

12 Tips to Survive Social Distancing with Your Mental Wellness Intact

Most of us are social creatures and thrive in community. And we like to know what to expect. This makes the current call for social distancing quite challenging. Below are some tips to keep your mental wellness intact.

1. **Acknowledge** why you're feeling threatened by these changes and be compassionate and patient with yourself. We need to grieve the losses: loss of religious community, postponed weddings, First Communion, and last senior semester on campus, canceled trips and plans. So many planned events canceled or postponed. It is important to express emotions over these losses.
2. **It's okay to be anxious.** As a society, we often avoid stillness, using constant activity as a culturally-approved numbing technique. Slowing down, stepping back from constant hustle, and taking a break is uncomfortable. It doesn't feel good to many of us. That's okay.
3. **Use tools to calm your body.** When we sense a threat, our peripheral nervous system goes into overdrive. When our bodily reactions to stress are sustained in a hyper-threat mode for long periods of time, it does not do us any good, and can start to make us feel a lot worse. Where are you feeling your stress: Tight jaw? Clenched fists? Shallow breathing? Racing heart? Then look online for visualizations, breathing exercises, prayerful meditations, and progressive muscle relaxations that can help target those areas.
4. **Get outside daily.** Go for a walk while complying with social distancing requirements. Move your body. One of the first things to fall by the wayside in times of acute stress, especially when our usual routines are thrown out the window, is the daily rhythms of self-care. This has an unfortunate ripple effect because many of those routines are exactly what keeps us feeling grounded and calm in the first place and helps keep our immune system in check. Letting go of these behaviors can backfire in the long-run. Prioritize adequate rest, healthy eating, and moving your body wherever you can.
5. **Find social support.** The new normal is causing us to isolate ourselves for the good of public health but we have to be careful not to cut off from emotional support. Find meaningful ways to still connect with those you love, even while we're not together in person. It helps us recover more quickly from trauma, reduces our blood pressure, and helps us cope. Call people. Actually call (Facetime, WhatsApp even better) instead of just Snap, Insta, or text. A little human connection goes a long way. A sense of community is also important so when online, look for more meaningful interactions than just clicking "like." Set up scheduled group video calls and group texts with friends or family. We are all in this together, and the more that we act accordingly, the better we will feel and the more we can help each other.

6. **Set limits on media and choose only reliable sources.** It's challenging to find the right balance between being informed versus ruminating on the same bad news over and over again. Protect yourself from falling into the information-overload abyss. Perhaps only absorb the news for 20 minutes, two times a day; morning and evening. Maybe hide the people on your social media feed who tend to post questionably sourced material.
7. **Don't let catastrophic thoughts seep in as truth.** In uncertain times, the brain looks to fill in gaps and connect dots. This can make us drastically distort the lenses through which we see the world, to the point where we start accepting needlessly catastrophic thinking as fully accurate. Work on becoming a curious, gentle observer of your thoughts. Don't automatically assume they are true.
8. **Set a schedule for yourself.** As tempting as it is to stay in bed, get up and get dressed. A sense of predictability and controllability helps reduce the stress response. Often we throw our routines out the window when life gets unusual. And life *is* different; we've stopped going to the places we usually do, most of us are not going in to work, some have kids home from school, we're not gathering at church or our usual meeting places. So, try to find some predictability where you can. Maybe it's taking comfort in eating the same breakfast you usually do, or dressing for work even though you're logging in from home, or participating in Mass through Livestream on Sundays. Small facets of keeping our routines can help us feel calmer.
9. **Help and Support others.** Giving back helps with anxiety and depression. Check on your neighbor. Explore ways to connect and volunteer virtually (check www.oldstpats.org for great ideas). Give blood. Make a donation.
10. **Look for beauty and embrace gratitude when possible.** Moments of beauty and grounding yourself in the here and now, will give you a mood boost. Maybe it's the daffodil sprouting up from the courtyard. Maybe it's the appreciation of our health care workforce. Maybe it's the message from the homily on Old St. Pat's Livestream. Maybe it's listening to a piece of music that brings us joy. Even small moments matter. And the more that we find them, the more our minds and hearts will be nourished by Christ.
11. **Seek professional help if needed.** Most mental health therapists have shifted to providing sessions using secure teleconferencing including our parish counselor and licensed therapist, Sarah Thompson . And most insurance companies are reimbursing for these sessions. Contact Sarah at saraht@oldstpats.org if she can be of help.
12. **Take one day at a time.**