



## COVID Fatigue

By Dr. Delia Roberts

As we pass the one-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 cases in Canada, the magnitude of the pandemic weighs heavily. No one expected that the effects of the SARS-Cov-2 virus would be as wide reaching, devastating and long lasting as they have been. In spite of the hopes for vaccines and new more effective treatments, the burden only continues to increase. For many, life is very different. Work expectations have changed radically, whether out of work, working from home, or trying to work amidst regulations for physical distancing, sanitizing and travel. But there are some things that can be done to help cope with the uncertainty, fear and loss. Not all of them will work for everyone, but hopefully if you give them a try, at least some of these suggestions will help reduce the stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Recognize what is happening

The additional stress created by the financial, social and physical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affects every aspect of our lives. Things we thought were going to happen have been taken away, and things we didn't want to happen have taken place. A recent survey of Canadians has shown that the impact on our mental health is significant, and not for the better. Self reported anxiety is four times higher than pre-COVID-19 and depression is two times higher. More than half of people who have had to quarantine have experienced a negative effect on their mental health. If you are feeling exhausted by the continuing restrictions, you are not alone!

Recognizing the amount of stress we are experiencing and how it is affecting us and those around us, is the first step in being able to look for positive ways to cope. If you or someone you know are experiencing increased feelings of anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, fear or other effects like disturbed sleep - reach out for help. It might not be something you'd normally do, but it's very important to take that step - there are things that can help!

A good place to start is to check out the information and resources provided in the newest piece in the Healthy Worker series; Mental Health in the Workplace, or any of the resources listed at the end of this article. And keep in mind that the pandemic will end, as more vaccine becomes available and most of the population becomes immune to the virus, business will reopen and life will go on.

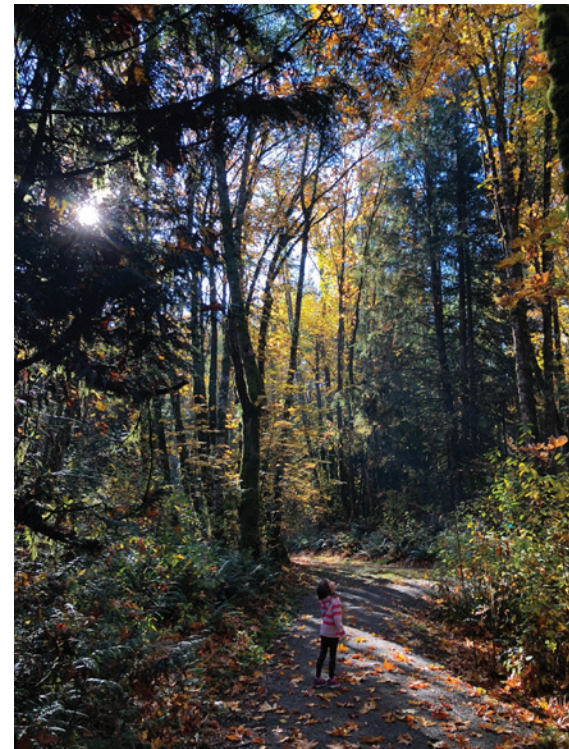
### Add physical activity

There are many ways to improve mental health but physical activity continues to be the strongest showing time and time again to be very effective. With gyms and recreational sports leagues largely shut down, we've had to be more creative with ways to work up a sweat. Fortunately, the internet offers a wide variety of instructional videos and virtual classes on just about any kind, and any level of activity you can imagine. Skill drills for your favorite sport, new types of exercise that don't require much equipment and rehabilitation work for previous injuries can all be explored from the comfort of your living room.

One great strategy if you are working from home or in quarantine is to do a few minutes of calisthenics once an hour. Set an alarm and every hour get out of your chair and do a set of sit ups, squats, push ups, lunges, rotator cuff pulls and heel raises. It takes less than 10 minutes, doesn't require you to change clothes or go anywhere and will refresh you more than you might expect. Start with 5-10 reps of each exercise and build up to 20 or 30 reps when it gets easy to complete the set, or gradually add weight by holding a soup can or dumbbell in each hand.

### Spend time in nature

Walking outside in nature has a calming effect and increases feelings of happiness, and people who spend time outdoors have lower rates of mental health problems. It helps with physical health too. Hospital patients who can see trees or have a view



of nature through a window recover faster. But recently, a clever study actually tested this effect in the same kind of rigorous trial that is used to study new drugs. Fifty randomly selected empty lots were turned into nature parks with trees and grass or left as is. In the neighborhoods where the lots were cleaned up and made green, mental health issues declined by more than 50% while those that were left unchanged remained the same.

In BC we are exceedingly fortunate to live in such beautiful surroundings. Make it a priority to walk outdoors at least a couple of times a week. It's a great way to connect with a friend or with your family but walking alone in the quiet is also hugely beneficial.

### Be mindful

Mindfulness is a popular term that means different things to different people, and in this state of COVID-19 fatigue, it can seem like just one more thing that we aren't doing right. There are however, some elements of the concept that can be very helpful, especially when we have a lot of stress in our lives. Our brains are actually pre-programmed to respond in certain ways to threats in order to help us get away or defend ourselves faster, or more strongly.

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When we experience a lot of stress, these kinds of preprogrammed responses can be heightened, and we can feel more fear or anger than is warranted by the event. For example, everyone has experienced the kind of situation where you are frustrated and angry about something that happened at work – or even a long time ago, and then find yourself yelling at your kids or your partner about something else entirely. Learning how to identify these kinds of emotional responses and slow them down is helpful. It gives us an opportunity to think about what the problem actually is, and whether our response will help or not. If this kind of scenario sounds familiar to you, think about reaching out to one of the resources listed at the end of this article. There are free on-line programs that can help you learn techniques to become more aware of your emotions, how you can better understand them and how to work with them to address the real problems that drive them. Here are a few suggestions that are simple to use that you can try right away.

- **Mindful Monday.** Be kind to yourself on Mondays. If you make a mistake or things aren't the way that you want them to be, imagine what you would say if you were talking to a good friend and say it to yourself.
- **Ten Second Tuesday.** On Tuesdays, when you feel a strong emotion pause before you respond. Breathe in for a count of three, hold the breath for a count of three, and breathe out for a count of four. Repeat for at least five breaths before considering the situation and what your response should be.
- **Willful Wednesdays.** Set a small goal for your day and make sure to get that one thing done. Matching the amount of work that you expect to get done to what is realistic is a way to gain a sense of control over our lives, even when there is a high level of uncertainty around big important things.
- **Thankful Thursdays.** On Thursdays, take five minutes at the end of your day to think about something good in your life, and how much you appreciate that thing. It can be as simple as a good cup of coffee, the sunshine warming you up or a smile from a passerby. This is a great activity to share with your family too.
- **Friendly Fridays.** Reach out to a friend, family member or even a stranger at some point on Fridays. Say hello and genuinely ask them about something in their lives, and then be sure to listen to the answer. If you can't do it in person, phone or email them. Doing something kind for someone else is a great way to build positive feelings. And the connection will give you an opportunity to also be heard, something that is critical for us as social beings.

## Put some energy into making connections

Loneliness is a strong negative factor for physical and mental health, and the more we try to stop transmission of the virus, the more isolated we become. This is especially true if you live alone, are working from home, are out of work or are quarantining. When we can't gather together with friends and family, it becomes very hard to feel connected to others in a meaningful way. Set a baseline rule for yourself not to go more than 48 hours without some kind of interaction with another human being. Phone calls, video calls or conferences, writing email letters, saying hello to neighbors over the fence or meeting friends or family for a walk outdoors are all great ways to make sure that we keep communicating with others in a way that makes us feel connected, supported and cared for.

Isolation can affect different people in different ways, but for many, the more isolated they are, the more that they withdraw. If you know someone who lives alone, and you haven't heard from them in a while, take a few minutes to reach out and make sure that they are alright. If they don't answer, consider dropping by and leaving a note and something small to make them smile on their porch. Books, food, supplies for a hobby they enjoy, kindling for their fire, a packet of seeds or a recording of some music, all are ways of letting them know you are thinking of them and that they matter.

## Learn something new

Challenging our brains with something that we find interesting and enjoy is a great way to clear our thoughts of stressors and simulate positive feelings. If you've always wanted to learn how to play a musical instrument or draw, make a craft, speak

a new language or study about science, history, philosophy or gardening, now is a great time to get started. There are on-line courses and instructional videos about any and all of these things available for free or a small fee on the Internet. Mastering a new skill generates positive feelings, hope and excitement as long as we are realistic about our goals and progress. If you have a friend with a similar interest, consider inviting them to join in. They can provide motivation to keep with it, share the learning process and help celebrate your newfound skills.

The difficulties raised by the COVID-19 pandemic are very real, and for many, extremely challenging. We can't change what has happened, but we can work on doing our best to look after our health and the health of our families. We are all in this together, and for the long haul, so give some of these suggestions a try and get a bit of relief from COVID-19 fatigue.

## More Resources

- [Canada Mental Health and Substance Abuse Support Mental Health Wellness Toolkit](#)
- [Bounce Back](#) is a free program from the Canadian Mental Health Association for people with anxiety and depression. Learn how to build good coping skills through the on-line program or connect with a coach over the phone
- [Here to Help](#) is a resource page with two streams, one for people who are experiencing mental health challenges and one for people who are trying to support someone else's mental health. Explore these pages for links to easy to understand information and other resources for more help
- [BC Mental Health and Substance Abuse Support](#)
- Based on well-established Cognitive Based Therapy techniques, this [free on-line anxiety management program](#) is available
- Your family physician or other care provider 📞