Mental Health Tips for Staying Sane During COVID-19

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SPEAKERS

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lan Daly 00:08

Hello, and welcome to Triton Tools and Tidbits. My name is lan Daly and today we're going to be talking about mental health and how to stay sane during COVID. We are going to hear from people who work at CAPS, Counseling and Psychological Services, here at UC San Diego.

Tiffany O'Meara 00:28

I'm Dr. Tiffany O'Meara, and I'm a psychologist here at CAPS.

Julie Badaracco 00:32

Hello, my name is Dr. Julie Badaracco. I am a postdoctoral resident at CAPS.

Ivory Ku 00:37

Hi everyone, my name is Ivory, and I am a wellness peer educator.

Lorraine Maraan 00:42

Hello, my name is Lorraine Maraan. It is my first year in the wellness peer educator program for CAPS.

lan Daly 00:51

My goal for this episode is to give you some real actionable tips that you can apply in your daily life while we go through this overwhelming period. The first tip that I have for you is to focus on what you can control.

Lorraine Maraan 01:09

To be honest, in the beginning, it was very hard - especially with having to do such a quick transition.

lan Daly 01:16

Lorraine, just like all of us, was pretty caught off-quard by the transition to distance learning.

Lorraine Maraan 01:21

One of the very first things I did was I tried to get a sense of control and understanding of the feelings and thoughts that I had that moment.

lan Daly 01:32

How do you go about getting a sense of control over the thoughts and feelings that you have in that moment? Well, there's a practice called mindfulness, you might have heard of it. It's a meditation strategy. And the goal is to be really aware of how your body is feeling in that moment. There's an app called Headspace that I think is pretty wonderful. But there's also any number of free options on YouTube for guided meditations. Meditation might seem scary, or not for you. And that's okay, too. But I might encourage each of you to try it out a little bit. Now, we all know that life isn't made up just of things that you can control.

Ivory Ku 02:17

Another challenge is that actually online classes have way more work.

lan Daly 02:22

Ivory has been struggling with the amount of work that professors assign under COVID. And that's not something that she can control at all. But it is something that she has to deal with. The idea of mindfulness is to sort of take that out of the equation, and to take a step back and find a time when you don't have to do that work. And you can focus on things that you can control. Have you been playing Animal Crossing?

Ivory Ku 02:46

Yes, I was actually going to jump in right there and say that I have the Pocket Camp version, because I don't have the Switch So I tried my best to make a cafe-looking environment for my camp.

lan Daly 03:05

You might have heard about Animal Crossing over the past few weeks, you might even be playing it right now. It has become a therapeutic outlet for a lot of people. It's a cute little social simulator, a video game that you play on the Nintendo Switch, where you get to build a house and interact with other people on the island. You get to design almost every aspect of it. It's fun, and it's something that offers a lot of control. The thing Ivory is talking about is a mobile version of the game called the Animal Crossing Pocket Camp. And if you don't have access to a Switch, or you don't have access to the game - because both of them are sold out, and when they're not sold out, they are kind of expensive - i's a pretty good option. I know this isn't for everybody. But it's just an example of a place that you can find control in a world that looks increasingly more and more uncertain. And that can be very mentally soothing.

lan Daly 04:13

Tip number two is to be radically accepting of your own limitations.

Tiffany O'Meara 04:21

You know, I think that radical acceptance is, - there are some things in life that are just going to be difficult, and painful, or unfair, and it can be it can be challenging to accept those things.

lan Daly 04:40

And it is hard to accept COVID. But Dr. O'Meara is not just talking about COVID. Because often for me, it's harder to accept that I had to be lazy for a day.

Tiffany O'Meara 04:53

It is definitely okay to be disappointed, to be sad, to be angry. You know, to feel loss. And all of those feelings are a part of life. And radical acceptance is about accepting life as it is rather than how we wish it to be.

lan Daly 05:15

I think a lot of us, especially the students, judge ourselves based on whether or not we are being productive,

Lorraine Maraan 05:21

Honestly, that is because I remember when I was still in my lecture halls, and I was so productive, being able to handle things as well as I did. And then I make this transition to where I'm suddenly behind in my classes, and I don't know where to go next, or I'm confused at everything. It makes me feel like, "Oh, is there something wrong with me? Am I not doing something that I should be doing? Or where am I going wrong?"

lan Daly 05:50

And often that productivity can be associated with a lot of positive emotions when it's happening.

Ivory Ku 05:56

Yes, definitely. I am very much a very big workaholic. I love going to school. I love going to my research lab. I love going to meetings and everything, love replying to emails...

lan Daly 06:11

Love replying to emails? That has to be the first time I've ever heard that sentence in my entire life. I have heard the sentence I hate replying to emails. I've ever heard the sentence I love replying to emails.

Ivory Ku 06:24

I don't know why. It's because I am also a production manager for one of my clubs, and I have to produce events for the club. And I have to reply to a lot of emails, talk to a lot of people. And I've really enjoyed doing that. So definitely, I sometimes relate my self-worth to how productive I am - how well I do stuff like that.

lan Daly 06:48

And all of that's pretty natural. It's just makes it so much harder when your productivity slips when you're depressed and down, and not able to do the things that brought you joy. And that's where the radical acceptance part comes in. Because you've got to be okay with yourself, especially when you're down, which leads right into our next point. Tip number three, have self-compassion, do your self-care.

Tiffany O'Meara 07:23

Keeping up with your self-care - and I know that that might sound simplistic, but what I mean is that I've seen a lot of students, you know - all of this happened right before finals, and right during spring break. And a lot of students fell off of their healthy habits. Their sleep got way out of whack, their eating habits, you know, not eating as healthy. And also, you know, their exercise, like staying in watching TV, going home to environments that they're used to relaxing in, and then staying in those environments. And just not getting back to the routine of the guarter again.

lan Daly 08:09

Dr. Tiffany O'Meara has a slightly different view of self-care from the one that I had in my mind. The first thing I want to ask you is, for you, is exercise self-care?

Tiffany O'Meara 08:22

For me, personally, you mean?

lan Daly 08:23

Yes. For Tiffany O'Meara.

Tiffany O'Meara 08:25

For Tiffany O'Meara, yes. For me personally, exercise is a huge part. It's interesting, I actually was the college student who would go home, and get home from a long day, and sit on the couch and watch TV and just open up a bag of Cheetos and start eating. That's how I used to kind of manage my stress.

lan Daly 08:48

But now she exercises, which, again, is just not what I was envisioning when she said self-care. I think it was imagining facials and massages. Basically, the treat yourself scene from Parks and Rec.

Tiffany O'Meara 09:02

Yeah, those things sound great, too. I wish I did more of those. You know, I think that those things are also self-care.

lan Daly 09:11

But honestly, those things don't appeal to me either. I have not been great about self-care in the past. And I think it took a lot of self-reflection for me to understand what I really liked to do. And that sometimes for me, self-care literally means rewatching The Office for the eighth time.

Julie Badaracco 09:32

We do have to be kind with ourselves. And we also do need to realize that we can't make all of these insane changes in a day.

lan Daly 09:41

I think Dr. Badaracco is pretty good about the self-compassion side of things.

Julie Badaracco 09:46

Be kind to yourself too, which again, I know is really hard. But thinking about - are some of the thoughts that I'm having to myself - are those things that I would say to a friend?

lan Daly 09:57

That's a good mental trick. Ask yourself if this is a thought that you would say to somebody else. We're often way meaner to ourselves than we are to other people.

lan Daly 10:15

Tip number four is to create a routine. You knew this was coming. If you follow any of the mental health tips or general productivity tips that are being released under COVID, this one comes up a lot. And anytime that you hear, and hear, and hear the same thing, it's easy to start ignoring it. But it is one of the most effective methods for really improving your mental health when times are this uncertain.

Tiffany O'Meara 10:49

So, one thing that I think could help people become more resilient this quarter, is trying to get back some structure to your days and trying to incorporate self-care during that. So, still getting up and creating a routine for yourself. Taking a shower, getting dressed, fixing your hair, going out and doing things that you would usually do to get your morning ready. Get your workspace organized before you get started. And remembering things like keeping up on your sleep, because if your sleep is off, it can impact your entire day. So, getting your sleep back on track, getting your routine back together and trying to incorporate some self-care, like some moving during the day. Social connectedness.

lan Daly 11:43

Dr. O'Meara is throwing a lot of ideas at you. But here's Dr. Badaracco talking about what the most important part of this is.

Julie Badaracco 11:51

It's super important that you're waking up at pretty much the same time every day. So, if you wake up at nine o'clock every day -trying to be as consistent as you can with that, trying to still have your morning routine, your bedtime routine.

lan Daly 12:05

There is a YouTuber named CGP Grey, who made a video a couple years ago called Seven Ways to Maximize Misery. The idea behind this video is that it's way easier to tell you how to be miserable than to tell you how to be happy. And one of the key points that he comes up with is that if you want to be miserable, make sure you vary your sleep schedule. I'll link the video in the description because I think

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it's worth a watch. But this is really key - you're going to sleep at odder hours, because you have trouble getting to sleep. And then you'll sleep in because you want to "make up" for your sleep. But the more that you vary your schedule from day-to-day, the less you are on anything like a schedule. And eventually your brain just gets so confused. It's not sure what it should be feeling. And so, you always feel tired. And this can really create negative, spiraling impact.

Lorraine Maraan 13:03

One of the things that I try to do is that--. I try to have a routine where I try to change my environment or have a sense of control in the things I do. Because I know for me, in the beginning, I would just always stay in my room, since I would just be there anyway studying. But when you're stuck in a room, it makes you feel like more lonely than you are, and it makes you feel like, literally, you're trapped in the box. So, I noticed when I just started going to the kitchen or the living room, and had that sense of a different environment, it made me feel like I had more control over things, and it made me feel like I had more freedom in that sense.

lan Daly 13:51

You can see how many of these tips are interrelated. And one of the most important pieces of a routine is movement. And that can be difficult when you're struggling. Especially if you're not the kind of person who likes to exercise.

Ivory Ku 14:11

Yeah, actually, because I'm not a big exercising person, I kind of use diet to compensate.

lan Daly 14:19

So, get back into the routines that used to give you joy. And if you're capable of adding some movement to your routine, I highly recommend it - even just walks around the block. Tip number five is to connect with people.

Ivory Ku 14:43

So, I already had a hard time maintaining friendships before COVID. And after COVID, now it's even harder for me to maintain friendships.

Julie Badaracco 14:56

It can just feel very lonely especially if you're living by yourself.

lan Daly 15:01

It's very easy to feel isolated these days. And I think a lot of us have some experience of what feeling isolated is like.

Lorraine Maraan 15:11

When I was a teenager, and I had this feeling of talking about my emotions, I definitely had that instinct of, "Oh, no one's gonna want to talk to me or hear what I want to say or ever relate to me." And it was very hard, just thinking that you're the only person that you can turn to.

lan Daly 15:32

And even though no one imagines that everybody's okay right now, it is still easy to feel like there's no one who you can talk to. I really recommend scheduling connection moments: weekly calls with friends, therapists, family members, anyone who really makes you feel connected and makes you feel a little more safe. Because these days, it is certainly hard to make new friends. Here's Dr. Julie Badaracco when I asked her if she thought she had made any new friends during COVID.

Julie Badaracco 16:10

Hmm. That's a good question. I do think I have been able to get closer with a lot of my existing friends, and I do think with a lot of friends that I hadn't talked to in actual years.

lan Daly 16:29

Just reaching out and scheduling something can be incredibly powerful, especially if you make that a regular thing. Tip number six is to experience positive emotions. Positive emotions can almost be a loaded idea today.

Tiffany O'Meara 16:57

You know, people hear positive psychology. And I think that one of the misconceptions about it is that we just tell people to think positively, or just be happy. Actually, the goal is not happiness, because it's not possible to be happy all the time. The goal isn't even thinking positively, because thinking all-positively is just as bad as thinking all-negatively because neither one is accurate, right? When I say that it can help to bring some positive emotion, and that positive emotion helps us to be resilient, I don't mean think positive and be happy through this difficult time. There was some research that Barbara Fredrickson did at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, in which they looked at the terrorist attacks of 9/11. And they found that the level of positive emotions that people experienced in the days after 9/11 predicted how well they were able to bounce back, in terms of excessive depressive symptoms, or versus experiencing some kind of growth after this traumatic event. And during something like 9/11, during something like what we're experiencing now, everyone is feeling sad, angry, uncertain, and afraid. But they found that the people who are more resilient are people that, in the mix of those negative emotions, also found ways to feel gratitude, love, to find some kind of hope - to find ways to be engaged.

lan Daly 18:47

I don't think anyone can make themselves experience positive emotions. But I think you can structure your life in such a way where you recognize them when they happen. Because there are little ones that happen all around you all the time. Kind of like when Tiffany dropped this bomb on me.

Tiffany O'Meara 19:07

My grandmother was an actress. She was auditioning for roles, and she auditioned for a pilot TV show, and she didn't get it. And she had worked so hard for that. A few weeks later, she had another audition, and she ended up getting that job, and that job was the voice of Wilma Flintstone in the Flintstone cartoons.

lan Daly 19:29

So, your grandma was Wilma Flintstone?

Tiffany O'Meara 19:32

Yes.

lan Dalv 19:33

I'm looking this up right now. Her grandmother was Jean Vander Pyl. And she played the role of Wilma Flintstone in the original Flintstones cartoon, as well as a number of spinoff cartoons. And even the weird owl show in 1997. Learning that was an incredibly positive emotion, and it was very unexpected.

lan Daly 19:59

Our seventh and final tip is to identify your strengths and work on new ones.

Tiffany O'Meara 20:04

You know, it's something that, for a long time, you kind of went "Yeah, yeah, I don't think that's for me," and then all of a sudden you try it, and you start seeing that there are benefits. The same thing happened to me with bike riding. I've had a bike for, I don't know how many years, and it's just sat in the garage. And not being able to go to the gym has forced me to go for bike rides. When I first started, I couldn't bike up hills - I had to walk my bike up hills. I really was getting winded very quickly, and I didn't have a lot of strength. It's incredible how much I have grown to enjoy biking. I'm outside, it's a beautiful day, and I just feel like this feeling of - I don't know if it's happiness - just a really positive feeling that comes over me.

Julie Badaracco 21:06

So, I got a paint by numbers, which was so much fun to do. And that's just a little example of trying out something new and trying to see, "Does this fit with my life? Does this seem like this might be fulfilling for me?" And it turns out, it kind of did. And I definitely I ordered another one.

Ivory Ku 21:27

There's one that I have been procrastinating on, and I am going to start it - it's continuing making music. I'm in this club called DJs and Vinyl House club. I am not really that big on DJ-ing, ironically. But I am very into making - I mean, I'm not good at it, but I really want to be better - at making electronic music that I can perform live. So, I recently performed winter quarter at a show that I produced on my own for my club. It's called Baywatch. I performed that, and I really, really enjoyed it. That was one of the best experiences of my life. I really want to continue doing that. So that's one thing that I'll be working on.

lan Daly 22:19

Is there any chance we could play a little bit of your music in the podcast?

Ivory Ku 22:23

Oh, yeah, sure. Awesome, awesome.

lan Daly 22:48

That song is called Aurora. I'll put the link in the description of this episode. Reconnect with the things that you are good at and learn to be good at new things. I know that might sound daunting. In fact, something I wish we had avoided more in this episode is how daunting all of these tips can sound if you don't feel like you're capable of even just existing under COVID right now. And the final thing I want to get across is that nobody's that good at doing all these things. Here's Dr. Julia Badaracco when I asked her what percentage of the time, she follows her own advice.

Julie Badaracco 23:28

I'm definitely not doing 100% of those. But I would say, again, I think it probably varies by day. I think there are days when I'm doing pretty good, and maybe I'm at 75%. But then I think there are other days when I'm really struggling, and I'm maybe doing 20% of those.

lan Daly 23:47

And I think 20% is okay. I'm not telling you to fail your classes. I'm not telling you that this is going to be easy. I'm not telling you to give up. I'm just saying if there's ever been a quarter where you can give yourself a little bit of a break for not being perfect, I think this is a pretty good quarter to do it in. For Triton Tools and Tidbits, I'm Ian Daly.