

## COVID-19: An update since our last note

This note considers the impact of the pandemic on your mental and physical well-being and provides tips to remain in control. At this time of the year people are also generally tiring. Throw in the year that has been and we all need to be reminded that taking the occasional break is a good thing.

### Maintaining our mental and physical well-being in times of crisis

The Covid-19 crisis does not only affect one's physical health, it brings with it another crisis, a mental and well-being crisis. Unlike the health impact of the virus, the mental and well-being crisis is one that we can put measures in place to control. Now, more than ever, we will need to focus on prioritising our mental and physical wellbeing.

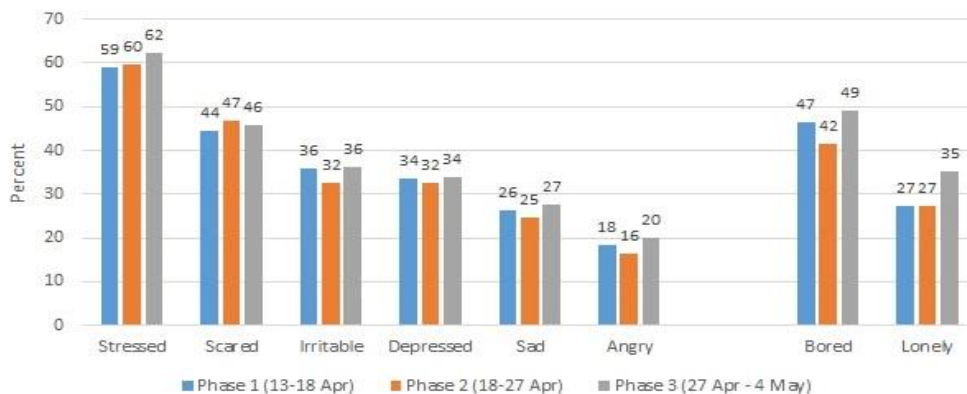
#### Pandemics are stressful

Staying locked up for the past few months with restrictions on our movement and isolation from people and places we enjoy has exhausted us mentally, physically and emotionally. The pandemic has led us to experience uncertainty and fears about our own health, the possibility of losing loved ones and financial and social pressures. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), common signs of stress during an infectious disease outbreak like the coronavirus pandemic include fear and anxiety about your own health and the health of your loved ones, worsening of chronic health problems, changes in sleep or eating patterns, difficulty concentrating and increased use of tobacco and/or alcohol. When fear and anxiety become overwhelming, they can cause strong emotional and mental strain which impacts our mental health and physical well-being.

#### Anxiety and uncertainty impact our mental health

Added to the fear of contracting the virus, we have experienced significant changes such as working from home, temporary unemployment, financial stress, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues. Mental health is an important part of overall health and wellbeing. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It may also affect how we handle stress, relate to family and friends, and make choices during a crisis. Research in South Africa has found that 33% of South African adults were depressed, 45% fearful, and 29% lonely during lockdown. While some may be resilient enough to adjust to the situation and recover from the effects of lockdown, others will suffer mental stress from the virus itself, collective grief, prolonged physical distancing and associated social isolation. COVID-19 may also place more psychological strain on those already living with mental health challenges or other chronic conditions. Experts predict that we could see a global epidemic related to mental health as a result of the uncertainty, loss of income and disruption to normal life. Reports are already showing an increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety in a number of countries. The [WHO](#) has provided useful tips and advice to look after our own mental health and our loved ones.

*The mood of South Africa under lockdown, by wave of surveying, University of Johannesburg and HSRC*



Source: Daily Maverick

### **Time for a digital detox**

With the pandemic accelerating the move to all-digital, communication and engagement have been largely driven through virtual mediums over the past few months. Most of us have increased screen time whether through remote working or binge-watching. Viewership statistics show that South Africans have been spending an average of four hours and 12 minutes a day in front of their television screens, compared to before the crisis, when people were watching TV for only an hour or two on a daily basis. This can lead to one losing track of time and may even negatively impact our sleep schedules. While it is important to stay abreast of what is happening, constant social media updates and 24-hour news consumption can make you more anxious and lead to [doomscrolling](#). The disruption to our daily routines and increased screen time is a significant negative aspect of the lockdown and ultimately affects our well-being. It is important to cut back screen time and consider adopting periods where electronic devices are switched off and time is taken to relax, exercise or engage in meaningful activities.

### **Avoiding increased stress while working from home**

Many of us that are still working from home (WFH) continue to experience distractions and spend a lot more time in front of our computers and video meeting applications like Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc. Research shows that too many online meetings can negatively affect stress levels as it requires greater emotional effort to appear interested in the conversation with an absence of non-verbal cues and an increased expectation to maintain eye contact. We tend to also feel anxious about our remote spaces and sometimes worry about family or home interruptions or our internet connection letting us down. It is important to reduce the 'Zoom fatigue' by only hosting meetings online that need to happen, limiting the number of virtual meetings as well as using messaging and email where possible. While WFH may come with its own set of positives, it could sometimes be more stressful than working at the office. It is important to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Studies suggest having a dedicated workspace that you can leave when your workday is done. This will help train your brain to work when you are in that space and switch off when you are not. Also ensure that boundaries are set with technology and that different evening leisure activities are planned for after the workday such as a walk outside, cooking, listening to music or spending time with family.

### **Focusing on resilience**

You can take actions to help support yourself and your loved ones if you are experiencing emotional or mental distress. While uncertainty brings with it stress and fear around the fact that the pandemic will most likely still be with us for a while, it also means that there is continued opportunity for growth. It is important to focus on goal setting and prioritising good habits. Remember to separate what is in your control and what is outside your control, then build a plan for those that you do have control over. Accept that crisis, change or loss can happen. A sense of humour is an important part of coping with challenges. Research shows that laughing triggers several healthy physical and emotional changes in the body such as reduced stress, anxiety and depression and an increased general sense of well-being. In a Norwegian study, people with a strong sense of humour were found to outlive those who didn't laugh as much, and a notable difference was seen in those battling cancer, cardiovascular disease and infection. Only we ultimately can take care of ourselves.

### **Sources**

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