Nutrition, Exercise and Staying Healthy

Nutritious eating and regular exercise are important elements for healthy living. But during the COVID-19 pandemic wrought with social distancing, working from home, and staying inside puts us at risk for frequent refrigerator visits, boredom or anxiety eating and limited physical movement. So, it is important for us to eat smart, hydrate and stay as active as possible.

Eating smart, maintaining hydration, and enjoying your food is always important for good health and living well. Smart eating starts with food planning and the USDA provides guidance and information how and what to buy during the pandemic. MyPlate Kitchen is another resource provided by the USDA replete with easy recipes, cooking videos, recipe resources, and cookbooks to keep you engage and on track with eating smart. In addition, the American Heart Association provides more eat smart tools for health promotion and heart disease prevention.

Drinking water to stay well-hydrated is critical for keeping joints lubricated, keeping organs working properly, regulating body temperature, preventing infection, delivering nutrients to cells, promoting sleep, cognition, and mood regulation.1 Experts recommend drinking roughly 11 cups of water per day for the average woman and 16 for men.2 And not all of those cups have to come from plain water. Some can come from water flavored with fruit or vegetables (lemons, berries, or orange or cucumber slices). But it’s best to avoid sugary drinks.

Daily exercise and regular activity are important to improve circulation, build bone and muscle strength, increase flexibility and fitness, control weight, and reduce the risk for developing chronic health conditions. Exercise also improves mental health and the feeling of well-being.

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2 Id.
There are many tips for maintaining exercise routine at home during the pandemic. But here are a few suggestions from the World Health Organization on how to stay active and safe while you are at home during the COVID-19 health emergency.  

- **If you are able to go for a walk or bicycle ride** always practice physical distancing and wash your hands with water and soap before you leave, when you get to where you are going, and as soon as you get home. If water and soap are not immediately available, use alcohol-based hand rub.

- **If you go to a park or public open space to walk, run or exercise** always practice physical distancing and wash your hands with water and soap, before you leave, when you get to where you are going, and as soon as you get home. If water and soap are not immediately available, use alcohol-based hand rub.

- **If you are not regularly active start slowly and with low intensity activities**, like walking and low impact exercises. Start with shorter amounts, like 5-10 minutes, and gradually build up to 30 minutes or more continuously over a few weeks.

- **Choose the right activity so that you reduce the risk of injury** and that you enjoy the activity. Choose the right intensity according to your health status and fitness level. You should be able to breath comfortably and hold a conversation while you do light- and moderate-intensity physical activity.

Finally, reducing the risk of acquiring and spreading the COVID-19 infection is paramount for our health and the health of our family, co-workers and community. Therefore, the information below is worth repeating while we are living through this life-changing pandemic:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the restroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available for hand washing, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.

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- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.

- Maintain social distancing between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet). Social distancing, while critical during this pandemic, is not always easy. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration or SAMHSA has developed Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak, which may be helpful.

- The White House issued guidance to help slow the spread of the COVID-19.

- CDC recommends that the general public wear cloth face coverings to help reduce virus transmission in public spaces. Wearing a face covering also reduces face touching.

- N95 facemasks are a critical component of personal protective equipment or PPE for health professional, first responders, and other frontline workers. The CDC does not recommend the use of N95 masks for the general public due to the shortage of these masks.

- Facemasks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 to help prevent the spread of the disease to others.

- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects people frequently touch.

- Stay home when you are sick and contact your healthcare provider you are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

**Behavioral Health - Simple Thoughts and Steps to Address Behavioral Health**

Physicians are alerting us that the behavioral health field will see unprecedented numbers of persons seeking care in the coming months due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. They speak in particular of medical doctors having to console family members of dying patients, a very painful experience, compounded with the news that the family members are not allowed to enter the hospital to visit their loved one. This level of intensity has a significant impact on the human brain and the cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses.
The situation physicians face is just one small portion of the difficulty one particular profession faces in light of this illness. Every profession can highlight its own unique struggles that deeply impact typical functioning. Even beyond the professional life of each person, the personal, spiritual and relational lives of each person are deeply impacted.

As much as we are called to do our part to care for ourselves by washing our hands and physically distancing from others, we also should consider care and maintenance of our own mental health and that of those around us. We cannot separate our physical wellbeing from that of our mind and spirit. Please take a few moments to reflect on the concepts provided here to support you in your maintenance of mental, emotional and behavioral health. Here are just a few steps that you could take to build your resilience during this time in our history.

1. **Each day focus on one thing you can do for yourself – no matter how small.** Preference may go to no-tech activities since so many of us are working on computers and video chats all day. Go outside and appreciate nature (as allowed by the local guidelines) at a slower pace to get a daily dose of physical exercise, relaxation and vitamin D. Call, video chat or even get out that old pen and paper to write a note to a relative or friend you haven’t spoken to in a while. Practice in these next few weeks to be in the moment, more mindful and supportive of those around you.

2. **Explore – even shape – new opportunities to expand and acquire new knowledge/skills.** COVID-19 is bringing attention to the resources available to us online that we could all utilize to learn about or experience new ideas and concepts. There is a full breadth of opportunities for meaningful social connection, mindfulness, self-care, distance learning, telemedicine and beyond out there on the web. There’s no time like the present to learn a new language, read that book we intended to read, take a video course, or even something as mundane as learning/practicing Excel skills.

In reference to behavioral health wellness, the Global Future Council on Technology for Mental Health has issued a call to action to empower 8 billion minds via wise and ethical development and adoption of a wide array of emerging technologies.
3. This is a time of physical distancing, not social distancing for the protection of those around us. We can all take ownership of and be supportive and responsive to our communities – our families, neighborhoods, work, and societies. A recent US study has shown that the most effective public health messages in slowing the spread of COVID-19 are those that focus on considerations of duty and responsibility to family, friends, and fellow citizens, not just our own personal agenda. A significant resilience factor for those who deal with behavioral health concerns is a sense of belonging. If we reflect deeply on the role of physical isolation as a contributory act to the good of our community hopefully, we can reframe the lack of human contact as an act of true participation. Paradoxically, our physical distancing can lead us to social proximity!

4. Be mindful during this time. With schools closed and many parents working from home without childcare for the foreseeable future, it’s hard not to start spiraling. Responsibilities seem endless, the situation frightful, and it seems like time to ourselves has become a thing of the past…Take a deep breath. Literally. Maybe you feel a little better? These can be difficult days, but incorporating mindful practices into our daily routines can help calm anxiety and build healthy coping skills.

5. Remain grounded. Being “grounded” or “grounding” basically means to bring the focus on what is happening to us physically, either in our body or in our surroundings, instead of being trapped by the thoughts in our minds that are causing us to feel anxious. It helps us stay in the present moment instead of worrying about things that may happen in the future or events that have already happened but we still find ourselves going over and over them in our heads. It is easy to get carried away thinking about “when will it end? Where will it hit next? How many numbers impacted today?” We can use these techniques to focus on the here and now, not the “there and then.”

The following activities are little things that can be done on your own, with children, in clinical settings, with older adults at any point during the day. These are activities that enhance grounding and mindfulness. It might be helpful to engage in these activities once or twice a day or even just when we feel like it is too overwhelming.
Take Five

- Stretch your hand out like a star.
- Trace each finger.
- As you slowly slide up a finger, breathe in and as you slide down, breathe out.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Uses: For calming and relaxation.

Tip Tap Fingers

- Place your thumb on your pinky on both hands.
- Then touch each finger with your thumb and go back and forth.
- To increase concentration, do this on one hand and with the other, go in reverse direction (thumb starts on forefinger).
- Uses: For grounding and calming.

Expandable Ears

- “Expand your ears and make them really big” and notice what you can hear outside the building.
- Next, shrink ears a little bit and listen for any sounds inside the building but outside the room.
- Then bring your ears a little closer and notice what you can hear inside the room.
- Then bring ears back to their regular size and notice what you can hear right around them.
- Uses: For transitions and calming; good for preparing to concentrate.

Mindfulness

- **Mindful listening**: Introduce the gong/singing bowl (there’s an app for that). Listen quietly until the bell ends with eyes closed. Listen for sounds that are both loud and soft around you.
- **Single focus jar/Mindful jar**: Create a single focus jar (recipe found online; can also do glitter and water) and shake up jar and keep focus on this as it settles. Bring your mind back to it as often as needed. Uses: good transition activity.
- **Senses Mindful Log**: Sit quietly and write down what you see, hear, smell, etc.
• **Breathing Buddies (good for children)-** Lie down and place a stuffed animal on your belly. Notice, without talking, how your stomach goes up and down as you breathe. As you are doing this, you can remember that any other thoughts are in a pretend bubble just floating away.

• **Music-** Music is always a great transition, particularly for children. Reflect on what instruments you hear, or just put your head down to rest and calm.

**Gratitude**

• **Gratitude stone-** Pass it around and invite others to share something they are grateful for.

• **Gratitude journal-** Record one or several things for which you are grateful.

• **Gratitude jars-** Place gratitude notes in jars. Read them later and reflect.

**Movement**

• **Nature Walks-** A short, silent walk outside noticing what you can see, hear, touch and smell. Discuss when back inside.

• **Rainbow Walks-** Take a walk and notice something red, orange, green, yellow, etc.

• **The shape of our body shapes our mood-** Stand with feet apart and arms at your sides, with palms facing inward to the thigh. Center yourself, and once you have, bring your attention to your hands. Slowly raise them in front of you and turn your palms upward. Ask yourself what subtle changes you notice in your mood. Next, round your shoulders forward and drop head so your chin is on your chest. How does this feel? After a few moments, pull your shoulders back and slowly raise your head. (This activity develops body awareness. You can add other movements and positions).

• **Heartbeat Exercise-** Jump up and down for one minute and then sit down and place your hands on your heart. Close your eyes and just feel the heartbeat, the breath and whatever else you notice about your body.

There are numerous other websites with great information that can guide us to keep our balance during this time. Please check out the NAMI, United Nations, MHA, SAMHSA and other resources that can help you with additional resources and thought-provoking concepts.
Social Wellness

Establishing healthy, nurturing and supportive relationships through connection with others. There is not a one-size fits all approach to ensuring Social Wellness, and like many facets of our lives, both nature and nurture impact our approach.

Take a minute to think about all the aspects of your daily routine prior to COVID-19 that had a social component. This may be a daily commute that involved a greeting or gesture. It could also be a sense of routine and structure within relationships. The interactions with those individuals may have seemed inconsequential in the moment, but now they are the very faces you crave to see. The various degrees of informal and formal relationships we hold create predictability and expectations. Whether you identify as an introvert or an extravert, we all have an innate desire to be connected. Actively working on identifying and filling gaps with connections will reduce the risk of engaging in unhealthy coping.

Below are a list of tools and resources that may help you connect during this time of social distancing. Remember to find activities that fuel your social wellness tank and bring you peace. It isn’t about what resources you use as much as it is about finding the routine that works for you. Pay close attention to your reaction to your activities, what senses are engaged and how you feel. Missing others, having routines, and looking forward presuming previous activities will not be replaced. However, relationships can be enhanced as we learn to experience others through broader connections.

Tools and Resources

- Yoga Practice
- Fitness Workouts
- Insight Timer meditation app
- Stay Home, Take Care
- Quarantine Chat
- NPR Tiny Desk concert series
- Monterey Bay Aquarium Live Cam
- Nightly Livestreams from the Metropolitan Opera
The Veterans Administration had created a video message about staying connected, cultivating ways to stay calm, improving self-control and remaining hopeful during social distancing and COVID-19.

**Spiritual Wellness**

You may have seen them: memes of DaVinci’s famous painting of the Last Supper. Instead of being surrounded by his friends at the table, Jesus sits alone while the disciples’ faces appear as if in videoconference boxes. What social distancing would have done to the first Holy Thursday! It’s corny, to be sure, but hopefully can make us crack a smile as we deal with the serious, and sobering, effects of the current pandemic. It’s good for us to keep a sense of humor during these difficult times. And it’s just as important for us to keep the faith.

![Image](image.png)

One way to keep the faith is by maintaining practice of the faith, through worship. Yet that’s difficult when houses of worship are shuttered. Many who cherish regular celebration of the Eucharist are hurting from being deprived of Communion and community. To fill the void, churches are livestreaming Masses, other liturgies, and prayer services. Take advantage of these opportunities!

Watching through a screen is not the same as sitting in a pew; no long-distance connection is a satisfying substitute for being together in person. But our tradition assures us that just wanting to be there is itself a blessing; God’s finger can touch us through “spiritual communion” when most other touching is disallowed.

Practicing our faith, however, won’t prevent our faith from being challenged. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Challenging times can challenge old assumptions. Asking “Where is God?” can become “Who is God?” We may feel afraid, angry, confused. That’s normal; that’s okay. Share those feelings in prayer, even (or especially!) if you’ve never prayed like that before. God wants honest prayers, not censored ones. We might find ourselves asking questions for which there are no simple answers. But simply asking will prevent a simplistic faith. Old images of God may give way to new ones that better reflect God’s mystery and love.
Many people are doing jigsaw puzzles these days. But what if we find our faith to be something of a puzzle? Now may be a good time to fit some pieces together. Consider a deep dive into doctrine instead of another binge on blockbusters. Of particular importance these days is Catholic social teaching, those principles we apply to what’s happening in society, especially for those facing hunger, homelessness, isolation, racism, unemployment and the prospect of serious illness without adequate health insurance. These teachings challenge us to respond with mercy, compassion and justice, and call us to reach out to those on the margins.

But how can we reach out when we’ve been ordered to stay in? It’s ironic that social distancing can impede social action, and that volunteers’ services are being shelved while shelves in pantries need volunteers to stock them. Yet there is still much we can do, even from our homes. We can contact our lawmakers and advocate for just laws and social change. We can reach out to the lonely or hurting through letter, phone, or video, offering love and practical assistance. We can donate to Catholic Charities and other organizations caring for the swelling ranks of those seeking help and hope. And we can continue to pray.

Lent recently ended, having been followed by Easter; a season of sacrifice and sorrow has been followed by one of joy, rebirth, and new life. Unlike Lent, this current pandemic is not yet at its end. But it too will be replaced by a new season, one we can hope will give birth to a better, more joyful world: a world in which the isolation so many experience today will be replaced by a renewed solidarity in love, justice, and peace. With each other. And with God.