



[www.anxietywellness.com](http://www.anxietywellness.com)

## **Home Alone: Coping with Isolation and Loneliness in the Time of COVID-19**

**Aureen Pinto Wagner, Ph.D.**

When the “stay-at-home” days first came upon us, our lives were disrupted quite abruptly. We had to quickly transition to new ways of going about our everyday routines. Although the rapid changes were overwhelming, our focus was primarily on new developments and keeping up with the safety guidelines.

We hoped it would be a couple of weeks, but now, many weeks into the stay-at-home life, the unending uncertainty about the next few weeks or months is looming large. When will we be able to see friends and family again? What if it’s several more months? How much longer can we continue this way?

These concerns may be even more relevant for adults who find themselves living alone for a variety of reasons—they work in different locations from their families; they may need to quarantine or protect family members from exposure to the virus; they were unable to return home when universities closed campuses; they are elderly or at high-risk, and regular visitors can’t come by anymore. Being home alone may have resulted in the loss of the routine and structure that was part of daily life.

Those who describe themselves as introverts may enjoy the reprieve and relish the solitude. But for those who thrive on active social engagement, the abrupt suspension of real-person contact may lead to loneliness, for which they were not prepared. The impact of isolation may have been more acutely felt in the month of April, when many could not attend the typical gatherings of family and friends to celebrate cultural or religious holidays. Perhaps there have been celebrations of other milestones that had to be canceled. In addition, some may have lost jobs or be worried about losing them and paying the bills. Others may be alone while friends or family are sick, or may be grieving the deaths of loved ones. For some, these stressors, along with isolation and loneliness, may worsen anxiety or depression. (If you are struggling to cope with anxiety or depression, please seek help from a therapist or doctor).

It’s normal to feel uprooted and isolated in these circumstances, and it’s important to acknowledge and accept feelings of sadness, loss, and anxiety as normal. It’s okay to miss the life we had and all the things we can’t do anymore. But it’s also okay to seek balance by focusing on what we *can* do. Doing nothing may make us feel dejected and hopeless. Research indicates that being actively engaged in enjoyable and fulfilling activities improves depression. It’s called behavioral activation.

### **Behavioral Activation for COVID Times: Choosing What You *Can* Do**

While we may feel stuck at home, with all the things that we *can’t* do foremost in our minds, we can also choose to focus on the things that we *can* do. It’s a time to proactively seek and cultivate meaningful actions to maintain social connections and engage in pleasant activities. Perhaps there are things we’ve always wanted to do, but couldn’t because we were always so busy. We may find that we have more time now, because we’re not commuting to work or school, or we’re in fewer meetings. We can choose to use that “found time” wisely and well. We can choose the mindset of turning adversity into opportunity.

Consider the following plan for behavioral activation in COVID times:

### **1. Reflect on your goals and values**

Take time to think about what you cherish in life—it can be your job or career, family, friends, a hobby or interest, health and wellness, faith or spirituality, time to yourself, or desire to help others. You may find yourself surprised at what really matters to you. With time to reflect on what matters most, you may even consider reordering your priorities. For each area you've identified, think about the ways in which you would like to do more, grow, or enhance. Make written lists of specific things you would like to do to reach those goals. Next, break down your goals into small, attainable steps. Small steps add up!

### **2. Create a meaningful new schedule**

Regular and familiar schedules may be out the window. You now have the opportunity to make your own daily and weekly routines. Set a time to wake up, get dressed, and be ready for classes or work. Set a bedtime, to give yourself enough hours to sleep. Adding even 30 minutes of sleep each night can do wonders for overall wellness. Allot the necessary time for your work or classes. For the rest of each day, make it a point to fit in one or more items from your list of core goals and values—contacting a friend or family member, a hobby, exercise, organizing your home, art, reading, etc., teaching yourself something new online such as cooking, art or music, or delving into a topic that's always interested you.

### **3. Think out-of-the-box**

Being home alone can propel us to think out-of-the-box. The activities on your lists may not seem feasible when you're home alone, but you might surprise yourself with creativity or innovation. Thanks to technology and the internet, many have maintained their social connections via virtual movie-watching parties, happy hours, dinners, or group chats. Reach out virtually to a friend or family member with whom you haven't had the time to keep in touch. Be the one to start a virtual group on a topic of shared interest, or join an existing group. Perhaps you enjoy gardening, but have neither had the time nor the space to do it. Consider if it's possible to tend to a couple of potted plants that you could pick up on your next grocery trip. Exercise no longer happens at the gym, but there are many ideas on the internet for indoor exercise in your home. Love to help? Find ways to volunteer remotely or to spread kindness. You've wanted to travel, but it's been too busy or out of the budget. Take virtual tours of parks, museums, zoos, aquariums and cities. If you like the peace and quiet of nature, have a nature show running in the background. Create or join virtual support groups. You're doing that here already!

### **4. Stick to the schedule!**

This could be the hardest part. Make a commitment to follow your schedule, no matter how you feel. Wake up, get dressed, and do what's next in your plan. Staying in your pajamas all day may make it harder to get in the mindset of action—but you can enjoy the pajamas as a weekend treat! Persevere in completing the small steps you chose to put in your schedule, in order to keep a meaningful balance. Add some variety so that it keeps you interested. Review how you've done at the end of each day, and make realistic adjustments if you think you overreached. If it's hard to stick with your schedule, ask a friend or family member to check-in with you each day and make you feel more accountable.

### **5. Seek the good**

Aim for good, not perfect. Forgive yourself and be flexible if you didn't get it all done. Use a "no blame, no shame" mindset, and view the next day as a fresh start. Treat yourself at the end of each day to something relaxing or fun, even if it's a simple thing like a cup of tea or a movie. Try to find something to laugh about each day. Humor can be an effective strategy for defusing stress and improving coping. Finally, consciously cultivate gratitude, which can help improve health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. It is possible to find at least one thing for which to be grateful each day.