

Keeping your mind strong in 2021

It is 2021 and unlike many years before, this year may have started on the same sombre note it ended on, in the midst of the COVID blues. We are in the peak of our second wave and you might start to feel the dread of another tough year creeping in.



As we start the new year, you might be finding yourself in familiar feelings of stress, uncertainty, frustration and worry. The reality of another year filled with loss of loved ones, freedom and finance, working and schooling remotely, parenting through a pandemic or isolating from at risk friends and family as well as worries around the vaccine may be sinking in. In some ways, you may be returning to the same worries of the previous year, but in just new or stronger ways. While our circumstances and challenges may not all be the same, we can all play an active role in our mental health and how we choose to meet the changing waves during this pandemic and year ahead.

The first step is to remain present through all your comfortable and distressing emotions. It might be easy to slip into avoidant strategies at this time, relying on unhelpful tactics to make yourself feel better, such as: using food, substances, relationships or other unhealthy means to distract yourself from your worries. But since the consequences of avoidance are most likely going to hit back harder, instead I encourage you to focus on developing a sense of presence and awareness in your life using mindfulness. This skill allows you to remain in an active state of attention where you can observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance without judgement but rather acceptance. For help developing this skill, try out the app “Headspace” to get you going.

Cultivating a clear, calm “headspace” is essential to ensuring you are responding to your daily challenges from a space of thoughtfulness and not reactivity. Taking this newfound awareness a step further, would mean to anticipate when certain situations are likely to cause you distress which you can then proactively manage.

“ For example, feeling you cannot physically see family members might make you feel sad and therefore want to pull away. Instead, it would be more helpful to acknowledge this reaction and work on giving yourself what you need (more connection) rather than reinforcing what makes you sad (feeling alone) by setting up virtual dates with your family. ”

Using the experiences, you have had last year such as what went well, what was a challenge and where you struggled the most can be useful in helping you set up proactive coping mechanisms for this year. While you cannot change the events themselves, you can change the way you experience them. Keeping a sense of what you can and cannot control during this time will really help you put realistic measures into place that will help you cope.



An example of something you cannot control is the fact that you may have to work remotely with the boundaries between your work and personal life being blurred. The way you could manage this restriction would be in how you maintain healthy routines like getting enough sleep, eating well and trying to implement work-life balance strategies.

In working on developing these habits of a clear headspace and proactive coping, you need to make sure you have enough internal resources to devote to these activities. This means you need to look after yourself by also setting aside time to do things you enjoy and activities which make you feel energised, such as: dancing, painting, cooking, reading, watching series and the like. A crucial element of this is connecting with loved ones and spending time (even virtually) with those we love and who make us feel good. It also means that you ask for help when you need it and allow yourselves to have a reprieve when you are at the eye of your storm.

While you will not be able to maintain perfect mental wellness all the time, you can work towards maintaining a stable sense of mental health. This means allowing yourself to react or feel setbacks and challenges and then move on from those setbacks and challenges in appropriate timing.

Maintaining your mental wellness is also about acknowledging and holding onto the moments of joy that you may experience and remembering what you are grateful for in your life. It is about not just focusing on only positive or negative aspects in your life but being able to balance what is going well with what may be challenging.

COVID has brought many challenges and negative impacts on our physical and mental health but it has also brought important opportunities to learn, grow and connect – let's use them.

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