life such as your diet and exercise habits, work productivity, or parenting choices." Basically: We're all human, and we're all doing the best we can.

8. Try to get some exercise, if your space allows.

Exercise is a great way to relieve stress right now, in addition to supporting your immune system and your mental health. Dr. Zimbrea suggests engaging in physical activities that won't compromise anyone's health, like a long, socially-distanced run or bike ride. "If outdoor activities are possible with maintaining social distancing, those are preferable," she says. "If spending time outside is not an option, redecorating the house or decluttering can help. Home improvement projects are at an all-time high these days."

9. Keep yourself mentally stimulated, but distracted.

Keeping your mind active with anything pandemic-unrelated can boost your mental health. Dr. Zimbrea suggests anything that can be distracting, from movies, board games to taking up a new hobby, learning a language or other new skill that may be useful later. The key is to think about literally anything other than coronavirus during these times—and sticking with it.

The information in this story is accurate as of press time. However, as the situation surrounding COVID-19 continues to evolve, it's possible that some data have changed since publication. While Health is trying to keep our stories as up-to-date as possible, we also encourage readers to stay informed on news and recommendations for their own communities by using the CDC, WHO, and their local public health department as resources.

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