



Communities + Generations + Innovations

Ten Coping Strategies for older Oregonians during COVID-19



Establish your "Battle Rhythm"

The coming weeks will be an especially difficult challenge for older adults—the basics of how we acquire food, medicine and health care will be different and complicated. We are told to stay at home, even if that means being alone. Meanwhile, every day it seems, the world is upside down anew.

"You must quickly establish a battle rhythm," says Juliette Kayyem, Harvard professor and former Homeland Security planner. "The same thing, the same time, every day."

Every teacher will tell you the same thing. The transition back to school after summer vacation is difficult. "We go through it every year," says a kindergarten teacher in Portland. "We know to expect some pretty stressful days as we all adjust to new routines." Now all of us are in the same fix, except that it's "Back to Home."

We turn to educators because teachers are experts in using the foundation principle of establishing a routine. Routines provide structure and a sense of safety, which helps children control their impulses and behaviors. A crisis like this one—where the most important action is to do nothing--may make you feel unmotivated or powerless. Your best friend: A daily routine that "chunks" your day into bite-sized bits and yields some measure of accomplishment and control along the way. A daily schedule is key to maintaining a positive frame of mind and any semblance of normalcy.

What are the basics of making a new routine?

Start with your usual routine

Lean on the parts of your normal routine that work best for you. Get up at the same time. Get out of the pjs.

- When are you used to having breakfast? Snack? Lunch?
- Do you have a weekly schedule of chores?
- Which television news do you watch?
- When do you go to bed?

This review should help you break the day into smaller blocks much like class schedule does for students.

Add in daily chores

Remember when you were a school kid and you got a certain pride from being the designated blackboard cleaner? A daily chore, no matter how trivial, means you are getting something done. You are being productive. It is easy to let the dishes pile up. But persist! Chores will relieve anxiety and provide some stress relief.

Expand what you enjoy

Once you've mapped out times for things like meals and chores, you're ready to fill in the rest of the day, and actually set aside times to read, pursue your hobbies, try new things. (See other Strategies for ideas.) The more a child plays, the more she *learns* to play.

"It's a technique called 'behavioral activation,'" says Eve Byrd, a nurse-practitioner with expertise in geriatric psychiatry at the Carter Center's Mental Health Program. "What that means is really being very intentional of thinking, what are the things that you enjoy doing, and then adding more of those to your day."

Your deepest values are best at guiding behavioral activation because they tend to be more stable than emotions and moods. Ask yourself, "What values are important to me? Family? Health/fitness? Friendship?" Then schedule yourself concrete activities that support those values.

Dedicate (and limit) time for distraction and entertainment

Be aware of the two major schedule busters: screens and self-medications such as alcohol. Many advisers warn about the ill effects of endless news watching or swiping through social media. And most of us recognize those "little helpers" erode our thoughts and intentions.

Arrange a regular outside connection

A scheduled phone call to a friend or family member can be a highlight--for both of you.

Exercise

Exercise routines often start out as onerous tasks. The trick is to make exercise a habit and for that you cannot rely on willpower alone. Let your schedule be your drill sergeant.

Give yourself time to read; share reading time, if possible

Ah, a cup of tea and a quiet hour by the window reading...Study after study shows the importance of reading. Being home all day is a great chance to exercise and strengthen that habit. If reading is challenging, try audio books available from the library or at online resources such as the Gutenberg Project and Librivox.com.

Be sure to write it down. Post your battle rhythm where you and others can see it.

Finally, be flexible over the first week or two. Review what seems to work for you and make adjustments.



If you are at home with other people, invite your companion or family to contribute to the creation of a daily house schedule.

Talk about isolation! Scott Kelly spent a year like this.



If a routine seems boring and unnecessary, here's advice from Scott Kelly, retired NASA astronaut who spent a year living aboard the International Space Station. "On the space station, my time was scheduled tightly, from the moment I woke up to when I went to sleep," he recalls. "You will find maintaining a plan will help you and your family adjust to a different work and home life environment. When I returned to Earth, I missed the structure. But pace yourself. Living in space, I deliberately paced myself because I knew I was in it for the long haul — just like we all are today. Take time for fun activities. And don't forget to include in your schedule a consistent bedtime. 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."