10 Tips for Preserving Your Mental Health in Isolation

Humans are a social species, and spending long periods in isolation can have detrimental physical and mental health effects. Events like the 2020 pandemic caught the world off-guard and left many people struggling to figure out how to cope with being alone.

In a survival situation, especially if you're not sheltering with friends or family members, preserving your mental health can pose a massive challenge.

So, what can you do to preserve your mental health if you're going to spend extended periods alone?

The Effects of Isolation on Mental Health

The internet may have made it easier to connect with people from all around the globe, but it feels like we're more alone than ever when it comes to in-person connection. When it comes down to it, humans aren't meant to be by themselves for long periods.

Mental and physical health are connected, and one can affect the other. On the mental health side, isolation can:

- Raise anxiety rates
- Increase depression

- Raise the risk of suicide
- Increase the possibility of dementia

Studies have also found that physically, loneliness and isolation have been linked to reducing cognitive function. There are also higher chances of developing coronary heart disease or even suffering a stroke.

These studies were all carried out under normal isolation circumstances, where individuals usually had the option to reach out to friends or family members to break their loneliness. If the world ends or you find yourself in a survival situation where reaching out to other survivors isn't an option, how can you protect and preserve your mental health?

1. Take Steps to Stay Busy

The world we live in is hectic. You can stay engaged in various tasks and hobbies from sunup to sundown without too much effort. In a survival situation, many of these activities will vanish, leaving us with far too much time to think about things we may or may not be able to control. If this is the case, you need to ensure you have enough things to do during the day to keep yourself busy. Plan for activities that keep you engaged from the moment you get up to the time you fall asleep.

You may have many chores or other things to keep you busy for part of the day, significantly if you're growing crops or raising livestock. Plan for your downtime to ensure you don't have any spare moments that could damage your mental health.

2. Build a Routine

Even if the world has ended, take the time to build a routine. Do the same thing every day, starting from when you get up in the morning and ending when you go to bed at night. The exact

details of your schedule will vary depending on what you need to do to ensure your survival. You might start the morning by brushing your teeth, tending to the animals, and making a cup of coffee. Maybe you end your night by putting the livestock away, making dinner, and planning your tasks for the following day.

It may take you some time to sort out what will work best in your routine, but having that to focus on will help you keep a handle on your mental health, especially on days when you find yourself struggling.

3. Get Enough Sleep

Sleep may be hard to come by if you find yourself constantly having to keep an ear out for predators or other threats. However, not getting enough sleep can have a detrimental effect on your brain.

While we don't yet fully understand the connection between sleep and mental health, scientists have found that not getting enough rest can [affect hormone and neurotransmitter levels](#) in the brain. In turn, these can make managing your mental health more complex and even make existing psychiatric disorders worse.

Take the time to get as much sleep as possible, as long as it's safe to do so. Seeping in isn't always an option in a survival situation, but as long as you're sure it's safe, grab a few extra Zs whenever you can.

4. Understand Your Red Flags

Take a close look at your mental health during an average week or month. Can you recognize things that might negatively affect your emotions? Knowing and understanding these red flags can help you identify them while you're in isolation.

You won't have anyone around to help snap you out of these behavioral trends, so it's up to you to learn your triggers and, more importantly, how to manage them.

This is a skill that you should learn before you find yourself in a survival situation. Learning to understand your mental health can help you manage your everyday life as well.

The last thing you want is to turn to alcohol or drugs when in isolation because addiction can worsen mental health conditions. [Half of those who have an addiction](#) are later diagnosed with some form of mental illness. You don't want to become a statistic when no one is around to help you.

5. Practice Mindfulness

One of the hardest things to handle when you're alone for long periods is the "ought to" — the little voice in your head that says you should do this or ought to have done that. It tends to make you anxious about things that haven't happened yet, or regret things that have already happened. Silence that little voice in your head by practicing mindfulness.

Mindfulness is many things, but at its core, it's the practice of living in the moment. You don't focus on things you have done or things that might happen because, in reality, you don't have control over either. Instead, you focus on remaining present in the moment, which can help you manage depression about the past or anxiety about the future.

6. Stay Active

You may not need to start a new exercise regimen if you're burning all your calories tending to your homestead. However, if you find yourself floundering, it might be a good idea to add some cardio or strength training to your routine and schedule. Regular physical activity triggers the release of

endorphins and other beneficial neurotransmitters that can help regulate your mood.

You don't need to run a marathon or be the world's strongest person. Make it a point to stay active when you find yourself in need of a boost.

7. Get Enough Vitamin D

It's important to note that if the reason for your isolation is a nuclear war that makes leaving the house deadly, feel free to skip this step until it's safe to go outside again. Otherwise, make sure you're getting enough vitamin D in your diet, as well as at least a little bit of sun exposure during the day. Studies show that low vitamin D levels can play a role in major depressive and other mood disorders.

Don't stay out long enough to burn, especially if you don't have sunscreen. However, getting 20 minutes of sunlight a day can help you regulate your vitamin D levels.

8. Improve Your Diet

A healthy diet might be challenging if you can't take a trip to your local Whole Foods to stock up on organic produce, but it isn't impossible. While you can survive on cans of condensed soup and Chef Boyardee, it's not the best choice if you're concerned about your physical or mental health. As part of your survival prep, make sure you have a variety of healthy, shelf-stable foods available so you can vary your diet while ensuring you're still getting all the nutrients you need to stay healthy.

This isn't to say you shouldn't enjoy a treat now and then when you find it. Just make sure the majority of your diet is made up of healthy foods.

9. Take up Journaling

Sometimes, the best thing you can do for your mental health is getting all those thoughts out of your head. If you can't talk to a therapist or another human being, the next best thing is to take up journaling. Get everything down on paper. Writing longhand means you have to take the time to think about what you're putting on paper, and that gives you a chance to sort through your thoughts and make sense of them.

Who knows — maybe your journals will help support a new generation of survivors as what's left of humanity finally gets around to rebuilding the world.

10. Read a Book

If you head out in search of supplies, make sure one of your stops is a bookstore. They are treasure troves for learning new skills that might help you survive, and just the act of picking up a book and immersing yourself in a story can be therapeutic. In a survival situation, you need to take any chance you can to escape from reality, even if it's only for a few minutes here and there.

You don't need to load up on books and build a massive library unless you want to, but picking up a new volume now and then can help you support your mental health by giving you the ability to escape.

Protect Yourself and Your Mental Health

As a species, we're not designed to be alone. If you find yourself in isolation for long periods, make sure you're taking all the steps necessary to protect yourself and your sanity.