

CALDWELL FAMILY INSTITUTE

Dealing with Pandemic Depression



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What is Pandemic Depression?

Pandemic depression is a term we made up to capture a unique brand of negativity that seems to be plaguing our clients lately. Understandably, many of us were caught off guard by the extent and intensity of the virus, and were ill-equipped to make such a rapid shift from what we used to call “normal” to the new ocean of uncertainty and unanswered questions. We witnessed many of our clients be plunged into a dark hole of canceled plans, lost income, and forced isolation. Things we used to depend on for mental wellbeing were stripped away, and our future was thrown into a murky swamp of unpredictability.

As COVID swept through our normalcy like a hungry colony of army ants, our clients felt more and more hopeless. They found themselves paralyzed by a sudden loss of daily routine, or overwhelmed by the demand to change course at the speed of light. Very quickly, their lives became a dangerous mix of junk food, sweatpants, and pessimism. It was certainly depression, but it wasn't textbook.



Our Response

We felt the need to create a special treatment plan for this very unique situation, and as we've watched it help our clients restart their engines, we are inspired to share it with the world. At a time like this, people need resources, and, well, we've got one. This booklet is now available to you for free, and we encourage you to pass it around to as many people as you like.

How to Use This Resource

We've divided this booklet into five sections, each covering a different recommendation for fighting pandemic depression, and each supported by scientific studies so you know we're not just making it all up:

- **Structure**
- **Self-Care**
- **DIY CBT**
- **Creativity**
- **Short-Term Goal-Setting**

Each section explains why we think that particular area is so important, then walks you through the steps you need to take to put the plan into action. The section on self-care is the longest (nine subsections!), and is a statement on what we have found to be the most neglected aspect of a depressed person's life.

Some of you will find that you only need one or two of these ideas, while others might find that you need what's in this booklet and then a whole lot more. Either way, please use, reuse, or pass along as you see fit. We're all in this together, and it's more important than ever to share good ideas and hope. As always, feel free to reach out to us with any questions or comments. We'd love to hear from you.



Structure

Routines. Schedules. STRUCTURE. Easier said than done, right?

This is the part you already know, but are likely ignoring. It's what your parents yelled at you about, what your teachers insisted on, and what you've always known, in the back of your mind, gives you a sense of purpose and direction in your daily life. You grew up with structure, went to school with structure, and likely had some kind of structure before the pandemic if you were a student, a member of the workforce, or raising kids of your own. And if you didn't have some kind of structure to your life, it is highly possible that you were plagued with anxiety and depression long before this mean little bug showed up. Every mental health expert in the world will tell you that structure in your day-to-day is the cornerstone to mental wellbeing. So, naturally, it's the very first thing we're going to recommend during this time of chaos and uncertainty.

Decades of research have correlated daily structure and routine with higher self-esteem, more organized personalities, better academic performance, and even improved physical health. A recent study showed that predictable family routines reduced impulsive and defiant behaviors in children (12). Another one showed that an organized daily routine improved coping skills, productivity, and a sense of self-worth in college students (14).

It follows, then, that most of us experienced a drop in our mental wellbeing when our daily routines were thrown out the window as a result of the virus. Our physical activity was taken away—no more early morning yoga class, no more gym workouts, no Tuesday night pickup games at the neighborhood basketball court. Our schedules were turned on their heads—no more shipping the kids off to school, no more stopping for coffee on the way to the daily staff meeting. And worse (if your job still existed) you had to quickly adapt to the Zoom universe and other online platforms with no warning whatsoever, often finding yourself taking online trainings late into the night when the kids went to bed and your daily toilet paper hunt was over.

The people who are doing well figured out very quickly that they needed to keep a structure at home—whether or not they were employed (30) (32).

The people who are not doing so well have taken a little longer to figure that out.

If you are a member of the second group, then we suggest you start here. Take a look at how you are structuring your day. Are you getting up at the same time every day? Are you following a schedule? Do you limit the amount of time you allow yourself for a given activity and adhere to those limitations? If not, this could be the primary contributor to your negative feelings.

Try taking the following steps for a week, and see how you feel. It is highly possible (and we've seen this in our practice) that you might be one of those people who doesn't need any further intervention than this. Structure—carefully scheduling how you spend your hours everyday—could be the key to improving your mood.



1. Choose a wake-up time and stick to it. Everyday.
2. Choose a bedtime and stick to it. Everyday.
3. Schedule your meals at approximately the same time, everyday.
4. Schedule at least 30 minutes (preferably earlier in the day) for exercise.
5. If you are working, actually write out the hours you are to be at your desk, head down, doing your work. When those hours are up, stop working. Schedule the same breaks you would have enjoyed in your “normal” job or classroom.
6. If you are not working, actually schedule home activities (clean out the closet, research that screenplay, organize photos) by writing in the hours that you will spend doing those things. Don't go over the allotted time.
7. Schedule social media time. Don't go over the allotted time—and we mean it!
8. Allow yourself 30-45 minutes per day for reading or watching the news. Watching or reading more than this appears to be contributing to a sense of doom and gloom in most of our clients. Limit your access to news and then put down your phone!
9. Actually schedule—and that means write it down!—relaxation time. Choose a few time slots here and there throughout the day where you get to watch TV, play with your kids, pet your dog, or stare at the wall. When time's up, TIME'S UP!

These simple steps (well, simple to type, harder to implement) might mean the difference between peace of mind and apocalyptic thinking. Take this seriously and really try it; you'll see a difference.

Self-Care

Once you've got some structure in place, it's time to take a close look at how you are tending to your instrument--that is, your own human body and mind. Self-care is no longer a woo-woo term for privileged folks who have time to take a walk on the beach after goat yoga. Self-care, more than ever, has now become critical for getting through this forced isolation. Many of our traditional tools for self-care (religious services, time with friends, salons and barber shops) are now unavailable, leaving a lot of us scrambling for other ways to care for our bodies and souls.

Read through the following list of self-care domains, and do a quick inventory of your current life. Are you walking around your house in sweats? Are you drinking more, and exercising less? Are you shrugging off daily showers? Are you finding yourself down rabbit holes of social media, rather than admiring the rose bush at the end of your street? If so, STOP! Prepare to be astounded at how much better you will feel if you get back to basics by eating right, sleeping well, getting dressed, and connecting with nature.

Basic hygiene

Basic hygiene habits are the things you do (or should be doing) everyday to stay clean and healthy. They include brushing your teeth, combing your hair, bathing, and wearing clean clothes. It is well-established (and now front and center to all of us) that our risk for contracting diseases or illnesses increases if we do not practice proper hygiene. As a matter of fact, one of the first signals for mental health professionals that something is wrong with a client is a decline in personal hygiene habits. (Betcha didn't know that we therapists are smelling your breath and evaluating your clothes every time you come in to see us!)

It has long been known that practicing basic hygiene habits can stop us from slipping deeper into depression. Studies show that something as simple as getting dressed for the day can make us feel more productive and confident. And--fun fact!--cool showers cause positive chemical changes in the brain, boost energy levels, and even help with weight loss (16) (24).

So why not take some easy steps? Watch what happens.

- Brush your teeth every morning and every night.
- Floss. Really.
- Take a shower.
- Shave.

- Clip your fingernails and toenails.
- Care about your appearance. Put on makeup if that's your thing, comb your hair, and choose clothes that make you feel happy.

And if you're feeling particularly ambitious, why not take some bigger hygiene steps? No better time than now! C'mon. We challenge you.

Quit smoking.

Quit vaping.

Quit drinking.

Cleanliness and Organization

Look, there's a reason Marie Kondo has become a household name. You're probably familiar with the notion that your environment is a reflection of your state of mind. Well, it's also true that your state of mind could be a reflection of your environment. Messy home, messy brain, and vice versa!

Rather than waiting until you feel better to put things away, try the reverse: Put your things away first and watch how much better you'll feel as a result.

Cleaning and organizing your living space truly works wonders on your mental health. Not only can it serve as a mindfulness activity to calm your thoughts, but it also can increase your sense of control over your environment. (Finally! Something we can control!)

Messy homes have been linked to depressive symptoms, and one study even showed that people (especially women) reported lower stress and better mood when their homes were finally organized (20). Cleaning can also be a form of exercise,

which boosts endorphins, our "feel good" chemicals. When we declutter and clean our homes, we can reduce our levels of stress, giving us one less thing to think about.



If you are one of those folks who shudders at the thought of organizing that pile of--well, whatever that is--in the corner of your room, then consider taking small steps. Do what elite mountain climbers do: Never look up at the top of the mountain. Simply keep your head down and focus on the next step in front

of you. Enough steps, and before you know it, you'll attain your clean and orderly summit!

1. First designate three small areas as "put away," "give away," and "throw away." You can use bins, bags, even cardboard boxes.
2. Start attacking that pile in these broad categories. Sort your things according to what you want to do with them.
3. Take the trash out first. It feels sooo good.
4. Now attend to the "give away" box, and decide whether it's all going to charity, or whether some or all will be going to friends or family members. Divide accordingly. Set aside.
5. Now it's time for the "put away" box. Begin with doing the dishes. Trust us. It's life changing.
6. After dishes always comes clothes. Wash what needs to be washed, hang what needs to be hung, and fold what needs to be folded.
7. From here, go for the things that already have a place to "live." For example, if you already have a bookshelf, put your books on the bookshelf. Don't worry about cleaning out the bookshelf itself yet, that's for later.
8. If you find yourself at this point with a pile of "I don't know's," then think deeply about whether you want those items in the first place. If not, give them away. If so, set them aside for now. It might be that you just don't have a place for them in your home yet.

Once you've worked your way through the pile(s) hogging your living space, you can begin to attack more specific areas. Choose a weekend to organize that bookshelf that somehow ended up holding cat food and rain boots. Choose another weekend to go through your kitchen drawers. Rinse and repeat until you're satisfied, and you'll naturally create new space for those pesky miscellaneous items left over from your piles. Just use the method above, and you'll be taking another step toward sweeping this pandemic depression right out the door.

Nutrition

Volumes upon volumes of science have shown that food and mood are connected. It's pretty simple: The better you eat, the better you feel. Much like expensive cars, our brains function best with the "premium fuel." Processed foods and sugars can impair our brain function and worsen mood problems like pandemic depression (5) (11) (17).

Try using this time to rethink the way you're approaching your fuel tank. Don't do anything crazy yet--first just do the reflecting. Think about what you're eating on a daily basis. Is the food you choose rich with nutrients, or packed with sugar and salt? Does it feed your whole body or just your tastebuds? Generally speaking, how do you feel after you eat it?



Consider how you might prepare a meal for a child you love. What kinds of things would you want for that little human body? Why? Thinking about children and food is actually a neat trick for changing the way you approach eating as an activity. Ever seen a kid on a sugar high? Does that seem healthy to you? (And do we need to remind you of the notorious sugar crash that follows?) Do you know many kids who skip breakfast or fast for several hours? And how about soda?

Would you approve of a child you love drinking soda all day? It's interesting to watch what happens mentally when we compare how we eat to how we'd ideally like a child to eat.

So, before you make any changes to your diet, try this mental exercise first. Spend a few days just observing and reflecting so you can really come up with some honest answers to the questions we posed above. Only after you've done the thinking part can real change happen. And we don't mean fad diets! The long-term damage to self-esteem compared to the short-term (not lasting) benefits just isn't worth it. We're not fans. It's so much better to make a lifestyle change, and you can't really do that without true self-reflection.

Once you've had a brass tacks talk with yourself, do the clean-out thing. Go through your fridge and pantry and toss all the foods that don't belong in your human body. Notice where you have emotional attachments to certain bad foods, challenge them, and overcome them! Then fill your kitchen with nutritious foods.

This is where people tend to slip up. They throw out the chips, buy a bunch of apples and call it a day. Well, no wonder the change doesn't stick! Once you've made a change in the foods available in your home, the work isn't over-

-it has only just begun. Fighting depression is, well, a fight, and the hardcore reflecting you did on your diet has to continue. Eat your meals, and continue reflecting. How do you feel about what you just did for your body? Do you notice a shift in your mood? How about an hour later? What do you notice after a day of eating awesome food? A week? Go back and eat cookies and cheeseburgers for a day. Notice any difference?

Continued reflection on your body and its reaction to food is the key to making lasting change. We can't expect to feel better if we don't become active in the change. And yes, it's work. It takes effort. But as the great Beverly Sills once said, "There are no shortcuts to anywhere worth going."

Sleep

Recently we had a family call our offices requesting therapy due to constant fighting among family members. When we brought them in for an assessment, we learned that no one was getting proper sleep. Instead of doing any therapy, we sent them home with a strict sleep regimen and asked them to call us in a month. Sure enough, when we heard from them a few weeks later, overall mood in the house had greatly improved, and the daily bickering that had plagued them for so long was pretty much gone.



Now, not all family problems are so easily solved, but we have always made sleep hygiene central to our therapy. Countless problems with mood, energy, attitude, and outlook can be attributed to poor sleep (26) (33). And we're all familiar with that dangerous sleep-depression cycle: Bad feelings keep us up at night, which causes us to lose sleep, which makes us feel worse the next day, which keeps us up later that night, which causes even more sleep loss, and so on.

Needless to say, it is simply essential to get good sleep in order to be in optimal health. Sleep helps our body restore itself and replenish our energy levels each day. Poor sleep can impact our immune system, emotion regulation, cognitive functioning, and physical functioning (5) (26) (33).

Practicing good sleep hygiene means setting yourself up for a good night of restful sleep. If you're someone who needs to revisit your own bedtime habits, consider these tips:

- Keep a consistent sleep schedule that allows at least 7 hours of sleep per night for adults, 9 hours for kids (sometimes more for teens).

- Limit exposure to bright lights and technology screens in the evenings. All electronic devices should be turned off at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Avoid consuming caffeine, alcohol, and large amounts of food before going to bed.
- Keep your bedroom at a comfortable, cool temperature.
- Try to make your bedroom a calm, relaxing space reserved for sleep. Don't eat, work, or watch TV in bed.

Exercise

Again, volumes upon volumes of research link exercise (the secretion of endorphins) to positive mood. In fact, a recent study even connects the specific feeling of hopefulness to regular exercise (1). Exercise has both immediate and long-term benefits. Moderate to vigorous exercise can improve the thinking in kids ages 6-13, and help fight short-term anxiety in adults (15) (26). Regular physical activity can keep skills such as learning, thinking, and judgment sharp. Along with some of the long-term benefits of exercise (lowering risk for certain cancers and diseases, weight management, strengthening bones and muscles), getting that heart rate up simply puts you in a better mood. Immediately.



We recommend putting exercise earlier in your day if your schedule allows. If you can face your day with an improved attitude right off the bat, you're more likely to set off a domino effect of having positive interactions with people, getting your work done on time, and ending the day on a high note. And for some reason, exercise seems to breed exercise. The more people work out, walk, swim, or jog, the more they seem to keep wanting to do it. So, get out those walking shoes! With not much more to do during this isolation, you might as well get that heart pumping.

Play

Sigmund Freud once suggested that humans are pulled in three directions: work, love, and play. That's right, the oh-so-serious Father of Psychology himself emphasized the importance of recreation and leisure time for the human psyche. He knew what happens to us when we don't reserve a portion of our daily lives for true enjoyment of our hobbies. But play seems to be one area that many of us have neglected.

Play is important for all ages, it's just that the definition changes over time. For kids, it might look like toys and make-believe. As we get older, it changes to sports, board games, video games, or contests. For adults, the "playground" is vast and varied. It can be anything from puzzles and reading, to game nights with friends, to a round of poker or chess. No matter where you find your amusement, regular play is an essential aspect of overall mental health. Studies have shown play to relieve stress, improve brain function, boost creativity through stimulation, and improve relationships and connections to others (3) (19) (22).

What do you like to do? What makes you happy? If nothing comes to mind (which is common in the depth of an existing depression), what did you like to do in the past? How did you spend your "recess" hours before you felt this way? Common sense would suggest you return to those activities and see what happens. If that's not possible, look around online for ideas, or ask friends and coworkers. Most importantly, start saying yes. If you're invited to a virtual game of charades, don't turn it down. If you're challenged to a round of Words with Friends, accept. Start catching yourself in that initial impulse to say "no thanks" or "maybe another time" and stop yourself in your tracks. Say yes.

In the meantime, here are a few of our ideas:

- Virtual family game nights
- Friendly competitions
- Art projects
- A book off the bestseller list
- Gardening
- Tossing the ball with your dog, or playing "laser tag" with your cat
- Baking
- Puzzles
- Video games

Productivity

Let's face it. Productivity just feels good. Ever reached the end of your list to check your final box? Ever turned in your final draft after weeks of edits? Productivity leads to a sense of accomplishment, one of the easiest routes to improved self-esteem, and a surefire way to battle pandemic depression. Studies from across the globe show us how productivity is a preventative factor for depression in adults, and kids will tell you all about the pride they feel after a job well done.

Work, paid or unpaid, has countless mental health benefits. A Chinese study demonstrated what happened to older vulnerable adults when they engaged in productive activities. Unsurprisingly, they reported less depressive symptoms such as loneliness, irritability, and hopelessness over a two-year period after participating in paid work, volunteering, or caregiving (13). A European study yielded similar findings: Adults who engaged in some kind of work, especially formal volunteering, were at lower risk for depression overall (6).

Okay, so how do we get to work when we are held down by the weight of a pandemic depression? Well, a Walt Disney quote comes to mind: "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing." Most of the people in the world who are known for productivity are the ones who don't overthink, overplan, or overdecide. And in that spirit, we're not going to over-explain. This might be one of those areas where we counsel against too much reflection, and instead advise you to count to three and jump in. Really. Just pick something to get done and start doing it. No more thinking. Only doing.

Nature

One interesting--and perhaps unexpected--benefit of the pandemic is that by eliminating most of our leisure activities, we are left with nature as one of our last outlets for clearing our heads. Now that we have limited choices for blowing off steam after a long day, especially one spent staring at a screen, many of us are turning to the trees for calm and comfort. People are reporting a significant increase in time spent outdoors--walking, hiking, gardening, and picnicking--and in doing so, are noticing the direct impact on their moods.



"Ecotherapy" is basically therapy that takes place in nature. And guess what? You don't need a therapist for it. You can conduct your own ecotherapy by working outdoor time into your daily self-care regimen. Humans find nature inherently interesting, so going outside actually activates the curious parts of our brains--the parts associated with positive thinking and feeling. In fact, studies show that time spent outdoors can protect against depression, and reduce rumination (thinking too long about something) often associated with negative mood (2) (4).

We feel better when we are in nature. Nature provides a respite for our overactive minds, refreshes us for new tasks, and replenishes our souls. When you find yourself with a choice between watching another episode or taking a walk around the park down the street, opt for the park. Try to notice what you're seeing, smelling, and hearing. Reconnect with the natural environment, and you'll likely see an immediate spike in your mood.

Social Connection

Now this is a tricky one. The number one thing we are missing the most right now is our connection to other people. If you're trying to be safe and follow CDC guidelines, you've likely limited your contact with other humans as much as possible--a socially conscious choice, but one that comes with the serious downside of utter isolation. Mental health professionals get nervous when we hear our clients isolating--it is well established in our field that social isolation is a petri dish for clinical depression.

So, first things first. We're going to have to accept a grim reality: we can't be near most humans right now, at least not in a soul-nurturing way. And since there really isn't a substitute for in-person connection, we're going to have to settle for second best. But let's focus on that word, "settle." Settling doesn't feel good. Don't expect to reap the same benefits from virtual contact that you enjoy in person. But also don't confuse "settling" with "feeling worse." Settling simply means that you didn't get your first choice, so you're going to have to make due with your second. It doesn't feel great, but it's better than nothing.

While it certainly won't feel the same, virtual connection can mimic much of what we experience in person. Many studies tout the superior benefit of video encounters over phone, text, and email (23) (25). One study compared face-to-face contact with Facebook contact for military veterans, and found that it was face-to-face contact that reduced psychiatric symptoms (27).

All this to say, virtual connection might be a necessary antidote to social isolation right now. Communication over video is almost as effective as being in-person when it comes to achieving social connection, because we are able to see our loved ones and their body language in real-time as we speak. Unlike other digital forms of communication, we can be assured that the person we are speaking with is present with us and that we have their attention. And that feels good.

Unfortunately, there's a fine line to walk here. There are also studies that link increased virtual connection to depression in teens. A thoughtful study published this year threaded the needle nicely: It showed that while video chats reduced feelings of loneliness, certain kinds of video chats actually increased depression in teens, especially because they can imitate some of the damaging social interactions that are inherent to adolescence. The study suggests that careful monitoring of the type of video chats (supportive, positive, etc.) can help reduce depression in teens (9).

This same study contained another interesting finding: A reduction in adolescent depression correlated strongly with increased time with family (9). You read that right. Teens who played charades with their parents actually felt better. Parents, rejoice! There is now sciencebacking your insistence that your

angsty teen spend the evening with you. And apparently it doesn't matter what you do together, just spending time together helps keep depression at bay.

And now to the question of gaming. While many adults tend to have an aversion to the world of online video games, often insisting that video games are the cause of many great wars and all the ills of society, science doesn't appear to be on their side. While excessive time spent on gaming can be harmful to mental health, mild to moderate use has many positive effects. For children, those who play video games exhibit more emotional stability and reduced emotional disturbances (10). Depressed mood has been significantly lower in moderate gamers compared to those who never play. In addition, playing video games can help with reducing impulsivity, increasing mental flexibility, and improving executive functioning skills (10). How about that, naysayers? A couple rounds of Fortnite might actually brighten your day and solidify your social connections.



DIY CBT

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is one of the most well-researched and best-proven forms of psychotherapy, sometimes working as well as antidepressant drugs for some types of depression. While medication may work well to treat depression, if you also use CBT, your treatment might work even better and the benefits might last longer (7).

For some of us, working with a mental health professional is an easy answer. CBT has an excellent track record against depression, and most therapists are trained to use it. But for the rest of us, therapy might be out of the question for a variety of different reasons. If so, why not try doing it yourself? Just follow these steps for several weeks, and see if you notice a shift in your outlook, energy level, and overall mood.

Identify your negative thinking.

One of the first tasks of CBT is identifying your cognitive distortions (faulty or unhelpful ways of thinking). These distorted thinking patterns cause negative feelings, which in turn can lead us to make poor choices, or otherwise act in a way that is unhelpful. Look at the following list, and see how many you might be entertaining:

All-or-Nothing Thinking

Sometimes called 'black and white thinking,' this is the tendency to evaluate things in extreme, black-or-white categories. This one is often associated with perfectionism: "If I'm not perfect, I have failed." One we're hearing a lot is, "If I leave my house, I'm going to get sick." Here's another one: "I cannot be happy without my normal activities."

Overgeneralization

This is when you conclude--often after a single event--that something will occur over and over again. Use of the words 'always,' 'never,' 'nothing,' and 'everything' often accompany this distortion. For example, "Nothing good ever happens to me," "I'm always going to feel this way," or "I'll always be lonely and miserable."

Mental Filters

This is when you only pay attention to certain types of evidence, as in noticing our failures but not our successes, or picking out a negative detail in any

situation, dwelling on it, and then experiencing the entire situation as negative. We're seeing a lot of mental filtering in the way our clients are consuming the news right now.

Discounting the Positive

This is ignoring or invalidating good things that have happened to you or that you have done, effectively finding a way to say, "That doesn't count." We see this a lot when our clients take a few positive steps toward self-care. They often discount those small steps as amounting to nothing, and slip right back into their depression.

Jumping to Conclusions

There are two key ways of jumping to conclusions:

Mind reading, where you think someone is going to react in a particular way, or you believe someone is thinking things that they aren't. Not hearing back from a friend right away might lead you to assume they are avoiding you.

Fortune telling, when you predict future events will unfold in a particular way, often to avoid trying something that's difficult or challenging for us. "This is never going to end."



In other words, imagining we know what others are thinking, or what the future holds, when in reality we don't.

Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization

This is exaggerating the importance of shortcomings and problems while minimizing the importance of desirable qualities or achievements. It's blowing things way out of proportion, or, conversely, inappropriately shrinking something to seem less important, often in conjunction with permission-giving statements that in some way rationalize poor choices we make, or allow others to make. Just take a look at some of the extreme opinions in the mask debate, and you'll see what we mean.

Emotional Reasoning

Judging yourself or your circumstances based on your emotions is known as “emotional reasoning.” This is when we assume that because we feel a certain way, what we feel must be true, for example, feeling hopeless and then concluding a problem is therefore impossible to solve. “The virus is mutating. I don’t even know why we’re attempting a vaccine.”

Should Statements

Should statements are self-defeating ways we talk to ourselves that emphasize unattainable or unrealistic expectations. Then, when we fall short of our own standards, we “fail.” “Shoulding” on others often leads to frustration and, when applied to the self, shame, guilt and self-loathing. “I should be able to handle this on my own.” “I shouldn’t be so easily affected by social isolation.”

Labeling

This is making a judgment about yourself as a person, rather than seeing the behavior as something you did that doesn’t define you as an individual. This is an extreme form of overgeneralization and oversimplification, as humans are far too complex to sum up with a simple label. “I’m a failure.” “I’m disgusting.”

Personalization and Blame

You entirely blame yourself for a situation that, in reality, involved many factors and was out of your control. Or you make something about you that’s not about you and end up getting your feelings hurt. We’re seeing this a lot when people decline an invitation to socialize, and the inviter takes it personally, rather than considering the context of the pandemic.

Challenging your negative thinking.

Once you’ve identified your logical mistakes, go to trial against yourself. Challenge these statements by pointing out their logical errors, then present evidence that these statements are actually false. Use real-life evidence, or it won’t work. We recommend doing this part in writing. There is something very powerful about seeing your own words on paper, advocating for yourself.

Replace your core negative thoughts.

As you work the previous two steps, you'll notice some themes start to emerge. If you see that one or two negative ideas about yourself keep popping up, then you've spotted your core negative thoughts. Once you've successfully mounted your "legal" argument against these thoughts, choose a positive thought that says the opposite about you, and begin to replace your core negative thought with this new positive thought as soon as you notice it. The trick here is to do it relentlessly, hour after hour, day after day, until it becomes easier and easier to believe. If it's too hard to replace your negative thinking, revisit the second step. You might not have presented yourself with a convincing argument. Try again, then come back to this step.



Creativity

All the coping skills you've learned from therapy, self-help books, motivational talks, and online listicles out there are good--as a matter of fact, many of them are fantastic!--but they often overlook one key area of emotional expression that has provided humans with comfort and inspiration since time immemorial: art and creativity. Did you know that children learn to draw before they learn to write? Did you know that music activates the top-left areas of our brain associated with positivity and hope? Did you know that everyone loves to dance, no matter how much they insist they don't?

Recent research on creativity and posttraumatic growth has linked challenging times to emotional creativity, divergent thinking, and artistic confidence (18). Apparently, going through something tough actually stimulates our most creative instincts. (No pain, no gain, right?) When you think about it, it makes sense. Some of the world's most prized sculptures, paintings, compositions, and choreography were inspired by significant pain and suffering.



Just this year, a study was published showing that military veterans who participated in a song-writing retreat reported significant increases in hope and optimism (11). Another study found that even those with unresolved trauma who engaged in creative activities reported happier, more positive mindsets (28).

These studies demonstrate the power of creativity. People might not need to go through a deep therapeutic process in order to feel better. It seems possible that utilizing creativity presents a "short-cut" to more positive states of mind.

The pandemic is an excellent opportunity to put your inner artist to the test. Pull out your old pencils, or dust off your guitar. Buy some paint or borrow some scissors. Creativity is limitless--anyone can do it with a little

inspiration. And the great thing about creative activities is that they can be done independently, with friends and family, or even with a professional if you need some help. No matter how you choose to start, you're bound to find yourself smiling once you really get into it.

Short-Term Goal Setting

Remember your New Year's resolutions? This year was a big goal-setting year for many of us, a year that began with big plans and inspiring dreams. Many of us put our plans in action and got excited about the year to come.

Then this happened.

Those ambitious 2020 goals may very well have been flushed down the toilet as the virus took hold of our lives. Getting dressed may have become your new daily achievement in the structureless haze of the COVID world. But humans need something to work toward and look forward to in order to feel okay. Not having goals leaves us feeling directionless and without purpose--a recipe for pandemic depression.

It's time to reconfigure your goals to work in the present COVID climate.

Research conducted on goal setting gives us an idea of what it takes to successfully reshape goals during the pandemic. Some studies link depression with goals that are too long-term, abstract, and generalized. Depressed people tend to create less specific goals with less specific ideas on how to reach those goals (8). For example, setting a goal of "being happy" is vague, and the attainment of "happiness" can be quite difficult to conceptualize. In turn, this "failure" quickly becomes another wrench in the negative thought cycle, because the chances of reaching such a vague and abstract goal are slim, especially when dealing with high levels of stress and a lack of understanding of how to get there.

On the contrary, setting specific and concrete short-term goals are more likely to break the cycle of negativity, and can combat pandemic depression by increasing happy hormones when the goals are accomplished. One study highlighted the importance of setting approach goals (I will eat greens for lunch), rather than avoidance goals (I will not eat sugary foods), to keep motivation flowing and depression at bay. These researchers found that the electro-chemical chain reaction that happens when setting and completing concrete approach goals stimulates happiness, motivation and self-esteem (32). For example, setting a specific goal to take a five-minute walk after dinner is not only a good way to improve your mood, but will also very likely snowball into more concrete goal setting and attainment.

Okay, so to increase the chances of actually sustaining goals during the pandemic, science recommends creating short-term and concrete approach goals. Here are some tips to successfully set and attain those goals whether you are a single person living alone, a couple, or a family with kids.

Revisit any goals that were set off course during the pandemic and reevaluate what is now realistic and doable.

Do a personal inventory. What are your strengths and limitations? What values do you hold close at this time? What has become more important? Less? Answers to these questions will serve as your road map, highlighting which areas are most meaningful to you when setting incremental goals.

Sit down with your partner or family and create goals together. Working on goals as a team could improve bonding and connection in your most important relationships, and provide you with a cheering squad when the going gets tough.

Start small, start somewhere, start anywhere. Keep taking one step at a time to maintain your momentum. Checking off an objective will give you that awesome natural high, and will keep you moving forward. Create a list in the morning with even the tiniest steps written down. Even big-time achievers break their projects into smaller, manageable goals. Going for a run starts with getting those sneakers on!

SMART goals are often used in the health and business sectors when talking about the sustainability of goals. SMART is a catchy reminder to set goals that are Small, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time bound. Keeping the SMART framework in mind helps with the specificity and concreteness of your goals.



Structure will be your best friend in goal setting and attainment. Stick to a schedule, write your goals down and find an accountability partner. Being accountable to someone or something will help keep you on track.

Don't quit. There will be setbacks, and days where you just don't accomplish a single thing. Give yourself room to mess up, then wipe the dirt off your knees, and try again tomorrow.

Final Note

If you put all of these recommendations into action and still find yourself battling a black hole of negativity, you might need a little extra help. Don't be afraid to reach out to a therapist, a life coach, or a clergy member. We sort of make a living doing this stuff, so you'll be in good hands!

In the meantime, it's us versus the bug. COVID may be here to stay for a while, but we don't have to put our lives on hold for another minute. Structure your day with short-term goals, and work in a healthy self-care regimen, some DIY CBT, and a creative outlet. You'll be amazed at what you can accomplish and even more impressed with how you feel. Enough is enough, wouldn't you agree? Let's put an end to pandemic depression and take our lives back!

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