WELL INFORMED

How To Stay Healthy—And Sane—When You're Stuck At Home

Expert advice for everyone who's skipping the gym, stress eating junk food, and letting their anxiety run rampant.

By | **Barbara Brody**, Writer

Even if you're someone who normally eats well-balanced meals, gets regular exercise, and has solid stress-management skills, the novel coronavirus pandemic—also known as COVID-19—is bound to change things. Gyms have closed, toilet paper supplies are running low, and we're all being bombarded by distressing nonstop news coverage.

"Being 'socially distant' leads to increased stress and anxiety, and that's going to affect people's habits. We have to acknowledge that," says Julie Kramer, a Northwell Health dietitian and certified diabetes educator.

While social distancing and orders to stay at home are certainly disrupting normal routines and are undoubtedly stressful, there's a lot you can do to protect your physical and mental health during this time. We asked the experts to share their best tips for staying healthy while you're cooped up at home.

Your diet

Despite the sparse shelves at many grocery stores, the U.S. doesn't have a food shortage at the moment. Blame the apparent shortfall on "panic buying," as Americans scramble to keep their homes well-stocked. The good news is that stores are constantly replenishing items, so something you're missing may very well be back soon. What's more, some of the healthiest foods—like fresh fruits and vegetables—are still largely available, says Kramer.

Take inventory – Before you head to the store or order online, go through your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry, and toss anything that's long expired, Kramer advises. Then make a list of what you want to eat for breakfasts, lunches, and dinners in the coming week or two so you buy what you actually need.

Plan ahead – Because of the above-mentioned panic-buying, don't assume that you can shop for groceries online and have them delivered tomorrow … or even this week. While there's no reason to stockpile excessive quantities of food, it does make sense to have a little extra on hand and to do your online or even in-person shopping well before you're down to a single yogurt and a few leftover packets of soy sauce.

Along the same lines, aim to plan out specific meals (or at least dinners) several days ahead of time. Meal planning can save a lot of stress and prevent you from loading up on junk, says Kramer. "Think about things you can make in large batches, like chili, healthy meatballs, and soups," she says.

When you go shopping, remember that you aren't limited to canned and packaged foods (though canned tuna and beans are good to have on hand, as are nut butters). You can—and should—also buy frozen chicken, shrimp, and fish, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. "Potatoes, sweet potatoes, and onions are great because they have a longer shelf life," says Kramer. You should also toss some healthy carbs like brown rice, quinoa, and whole grain pasta into your cart.

Indulge in comfort foods without going overboard – Many people snack more when they're stressed. Make munching more nutritious by opting for healthier choices, such as popcorn (which is a high-fiber whole grain) instead of potato chips. "When you're having a snack, you ideally want to include a protein or

healthy fat" so you're not famished again moments later, says Kramer. An apple with a little peanut butter, cheese and crackers, or a small handful of dark chocolate almonds are all good options.

It's also wise to portion out snacks—don't eat directly out of the bag or carton—and remember to stay hydrated: "A lot of people mistake thirst for hunger," says Kramer. It may help to have a cup of tea, seltzer, or water before snacking to make sure food is really what you're craving.

Your physical activity

Calling all couch potatoes and former gym junkies who are feeling lost: It's time to break a sweat ... or at least get some steps in. Here's how:

Go for a walk, jog, or run outdoors – "Fresh air is so important," says Kramer. "Especially now that the weather is getting nicer, take every opportunity to get moving outdoors. If you have a tracker this is a great time to use it to see how much you're moving."

Make use of home exercise tools – If you have a treadmill, stationary bike, or stepper—even if it's been in the basement for years—now's a good time to use it, says Jennifer Caliendo, director of operations at Northwell Health's Center for Wellness and Integrative Medicine (https://northwellcwim.com/). Just got a new Peloton? Great; stick with it. In addition to live and on-demand cycling classes, Peloton also offers yoga, strength training and guided running classes, says Caliendo.

Download an app – Anyone who has a smartphone can bring fitness classes into their living room. Check out apps like Daily Workouts (https://dailyworkoutapps.com/) and FitOn (https://fitonapp.com/); both offer tons of options for workouts you can do from just about anywhere.

Your emotional health

During an infectious disease outbreak, it's not unusual to worry about keeping yourself and your loved ones safe. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html) (CDC) notes that many people may find it hard to sleep or concentrate during times like these. While eating well and staying active should have a positive impact on your mental health, it's wise to take additional steps to curtail your anxiety.

Try yoga or meditation – "Yoga isn't just the postures; it's also breath work and mental focus and concentration, which culminates in this effect of calming the nervous system," says Lisa Bondy, director of yoga at the Center for Wellness and Integrative Medicine. If you've never practiced before, look for beginner classes on YouTube or fitness apps. Meditation is another good option, and apps like InsightTimer (https://insighttimer.com/) make it easy to get started.

Practice deep breathing – As with yoga, various deep breathing techniques can be incredibly effective at easing your racing mind. Bondy likes The Breathing App (https://eddiestern.com/the-breathing-app/), which was designed to slow your respiration to six breaths per minute and improve heart rate, blood pressure, and brainwave function at the same time.

Limit news and social media – It's important to stay informed, but information overload can also be incredibly anxiety-provoking. Consider limiting the amount of time each day that you spend watching the news—perhaps just 15-20 minutes in the morning and 15-20 minutes in the evening, suggests Lisa Langer, PhD, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell. "It's also important to limit the amount of time the TV is on if you have children or teenagers in the house who may be experiencing anxiety about school closings, how many people have tested positive, etc.," she adds.

Stay connected – Practicing social distancing will literally isolate you from extended family, friends, and work colleagues. If you're feeling lonely, social media may help you stay connected with family and friends you can no longer see in person ... but it can also be a great source of stress. Consider doing a little less scrolling and a bit more one-on-one talking, texting, or video chatting.

Spend some time alone – People who are quarantined at home with their family may find that too much togetherness increases their stress. "Try to find some alone time each day, if possible," says Langer. Go for a walk by yourself, take a long bath or shower, or curl up with a good book. Making time for yourself "may be the key to decreasing anxiety and protecting your mental health," she says.

Next Steps and Useful Resources

See what happens inside your body (https://thewell.northwell.edu/well-informed/coronavirus-symptoms) when you have coronavirus.

Tips for staying productive when home is where the work is (https://thewell.northwell.edu/well-informed/working-from-home-coronavirus).

Worried about coronavirus? We've got you covered (https://www.northwell.edu/coronavirus-covid-19).

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