

COVID-19: Playing the Long Game for your Mental Health

Mary Kate Lee

You're probably tired, burnt out, overwhelmed, or anxious from the constant stream of information (some true and some false) penetrating your social media, virtual conversations, and thoughts. You've likely seen the myriad of resources¹⁻³ to help manage your mental health at this time. Many are all presenting important, relevant, and meaningful information. I encourage you dive into the endnotes at the bottom of this article and explore some that we think are really helpful.

I'm not here to regurgitate what has already been said (we've already concluded that you've been bombarded with information). Instead, I hope to offer you a different lens in which to view the pandemic we face.

The short of it: *we don't know how long this will last*. Embracing a mindset for the long term *now* will help you adapt and increase your resilience as circumstances continue to evolve. Below are some ways to help prepare for the long game.

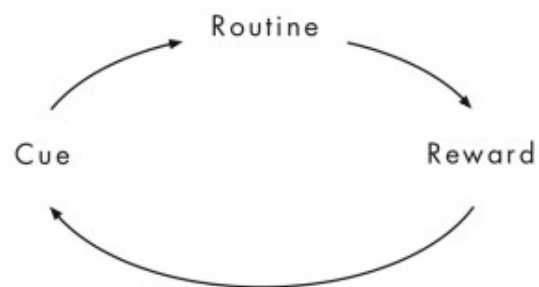
Tip #1: Sustainable Habits⁴

One step in playing the long game is thinking sustainably. Reflect on your current daily actions. Ask yourself: can I maintain this lifestyle for the next nine to eighteen months? If your answer is "No way!" consider changing a habit. Habits are small actions that make up our daily routines. Each habit is perpetrated by the habit loop, which includes a cue, routine, and reward.

- **Cue:** the trigger or reminder for the action
- **Routine:** the habit itself
- **Reward:** the prize we crave that tells your brain "this is worth remembering"

For example:

- **Cue:** your phone buzzes
- **Action:** you check your phone
- **Reward:** your brain gets a spike of dopamine, which makes you feel good and solidifies this habit



Charles Duhigg: *The Power of Habit*

Habits are highly dependent on this structure and also on its environment. For many people who are working from home and social distancing, environments have changed drastically, which means normal routines have been disrupted. However, with this change comes opportunity. Instead of focusing on the uncertainty of COVID-19, focus on the things you can control: your actions. By changing your actions to form sustainable and healthy habits during this time of uncertainty, you're providing a sense of purpose to each day and fostering a sense of accomplishment. Having simple routine and structure built into your day via healthy habits also helps to keep you focused in the present and increase productivity.

Consciously making the most out of this situation will improve your psychological wellbeing and provide a sustainable mindset to prevent feeling helpless or burnt-out.

Forming Habits⁴

1. Identify the routine (this is the action you want to create).
2. Identify the cue (What will trigger this habit into action?) Most habitual cues are a result of one of these five categories:
 - a. Location
 - b. Time
 - c. Emotional state
 - d. Other people
 - e. Immediately preceding action

Note: build your habit from a cue that already occurs. For example: check for COVID-19 updates at one specific time during your day: only *after you shower* or *eat breakfast*.

3. Experiment with rewards.

Rewards are powerful because they fulfill the cue and solidify the action. Creating a new habit means figuring out what reward will be the most effective. Mind you, this could take weeks. During this phase, do not put pressure on yourself to “figure it out quickly.” Remember: we’re playing the long game.

Tip #2: Quality Control

Social distancing is the exact opposite of what we humans are wired to do. When the U.S. is already living in a noted loneliness epidemic,⁵ social distancing can further stress our relationships, but it doesn't have to. Being intentional about picking up the phone to check in on a loved one can still foster the connection we so desperately need at this time. Being cooped up inside may make you want to talk to just about anyone, but interacting with overtly negative or dramatic people during this time could negatively affect your mental health. Limiting the number of people you speak with *without* sacrificing the quality of conversation is another sustainable way to deal with quarantine.

Quality control also applies to the media you consume. There is a lot of false information circulating, so selectively choose credible sources to gather information from and *tune out the rest*. The Lerner Center compiled reliable and credible information to mitigate confusion around the pandemic.⁶

Tip #3: Adopt an Attitude of Gratitude

With commute time, events, meetings, and obligations cancelled, it is easy to adopt a helpless attitude. Expressing gratitude, even for the smallest things, can help reverse this mindset. Being grateful can boost positive emotions and enable a more prosocial attitude.⁷

Here's how

1. Gratitude Journal: Reflect on and write down 3-5 things for which you are grateful 2-4 times a week.
2. Three Good Things: Similar to the gratitude journal, reflect on and write down 3 things you are grateful for and/or 3 things that went well. You should also include the reasons behind those three good things. Do this 2-4 times a week.
3. Mental Subtraction (Writing Optional): Imagine what your life would be like if a positive event had not happened.

3 SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LERNER CENTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROMOTION

4. **Gratitude Letter:** Write a letter to someone to whom you are grateful but have never explicitly told. Reading the letter out loud (via video chat) to the person or having them read it will help strengthen your relationship with them.

Tip #4: Get outside!

One thing to be grateful for during this time: the weather! While it's not 75 and sunny just yet, the weather is nice enough to bundle up and get some fresh air. A change of scenery can prevent cabin fever and spending time outdoors is good for our bodies and minds.⁸

Remember this is larger than you and me.

While it's easy to get swept away in the hysteria of our reality, remember that this outbreak is affecting all of us in a multitude of ways. Therefore, I encourage you to be kind and considerate towards others. Are you feeling anxious, confused, and irritable? Are you struggling to cope with the quickly evolving mandates? Understand you are not alone. Playing the long game requires us to lean on one another for support.

End Notes

1. Brewer, K. (March 2020). Coronavirus: How to protect your mental health. *BBC News*. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/health-51873799?fbclid=IwAR3SgixbU7EuOegj7oKUuHggYMMKy_5ctogvarQeyw2Ojk_Onk_qKtXBbWw&_twitter_impression=true.
2. Kanter, J. & Kuczynski, A. (March 2020). Social distancing comes with social side effects - here's how to stay connected. *The Conversation*. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from https://theconversation.com/social-distancing-comes-with-social-side-effects-heres-how-to-stay-connected-133677?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook#Echobox=1584372885.
3. For articles on mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak, visit <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>.
4. Duhigg, C. (2020). How Habits Work. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from <https://charlesduhigg.com/how-habits-work/>.
5. Collins, S. (2018). The Loneliness Epidemic Has Very Real Consequences. *WedMD*. Retrieved March 19, 2020 from <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/loneliness-epidemic-consequences>.
6. Syracuse University Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion: COVID-19. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from <https://lernercenter.syr.edu/covid-19/>.
7. Lee, Mary Kate. (May 2019). Gratitude as an Antidote to Anxiety and Depression: All the Benefits, None of the Side Effects. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from <https://lernercenter.syr.edu/2019/05/28/lerner-center-program-coordinator-mary-kate-lee-publishes-issue-brief-on-gratitude/>.
8. Suttie, J. (March 2016). How Nature Can Make You Kinder, Happier, and More Creative. *Greater Good Science Center*. Retrieved March 18, 2020 from: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_nature_makes_you_kinder_happier_more_creative.

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The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.