

The right stuff – what to do when lockdown is extended.

What does an astronaut, submariner and a Prisoner of War have in common? Sounds like the start of one of my bad dad jokes..but the answer is: extended periods of isolation. I am going to share with you some of mine and their key insights to staying sane as we navigate our way through this isolation extension.

Whilst the physical implications of COVID-19 have understandably taken centre stage, the very real mental threat caused by isolation and loss have been underplayed. A recent report published in *The Lancet* warned that the mental health effects of the pandemic could ["exceed the consequences of the 2019-nCoV epidemic itself."](#) [Calls to mental health helplines are surging](#), and a survey of U.S. workers by Qualtrics found that [52% of those now working remotely](#) feel more anxious working from home.



Negative emotions are overwhelming some people. Research shows that people's emotions (positive or negative) can "go viral" within groups, influencing others thoughts and actions. It starts when we automatically mimic other people's facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, which we're hardwired to do from infancy. Through a variety of [physiological and neurological processes](#), we actually feel the emotions we mimicked, and then act on them. But just as negative emotions can be contagious, positive emotions can be as well.

The following "right stuff" practices will help us be more prepared and in control during this unsettling period, thereby immunising us against negative emotional contagion.

MENTAL PRACTICES:

Realism: confront the brutal facts, aka the Stockdale Paradox from Jim Collins book: *Good to Great*. Look at the situation through three lenses: worst case, best case and most likely. In developing the most likely case, consider the worst-case outcomes and mitigate for them. Many people parade as realists but in fact are pessimists.

Reflect: recall a time in your personal or professional life when you were able to rise above a difficult situation. Then ask yourself: *What happened? What was I thinking and feeling at the time? How did I get through it? What did I do that helped me get through that situation? What did I learn from the experience that has made me a more resilient person today?*

Rituals: one of the big challenges of lockdown is the sameness and blurred boundaries between work and home-life. Many people are working longer hours. Have a work start and

closeout ritual, have a happy hour, exercise power hour etc. If possible, avoid working on the weekend. The potential for burnout in the long-term will potentially rise as we try make up for lost time, cancel holidays and over-compensate out of job loss fear by working longer. Have a marathon mindset.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL PRACTICES:

Response-ability: assume both respect and good intentions. People will get cranky and mistakes will happen, often unintentionally. Remember they are also under-pressure; this is a unique challenge best handled with compassion. Because a lot of our comms is online, we will miss a lot of vital non-verbal cues, and so we need to be extra careful of tone and messaging.

Re-connect: find those people that uplift you and connect with them using tech. The Framingham study showed that if a direct connection of yours was happy, you had a 15% increased likelihood of being happy. Where possible "mute" those that have contagious negative emotions.

PHYSICAL PRACTICES:

Reboot: sleep (7-9 hrs per day), exercise at least 30 minutes, 5 times a week at moderate intensity and relax by doing something you enjoy every day. Watch what you eat. Bad food habits increase by 33% when these bad options are in your direct line of sight.

Routine: create a rhythm that replicates your normal work schedule. Make your bed at a certain time, wake up and eat at the same time. We know from neuroscience that the brain craves certainty. By doing this you will calm and ground your brain.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:

Retreat: carve out time and space that is 100% yours where you can just be still. Let's move from FOMO to JOMO (Joy Of Missing Out). You will be amazed by the quality of your thinking.

Realise: look around you, appreciate what you have. Express sincere gratitude, ironically, it's a free gift that is highly valued. Gratitude is the lubricant of relationships, it also changes the aperture through which we see the world, making us more optimistic.

Reach-out: support others in need. People who help others increase their oxytocin levels which helps protect their own hearts.

In closing, Viktor Frankl (Holocaust survivor) poignantly observed: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." What's your way?

For those that want to explore this fascinating topic some more:

1. Submariners: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-submarine-crews-and-astronauts-can-teach-us-about-isolation>
2. Astronauts: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200408-an-astronauts-guide-to-surviving-isolation>
3. Reformed felon: <http://nautil.us/issue/32/space/how-to-survive-solitary-confinement>