

How to keep up wellbeing during the pandemic



The World Wellbeing Panel ([WWP](#)) promotes wellbeing as the ultimate purpose of all major decision-makers, particularly government. It routinely asks questions of relevance to wellbeing policy of its panel of 50 world experts. WWP's latest survey asked for advice on "how to maintain wellbeing during isolation while facing huge emotional stress from the threat of the COVID-19 virus".

Twenty-six members of the panel responded, representing professors in many sciences (economics, psychology, philosophy) and geographical areas (Europe, the Americas, Asia, Oceania). Some experts talked about what social isolation does, but most about what people can do to help their wellbeing.

Stefano Bartolini points out that we do have knowledge of lengthy social isolation among well-prepared groups, namely astronauts and small groups of polar scientists. Studies show that isolation often provokes a sort of "psychological hibernation". People find it difficult to remember things or perform certain tasks. Other effects include depression, concentration difficulty, sleep disorders (sleeping too much or too little) and irritability: astronauts spend up to 30% of their time arguing. Most polar adventures of the 19th century ended in riots, madness, suicides, and cannibalism." (e.g., [Suedfeld and Steel, 2000](#); [Mays and Beattie, 2016](#); and [Haddelsey, 2018](#))

So social isolation extended for many months has serious mental health and eventually physical health implications, even among groups like scientists and astronauts, who are well prepared for them. What can one do though in isolation? We discuss the suggestions thematically.

Social interactions

Almost everybody in the panel emphasised the important of maintaining social contacts with friends and family. Ruut Veenhoven says that "research on the effects of coping with disasters suggest that social contacts help." (e.g., [Bonanno et al., 2008](#) and [Butler et al., 2009](#)) and Jordi Quoidbach points to the quantity and quality of our social relationships being one of the most important predictor of happiness (for example, Harris and Vazire, 2019)

Specific suggestions:

- Make an effort with phone and internet.
- Chat with available people closer by, like the neighbours [[Maarten Vendrik](#)].
- Develop closeness/communication rituals, like a story-telling session every night at dinner or sharing "the best and the worst" of each person's day. Ritualising time for sharing stories, gripes, and information helps keep people close and give people something to look forward to [[Gigi Foster](#)].
- Make it a point to meet at least someone each day! [[Francesco Sarracino](#)].
- Giving is better than receiving, even during lockdown (for example, Liu and Aaker, 2008 and [Meier and](#)

[Stutzer, 2007](#)). So, think how you can help those in worse circumstances [Christian Krekel]. Look for volunteers in your neighbourhood or friends circle to help who can do online teaching [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell]. Volunteer or help a neighbour [Daniel Haybron]. Look to social and environmental problems [Maurizio Pugno, citing [Fleurbay and Schwandt, 2015](#)]

Ways to deal with negative thinking

The astronaut data tells us negative thinking starts to creep in and is hard to avoid.

Some tips though:

- Assuming one is fortunate enough to be healthy and have sufficient financial security, then people can tell themselves that they are given the gift of quality time with family and loved ones [Ori Heffetz]. Via the internet one can “reconnect” [Arthur Grimes].
- Actively avoid hearing too much bad news, especially for individual with a more neurotic personality; and think about “exit” strategy when negative thoughts start to populate somebody’s mind [Eugenio Proto]. More generally, just don’t read too much news [Ori Heffetz, Heinz Welsch, Maarten Vendrik]. Limit oneself to checking the news at one or two particular times a day helps cement such habits.
- Avoid informing yourself about the most gruesome details of the sanitary and social effects of the disease. [Maurizio Pugno].
- Stay away from passive social media use which has been found to be negatively associated with subjective wellbeing [Anke Plagnol]([Verduyn et al., 2017](#))
- Distract yourself. Emphasise what you can control, not what is out of your control. Look for gratifications. Try to look beyond the obviously available ones (sex, food, good movies, music and readings.). Learn something new, there’s plenty of online activities now. Try to have fun. Humour and laughing are the best medicine. [Stefano Bartolini]
- Improve your house [or garden], as house quality also increases happiness. [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell, Ruut Veenhoven]
- Get outside – Even just a few minutes outside can help reduce feelings of isolation and claustrophobia. Do something physical every day. [Daniel Benjamin]
- Practise art. Art is a tool to maintain intersubjective experience and getting the sense of “doing something now”. So, make art and share with others. [Alpaslan Akay]

Organise your day

One of the most successful ingredients of cognitive behavioural therapy against many mental health problems are tips on how to form routines that give one a sense of control (Christopher Boyce).

- Maintain a strict daily time structure (working in home office, sport activities, leisure time, fixed time to get up and to go to bed) [Ronnie Schoe, Maarten Vendrik, Francesco Sarracino].
- Maintain diaries that emphasise the positive, such as writing down every day five nice things you have seen others do [Paul Frijters].

Face the fear

Cognitive behavioural routines have found out anxiety can be reduced by facing fears in the sense of putting them in perspective and seeing them as normal and something that can ultimately be accepted.

- Find out what the threat of COVID-19 to your personal health (and to that of your family members). This helps detaching from the fear. [Maurizio Pugno]
- One can train oneself to be comfortable with the idea of death so that one cannot be frightened too much by the prospect of it. To those who do not believe in afterlives, viewing death as a normal part of life helps. What helps is the realisation that human minds change continuously, including our memories, our identities, and our skills, such that our “old selves” die a little every day anyway, making death seem less dramatic. [Paul Frijters]
- Optimism and positive thinking (as well as material comfort) can help in dealing with the crisis. [Rainer Winkelmann]

Work on the future and on oneself

"Prepare for life after the epidemic" [Ruut Veenhoven].

- Reflect about one's beliefs of what contributes to personal well-being, i.e. the personal wellbeing of oneself and of others [Alois Stutzer].
- Observe ourselves, understand the fragility of life, and develop meaning in life, such as from small things that they ignore in their normal life [Alpaslan Akay].
- Think about what was wrong with your life before the pandemic, and plan what to do now and in the future to remedy it. Focus on: healthy lifestyle and importance of close relationships [Maurizio Pugno].
- Think about how you want to live and what kind of society you want to live in, and want the next generations to live in, and how you can help to make that happen. What matters are "love, family, community, doing something worthwhile, appreciating the beauty around us" [Daniel Haybron].

Healthy habits

The literature has widely recognised the importance of maintaining healthy habits such as exercising, eating healthily and trying to sleep regularly (for example, [Groeger, Zijlstra, and Dijk, 2004](#); [Hamilton et al., 2007](#); [Wheaton et al., 2012](#); and [Mujcic and Oswald, 2016](#)).

- Continue to eat healthily and exercise – both to feel better and keep your immune system strong [Daniel Benjamin]. On top of this, prioritise sleep [Gigi Foster]. Exercise in green spaces [Christian Krekel].
- Eat healthfully as obesity negatively correlates with happiness [[Katsaiti, 2021](#)]. On those countries where you can go out, it is very important to go do sports. With less pollution, this should increase happiness [Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell].
- Do low intensity exercise (jogging, biking), which gives your brain small injections of dopamine that improve your mood [Stefano Bartolini].

Conclusions

The long-term effects of this episode on life satisfaction as well as individuals' behavioural changes to adapt to it will depend on the length of the social distancing measures. The impact of the pandemic on individuals' wellbeing will also depend on the health impact (final mortality and morbidity), the economic consequences (notably through unemployment and poverty), and the age and personality of each individual. It is now premature to make predictions of the long-term effects of this period of huge uncertainty and fear lived with social isolation. The experts conclude that in order to minimise the negative effect of this experience, it is important to maintain social interactions (with special emphasis to giving to others), develop strategies to deal with negative thinking, reflect on your own life and the future, structure the day to include healthy habits, and face the fear.



Notes:

- You can find the results of the World Wellbeing Panel and well as a list of all panellists [here](#).
- This blog post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
- Featured [image](#) by [Mike Von](#) on [Unsplash](#)
- When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#)



Tony Beaton is an honorary research fellow at the University of Queensland's Institute for Social Science Research. After a 30-year career in the information technology industry in service engineering, and sales and marketing, Tony retired in 2003 and went back to school (for fun!). He completed a degree in finance and management, masters in research in management (trust development in newly forming teams) and a PhD (economics of happiness).



Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell is a tenured scientist at the Institute of Economic Analysis IAE-CSIC and director of the Barcelona Graduate School of Economics' master's programme in the economics of public policy. Professor Ferrer's main research area is the econometric analysis of subjective measures used as a proxy for welfare and well-being so as to address a range of scientifically and politically relevant questions. In addition, she has worked on individual behaviour and sustainable consumption. She has PhDs in Economics from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (US) and the Tinbergen Institute (University of Amsterdam).



Paul Frijters is a professor of wellbeing economics at LSE. He completed his master's in econometrics at the University of Groningen, including a seven-month stay in Durban, South Africa before completing a PhD through the University of Amsterdam. Professor Frijters specialises in applied micro-econometrics, including labour, happiness, and health economics, though he has also worked on pure theoretical topics in macro and micro fields. His main area of interest is in analysing how socio-economic variables affect the human life experience and the "unanswerable" economic mysteries in life.



Arthur Grimes is a professor and chair of wellbeing and public policy in the School of Government at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He is also a senior fellow at [Motu Economic and Public Policy Research](#) in Wellington. Arthur has a background both as a research economist and as a senior public policy official. He was chairman of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand from 2003-2013, where he was previously chief economist. He served on the Financial Markets Authority board from 2011-2017. Other past policy roles include chair of the Postal Network Access Committee, and member of various official taskforces covering tax, urban planning, infrastructure, and superannuation.



Eugenio Proto is Alec Cairncross professor of applied economics and econometrics at the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School, and research fellow at CEPR, IZA, CESifo. He earned his PhD in economics at ECARES, Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2004. Previously he was assistant and associate professor of economics at the University of Warwick, and professor of economics at the University of Bristol. Eugenio's research interests range from development and growth to behavioural and experimental economics. He is currently academic editor of *PLOS ONE* and associate editor of the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*.