

## Coping with isolation due to COVID-19 while incarcerated

The outbreak of COVID-19 has challenged people all over the world to make important changes in their daily lives in order to prevent the spread of the virus. One way to do this in a correctional setting is by using isolation for those who are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 or who have tested positive. This is important to protect everyone inside the building - staff and patients - and even those who we may come into contact with from the community.

However, isolation can be stressful. It is natural to experience fear and anxiety over the COVID-19 outbreak. You may be worried about your own health, the health of your loved ones, and the state of the world in general. It can be helpful to remember that this outbreak is a shared human experience. The recognition of common humanity can help us to feel less alone.

In addition to general fear and anxiety about the virus, changes in your routine and a feeling of a lack of control caused by isolation may make you feel sad, bored, angry, frustrated, or irritable.

There are things you can do to help decrease negative impacts of stress caused by isolation:

### 1. Limit your daily intake of news about the pandemic

The constant flood of news about the pandemic can be overwhelming. It may be helpful to pick one time during the day where you update yourself on important information by listening to the radio or watching the news.

### 2. Do something with higher purpose

Focus on something outside of yourself – help a friend, do something kind for someone you don't know well, volunteer to do something that benefits everyone on your unit, pray, read a religious or spiritual text

### 3. Look for the good

Seeing positive outcomes following something traumatic or difficult is called **Benefit Finding**. The saying "every cloud has a silver lining" expresses the main idea behind this exercise. When you are suffering, benefits can be hard to see – it can take time and reflection to identify them.

Examples include:

- Experiencing a serious illness may force someone to reconnect with supportive family or friends.
- Being rejected for something can help remind someone to be grateful for what they have

The GLAD Technique<sup>1</sup> can be helpful to find good things in everyday life. At the end of each day, think of:

One thing you are **G**rateful for today

- a friend, a kind word, your basic needs are being met (food, shelter, clothing), etc.

One thing you **L**earned today

- something about someone else, a fact about the world, a new word

One thing you **A**ccomplished today

- any task you completed, even if it is small – taking a shower, making your bed, writing a letter, etc.

One thing that brought you **D**elight today

- a joke, thinking of a loved one, hearing a heartwarming story, something that made you smile, no matter how small!

#### 4. Use mindfulness and other relaxation exercises when you overwhelmed

Mindfulness can be a helpful tool in managing stress and anxiety. There are three general goals of mindfulness: 1) Focusing on the here and now (not worrying about the past or future) 2) Noticing and describing what is going on in the moment without judging it as good, bad, happy, sad, etc., and 3) Letting those moments go as they pass.

If you would like more information about mindfulness exercises, let the mental health department know!

Engaging in physical exercises which relax your body can also be helpful:

#### Stretching/Yoga

Stretching before bed can help you to release the tension you have been holding in your body throughout the day.

1. **Standing forward fold.** Stand with your feet shoulder width apart, raise your arms in the air. Slowly bend forward at the hips, exhaling while you do so. Allow your upper torso to hang here for 8-10 breaths. With every exhale, stretch a little more, your head getting closer to the ground.
2. **Legs up the wall.** Sit facing the wall and lie on your back. Move your buttocks as close to the wall as you can get, and lift your legs, resting the back of your legs against the wall. Rest with your arms by your sides, palms up. Hold for 8-10 breaths.
3. **Spinal twist.** Lie on your back, extending your arms out from both side. Slowly cross your left leg over the right side of your body, allowing it to fall naturally to

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<sup>1</sup> Altman, Donald. (2014). The Mindfulness Toolbox. Tool #22 The G.L.A.D. Technique. (Pp 73-76). PESI Publishing & Media.

the floor on your right side. For a deeper twist, turn your head to the left. Hold for 8-10 breaths. Repeat on the other side.

4. **Knee to chest.** Lie on your back, bend one knee and bring it up to your chest, placing both hands on your knee to hold it in place. Hold for 8-10 breaths. Repeat with the other knee.
5. **Seated side bend.** Sit on the floor in a cross legged position. Place your left hand on the floor beside your left hip, lift your right arm above your head and reach over your head, leaning to the left. Hold for 8-10 breaths. Repeat on the other side.
6. **Bear Hug.** Standing or sitting, wrap your arms around yourself like you are giving yourself a hug. Grasp your shoulders and pull to deepen the stretch for at least 30 seconds. Release your arms, stretch them wide out to the side, and repeat the exercise with the other arm on top.

#### **5. Distract yourself, and stay connected to others**

Give your brain and you heart a break from worry. Listen to the radio, read, do a puzzle, play a game, watch TV, make a list, solve a solvable problem, learn something new, clean or tidy your space, bead, draw, get some exercise. Anything that takes your focus away from the stressors of life, even if it's just for the moment.

Staying connected with others in whatever way you are able to can also be important. Engage socially with others in isolation – play cards, have conversations (preferably about something other than the virus). Speak with one of the mental health professionals or nurses on their daily rounds about how you're feeling. If you have loved ones in the community that you are able to contact via phone calls, do so. Write letters to loved ones you cannot call, even if you cannot send them right away.