



Staying well. 'You're not working from home – you are at your home during a crisis trying to work.'

By Deb Robinson, Trauma Informed Practitioner, developing trauma informed thinking, care and practice across Reading partners.

We're all aware that we are in this current situation for the medium to long haul. While some of us may be managing well, it may become trickier the longer we continue on this path.

It's a bit like your car. Regular maintenance contributes greatly to smooth travel. Washing and cleaning keeps it looking and feeling good. But not giving your car any care or attention will impact you further down the road.

So just as its vital to monitor our own physical health and look for ways to keep active as we stay indoors, it's also essential to monitor our emotional health and wellbeing for the journey we're on. This is even more important as the link between stress, physical and emotional health has been explicitly proven.

Your immune system needs you!

We are all going to be experiencing an array of emotions, which is natural. This is an unprecedented situation and there is a sense of threat here right now. Janina Fisher, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist and former instructor at The Trauma Center (a research and treatment centre) likened it to Godzilla rampaging.

What is imperative to understand though is that when we're frightened, anxious, worried or stressed, our immune system is suppressed. We will all have our own ways of managing or, trying to manage. But the key is to try not to think too much about the future right now.

We can't make adequate sense of everything just yet. So, the more we can live in the present - moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day - the more we bring calm to our bodies and support to our immune systems.

Space the breaks

We can't change what's going on around us but we can influence how we respond to it. We won't be able to remove the stress or distress but we can find different ways to modulate it. This is the sine wave – the regular predictable up and down, riding the wave, not the roller coaster!

Dr Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist, researcher and teacher, talks about the "dosage" like paracetamol. Take two tablets every six hours, maximum dose of eight in any 24-hour period. The big walk first or last thing in the day that you're doing can be very regulating. But more effective and longer lasting, is to have more breaks spaced through the day – riding the wave.

So perhaps take your one hour daily exercise outside in a morning, to start the day. Then take a 20 mins walk in your garden or do one of the many online fitness classes there are available at lunch,

finishing with 20 mins yoga to wind down early evening. Taking more regular doses of regulation gives our nervous system (and immune system) regular periods of down time.

Focus and be aware

What's equally important is that while on the walks (or during other activity), we focus on what we are doing, not what we were just doing or working on beforehand. For any fitness folk, it's the HIIT for emotional health! Does this sound like mindfulness? Yes, it is. But there are different ways to be mindful.

Essentially being mindful is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose; in the moment and non-judgementally" (Kabat-Zinn).

It's not all about getting at one with you and your body. For some, mindfully connecting with their body is not easy, safe or it can be just plain boring. Being mindful simply requires us to become aware of ourselves and our surroundings in the moment – here and now.

Mindful practice

So, while you are staying indoors and making more cups of tea or coffee instead of going out to buy one, we can use this activity to practice mindfulness.

Focus on the elements of making the tea, the shape of the mug, the warmth of the cup, the steam, smell, taste etc. Or we can mindfully clean our teeth – be there and then with the activity of teeth cleaning. We can mindfully be with our children, pets, nature simply by attending to there and then. No going inside the body at all!

The three ways to be mindful (can use as a stage process or jump around)

- 1) Be mindful of external environment: wind, breeze, colour of leaves, sounds.
- 2) Be mindful of self in the external environment: Sound of footsteps, branches moving, sensation of breeze on face, smell of grass as its cut, how our body moves when we run, jump, dance, sing.
- 3) Be mindful of our internal environment: noticing the changes within our self and responding without judgement – noticing an emotional response – sitting with the emotional response and allowing it to modulate. Not judging it as helpful/unhelpful.

It's all about being here and now rather than there and then.

And breathe

Breathing on purpose is a great way to regulate our nervous system – its quick, easy and free! Try using your finger to slowly trace the outline of your stretched hand. Start at the thumb, breathe in on the upward trace and out on the downward stroke. Finish with an extra-long downward stroke on your little finger, go all the way to your wrist, letting your shoulders drop as you do.

Try walking upstairs, noticing the muscle movement in your legs as you do. Does your breathing change? What happens to your heart rate? How do the soles of your feet connect with your shoes, socks, carpet or wood?

Every hour or so do something – just for a top up, to keep going. If you need more, do more. Think about what do I need today, to get to the end of today? The message is to do whatever you do best, just do it regularly. It doesn't have to be long - Dr Perry suggests something rhythmical, repetitive and rewarding for five minutes each and every hour, mindfully and with intention. Little and often!