

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a black Adidas tank top. She is looking upwards and to the right with a bright, joyful smile. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting at night or in low light. The text 'Health & wellness Guide' is overlaid in white at the bottom of the image.

Health & wellness Guide

KEEP PLANS SHORT-TERM

One day at a time. Please remember that. Plan for today, maybe tomorrow – but don't look into a currently unknown future. You'll drive yourself to distraction.



FIND NEW STRUCTURE

There's no denying that humans are creatures of habit. That morning coffee shop trip, the route we take to work. Most of us like some kind of structure – even if we aren't consciously aware that we do!



Now, we have to create a new kind of structure that still gives us a sense of purpose. Building routine is grounding, a welcome feeling amongst a period of unease. What can you do to create this? Perhaps going to bed and getting up at the same time as usual. Getting dressed as you normally would. Engaging in the hobbies you ordinarily enjoy. What about keeping the 'weekend'

As we all start forgetting what day of the week it is (bar bin day, of course) it might be nice to have Saturday and Sunday as the 'relaxed days' – especially if you have kids. Putting away school learning packs and Twinkl resources, more screen time, an extra pack of Haribo or two? BUT – always remember to ensure some flexibility with this 'routine' to allow for wavering moods. This will inevitably happen.



TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF

And if you aren't productive? Please, it's no big deal.

Be kind to yourself. As author and mental health advocate Matt Haig so eloquently wrote on his Instagram feed last week, "The current era is crap enough without having to feel guilt that we aren't learning Greek and painting watercolours of daffodils. If you brushed your teeth today and got showered and ate something and spent ten minutes not looking at the news then well done, it's an achievement."



ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL

This slowing down of our days may bring feelings to the surface that would otherwise be buried under layers of life's 'busy-ness'. Emotions that have been suppressed – maybe unwittingly – may arise; feelings of sadness, anger or anxiety. This is normal. Let these emotions come. Sit with them. Give them space. They often soften once we allow ourselves to feel them.



And remember – just because you think it, it certainly doesn't make it true. Your thoughts are just... thoughts. It's not about changing our negative thoughts, replacing them, or fighting them. Rather, when those less-than-helpful thoughts come along, they can become 'old friends' – they can come and go – but you just don't have to attach feeling to them anymore.

***"I always say to my clients when you realise the horror movie is JUST a movie, it loses its power."
"***



PRACTISE GRATITUDE

Gratitude is an easy way to see past what is making you anxious. Being grateful changes your focus from what is wrong to what is right, and this shift is a powerful tool for bringing perspective into our

lives when we seem to have deviated from that balance. Now is as good a time as ever to practise gratitude. Put pen to paper and write down a list of what you're grateful for every morning and notice the changes in your mood.



EXERCISE

Any kind of movement is key here – it will help reduce stress and anxiety in the body. We are lucky that so many gyms,

yoga studios, personal trainers and fitness accounts have moved their workouts online – many even offering free content. Whether you have a little boogie in the kitchen cooking dinner, pop outside for a walk or engage in something a little more intense, exercise is no doubt BRILLIANT for body and mind. Joe Wicks at 9am, anybody?



BE MINDFUL – FOCUS ON YOUR BREATH

Your breathing is the easiest (and most useful!) place to start when it comes to appreciating the present moment.

Choose a quiet, comfortable place. Sit or stand and just breathe naturally.

Simply observe each breath without trying to adjust or alter it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation through your nostrils. If your mind wanders – which it will – bring your attention back to your breathing.

A great breathing exercise for when you are feeling particularly anxious?



Try breathing in through your nose for a count of 4, hold the breath for a count of 7, and exhale through the mouth – pursing the lips – for 8 seconds. Repeat this cycle up to 4 times.

If these counts are uncomfortably long, reduce to suit. Just make sure that the out breath is always slightly longer than the in breath. Mindful breathing is a great tool for bringing yourself out on your head and down into your body.



Look after your state of mind – ships don't sink because of the water around them; they sink because of the water that gets in them.

GROUND YOURSELF

Try this short grounding exercise:

1. Close your eyes and create the most calming environment you have ever been in.

You can either enact this from memory or use your imagination. Here you are safe. You are looking through your own eyes – so you can see, hear and really feel this place of calmness.

2. Experiment with the visual qualities to see if you can make it even calmer – maybe shift the focus, adjust the size to make it larger, filling your visual screen into a panoramic scene.

3. Next play around with the auditory qualities – the volume, the direction of this sound, adding music, or perhaps even turning the sound off.

4. Finally, experiment with the kinaesthetic qualities of this calm place – releasing any tension you feel in your body now. Starting from your feet, working your way through your legs, stomach, shoulders and chest, arms and hands, the muscles around your mouth and eyes. Breathing deeper, slower.



**STEER CLEAR OF
UNHELPFUL
COPING
MECHANISMS**

By all means, enjoy a glass or two of red (personal tipple of choice). But don't be sucked into unhelpful coping mechanisms. Alcohol, drugs, too much caffeine, and general 'busy-ness' are some of our usual go-tos, but they aren't particularly useful during this time. If you are blocking uncomfortable feelings, you are essentially blocking all feelings. We need to acknowledge these difficult emotions.



GET CREATIVE

If we're feeling particularly anxious or low, we might forget about doing the things we usually get so much joy from – it's a bit of a vicious cycle! However, these things – especially the creative ones – are often the distraction we need to help move us away from such detrimental thoughts and feelings. Think about how you could adapt your hobbies and creative interests during this period at home, or try something new. There are lots of free courses online for instance, and people are continually coming up with inventive ways to have fun. Check out the online pub quizzes and music concerts. Minimal effort, maximum laughs.

STAY CONNECTED

There's no doubt about it, not being able to visit family and friends right now stings. Rather than reeling, plug your efforts into staying connected.

Phone calls or video calls – via FaceTime or the HouseParty app – are great.

Dropping texts or sending messages on social media platforms also help to keep us connected. It's vital we keep contact during this time – it will help both you and the people you are talking to feel less isolated. When this storm passes and life returns to a new normal, maybe we will squeeze the ones we love that bit tighter? I think so.



LOOK AFTER YOUR SLEEP

Sleep is absolutely vital for maintaining good physical and mental health – it's really important to get enough. Bedtime plays a significant role in healing and repairing our hearts and blood vessels; helps us maintain a healthy weight and a good balance of hormones; and controls our sugar levels. Sleep is also incredibly important for various aspects of brain

function, including concentration, performance and productivity.

When it comes to counting those sheep, be mindful of melatonin levels – exposure to light in the middle of the night can suppress melatonin production and enhance alertness. So forget those late-night Instagram scrolls – it can disrupt your sleep and makes it more difficult to fall back off. If you need to take a trip to the toilet, keep a subdued light to hand rather than turning on that ultra-bright bulb!

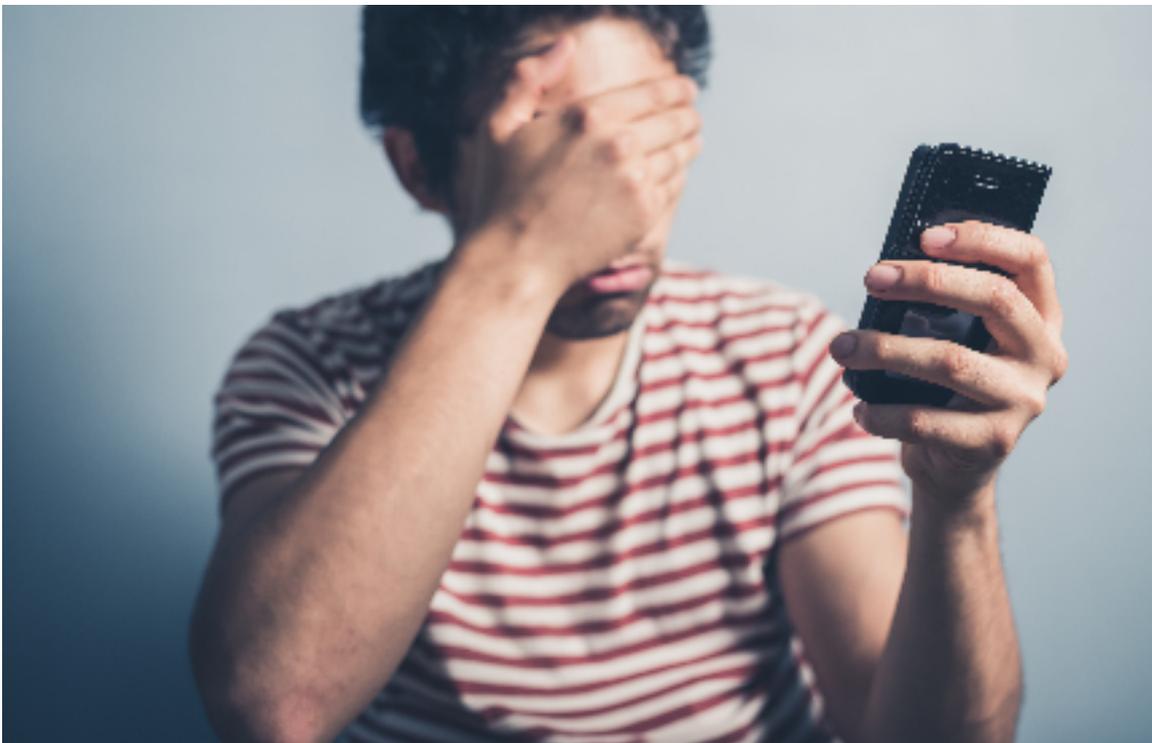
Making sensible food and drink choices (cough, caffeine, cough) and keeping your electrical device usage to a minimum will all help to keep your sleep patterns in check.



KINDNESS IS KEY

Kindness is the simplest way to tell another that there is love to be found in this world. Do something for others – it is great for mental health, and you help someone in the process.

Win, win. Big or small, how can you help a neighbour, a family member, or a friend today?



LIMIT DIGITAL USAGE AND MEDIA EXPOSURE

Pay attention to the amount of time you're spending watching news coverage, listening to radio updates and checking social media news pages. Perhaps you could set yourself a specific time to read updates – or turn off alerts on your phone? Remember to stick to facts in these unprecedented times. Find a credible source that is trust-worthy (GOV.UK for example) and avoid listening to your neighbour's cousin's dog walker's Facebook update.

On the flip side, think about how possibly inaccurate information could affect others too. Avoid sharing information without first checking its reliability.



**USE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
TO YOUR ADVANTAGE**

Yes, it really is a double-edged sword but social media can be a lifeline especially in strange times like these. Go to where the good stuff is – feeds such as The Happy Newspaper are great for spreading joy and love. There are so many accounts dedicated to mental health and finding inner peace – Megan Rose Lane, Sandy Newbigging and Matt Haig to name just a few.

HAVE A LAUGH



A good laugh heals a lot of hurts. Watch something that garners a giggle – head to the Netflix comedy section and pop something on. Watch old videos on your phone, gather ALL the memes, read something funny, watch a comedy show.

You most certainly CAN find joy and beauty in these times. Go seek them." Natasha Albanese is a Hypnotherapist, NLP Practitioner and Life Coach.

