

# Life

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*Once food gets into our fridges, larders and kitchens, ensuring that it gets used up before going off seems like an obvious thing to do — but it's alarming how many millions of tonnes are simply chucked because we don't keep track of the food we've spent our money on.*

— Tristram Stuart

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## Coronavirus Pandemic



When family members have to stay home together for long periods, parents should maintain the daily routines of children. But they should also set aside time to engage fully with the young ones, such as cooking together. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

# Staying in: Stick to a routine

**Keeping to a schedule for work, meals and hobbies will help one cope better with long periods of isolation and lift the spirits**



**Joyce Teo**  
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It has been more than a week since Singapore entered a month-long circuit breaker period, where people hunker down at home to play their part in slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

Elsewhere, much of the world is under lockdown as the disease spreads like wildfire.

Many people have had to adjust to spending long periods of time at home with family members.

While some enjoy being at home more, others may find it challenging to work and live in the same place for weeks on end.

But there are ways to make it better, say experts and those who have had experience with extended periods of isolation for work.

### A ROUTINE FOR YOURSELF

Retired National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) astronaut Scott Kelly, who spent nearly a year on the International Space Station, kept to a tight schedule while being there.

"You will find maintaining a plan will help you and your family adjust to a different work and home life

environment," he said in a New York Times article.

Pace yourself and schedule a consistent bedtime, he advised. "Nasa scientists closely study astronauts' sleep when we are in space, and they have found that quality of sleep relates to cognition, mood and interpersonal relations — all essential to getting through a mission in space or a quarantine at home."

While many people may think that working from home is a breeze, the reality can be different. Without a routine for the day, some might be bored while others find themselves working day and night. Dr Goh Kah Hong, head and senior consultant of psychological medicine at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, said: "Working from home is foreign to most of us and could take a little more effort than you think."

The fact that not everyone has a place to work from at home means you first have to plan for it.

The second step is having the right frame of mind for work.

"You can do so by having a little 'check-in ritual' to mentally switch from home to work," said Dr Goh.

"Some might want to get dressed in work clothes to feel more at work, especially if you have to teleconference. It is important to remain connected with your colleagues and perhaps set achievable and meaningful goals together."

Apart from work, schedule time for self-care, activities that you enjoy such as reading, exercising and bonding sessions with your family.

For Mr Jon Bailey, a former submarine weapons officer in the Royal Navy in Britain who spent several weeks at a time in a steel tube underwater, maintaining a routine meant time passed by quickly and meaningfully.

He offered the following tips to the British Medical Journal:

- Set times for work, hobbies, meals and so on. Write them down and stick to them.
- Do not lie about in your pyjamas, or at least have daytime pyjamas.
- Do at least 30 minutes of exercise a day — it breaks up the day and can help lift your mood.

"Life at sea is a clockwork pattern of shifts. Routine gives you direction and keeps the time flowing — so establish one early on before low mood sets in," he said.

### A ROUTINE FOR YOUR CHILD

Dr Kang Ying Qi, a consultant at the National University Hospital's child development unit, said parents should maintain a child's daily routine as much as possible to help him or her cope with any anxiety he or she may have.

She said: "Some children will benefit from a clearly drawn-up timetable for home, as this visual reminder increases the child's ability to accept and transit into new schedules."

"Giving your child control over small decisions can also help him or her feel more empowered amid the changes. For example, children can choose if they want noodles or rice for a meal or the book they would like to read."

If parents have to work at home, it helps to schedule time to fully engage with the child so that the child is able to tolerate periods of being alone and look forward to these moments for engagement.

Nevertheless, the best timetable can get disrupted by urgent work commitments. Talk to your child beforehand and find a visual signal that represents a do-not-disturb sign, advised Dr Kang.

"For example, when a parent ties a red ribbon on his or her door, it means the child should not enter the room unless it is an emergency," she said.

### TUNE OUT SOMETIMES

People are overloaded with pandemic-related news and it can be very stressful to be immersed in the news for a prolonged period of time.

Dr Goh said: "Limiting the exposure helps us keep a healthy mindset."

When the level of stress reaches a hysterical point, people can behave irrationally, such as joining long queues in a supermarket when physical distancing is most needed, he said.

### TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Ms Andrea Chong, a senior clinical psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health, said: "Set realistic expectations, especially regarding productivity."

"Remind yourself that the measures are temporary and focus on the altruistic reasons for doing so, for the protection of loved ones and the larger community."

Then, take a step back and look for the silver lining or find things to be grateful for, she said.

### STAY CONNECTED

Dr Goh said: "Loneliness is an emotional response to perceived isolation, which is a very real threat with social distancing."

So, call a friend to express your care and concern. "You would be surprised how caring for others can often make you feel better," he said.

As a society, many are coming together and showing solidarity in fighting the pandemic and that definitely makes people feel less lonely.

It is also important to differentiate between loneliness and being alone, he said.

"Solitude has its reward — time and space to think and reflect and move closer to a better future."

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## What not to say to your child about Covid-19

In the midst of ever stricter measures being introduced to curb the spread of the coronavirus, both the young and the old have had to adjust to changes in lifestyle.

Still, some parents or caregivers prefer not to talk to their children about the pandemic, fearing that they are not ready to hear the truth of the matter.

Dr Kang Ying Qi, a consultant at the National University Hospital's child development unit, said parents should first acknowledge and address their own fears before they can have a calm discussion with their child.

"Start with asking your child what he or she already knows, inquire about the questions he or she has, and then supplement or correct the understanding accordingly," she said.

Even young children know something is going on. "Children below four years old may not be aware of the virus, but are still keenly cognisant of the changes to their immediate environment and daily life," said Dr Kang.

"Beyond information about the pandemic, the underlying message a parent should try to convey is that he or she is there to support the child through the changes and uncertainties."

Dr Kang said parents should take note of the following:

- Avoid inundating children with excessive information. Children can be especially sensitive to graphic images and details about tragic circumstances.
- Refrain from discussing your concerns about the pandemic when you are around the children.
- Avoid using scare tactics involving Covid-19 to get a child to comply with your instructions. This will inadvertently increase his or her anxiety and fears about this pandemic.

Joyce Teo