Lessons from Antarctica

THE IMPACT OF ISOLATION AND RE-ENTRY ON MENTAL HEALTH

future thinc.

Phased Re-Opening

This week, most Australian States have started implementing Phase 1 of lessening COVID-19 restrictions, with a number of States celebrating weeks without new cases. After months spent in our homes in semi-lockdown, Australians are itching to get out. Mother's Day weekend saw crowds in shopping centres swell to pre-Christmas levels with limited concern evident for social distancing. Many Australians have cabin fever and are basically over restrictions.

The impact of COVID-19 on economies and our way of living has been astronomical. Feelings of boredom, isolation, frustration, a lack of energy, anger, anxiety and depression (which are normative responses to a global pandemic) are exacerbated by uncertain time frames and disconnection from other people.

Reverse Culture Shock

Phased re-opening of our economy and businesses presents a new mental health challenge. Adaptation to a post-COVID world with profound associated long-term changes will challenge us all. Psychologists call this response reverse culture shock, or re-entry syndrome. It's the feeling you may have on return from living ov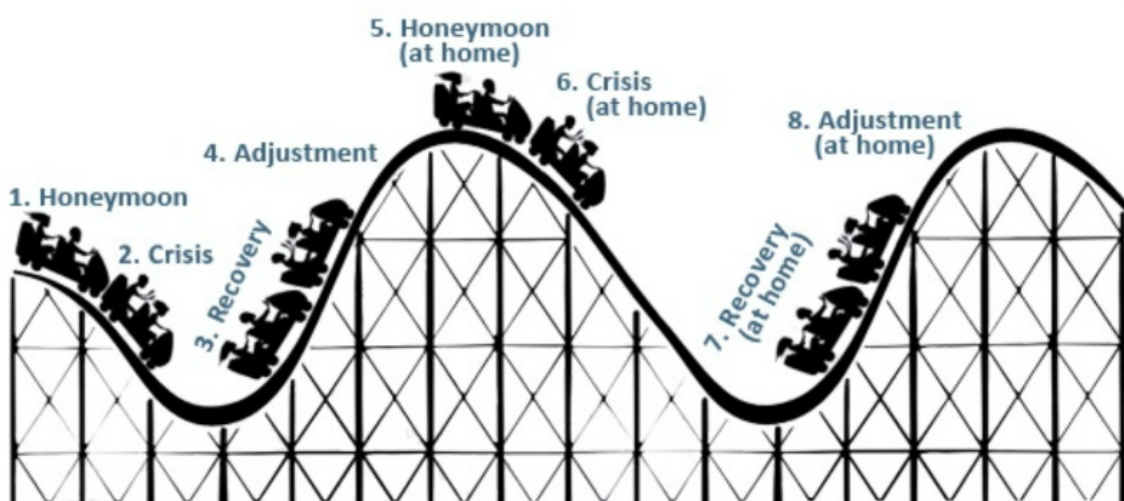erseas. It's particularly severe among returned long-term Antarctic expeditioners. This concept directly applies to our current situation with COVID-19.

The Impact Of Re-Entry On Mental Health

The concept of reverse culture shock dates back to the early 1960s. US psychologists John and Jeanne Gullahorn observed that after a period of extended travel. There's ups and downs: readjusting to what was once familiar. They proposed 'An Extension of the U-Curve Hypothesis': traveling away and experiencing culture shock is a 'U'. Then returning and struggling to reintegrate is a 'W'. The centre of the W — the 'welcome home' banner at the airport — is referred to as the 'reunion'. Then two months later comes 'reintegration' which is unexpected and can hit hard.

Dr Kimberley Norris, a clinical psychologist and authority on Antarctic confinement and reintegration at University of Tasmania, told ABC's Hack, this period of re-adapting post COVID can be just as severe as the culture shock of travel. Everyone is holding out for restrictions to be eased and there seems to be a widespread assumption that everything will be quickly good again, we will feel happy and resume normal life as if it was all a bad dream. She predicts this could lead to a collective emotional crash.

The Reverse Culture Shock W curve

1. Honeymoon
2. Crisis
3. Recovery
4. Adjustment
5. Honeymoon (at home)
6. Crisis (at home)
7. Recovery (at home)
8. Adjustment (at home)

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> "We may now be entering the dreaded third quarter of hollow-eyed stares, odd fixations and brooding resentment. Time grows sludgy. The days blur into nights, and weekdays into the weekends. You've hidden the notifications from a recently downloaded exercise app and you're no longer telling people you'll learn Italian. You begin to suspect that your friends have their own Messenger group."
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> Hack ABC Triple J May 2020

The Antarctic Experience – Anticipating The End Of Isolation

Antarctica has the world's coldest temperatures, worst weather and most isolated living conditions. That can make life stressful for the people who spend the long polar winter at research stations there, sapping morale and affecting their ability to do their jobs. The monotony of eating, sleeping, working and spending leisure time in one place with the same people for months on end erodes wellbeing.

In studies of people isolated in submarines, space stations or polar bunkers, researchers have found there appears to be an inflection point where the frustration and hardship of being cooped up inside gets suddenly harder to tolerate. This is labelled the "Third Quarter" of isolation when frustration and conflict peak. However, there is no fixed date for the end of COVID-19 restrictions unlike a polar mission.

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> "In an extreme case at Russia's Vostok station in 1959, a scientist became unhinged after losing a game of chess, and murdered his opponent with an axe. Chess was subsequently banned at Russian Antarctic Stations."
>
> Hack ABC Triple J May 2020

Explorers who spent 14 months in Antarctica at Germany's Neumayer III station were alarmingly found to have experienced shrinkage in critical regions of their brains. These changes in brain structure was associated with poor performance on brain tests related to attention and spatial awareness.

The Third Quarter

Studies examining the impact of isolation on Astronauts also identified the "Third Quarter" phenomenon. First described in early 1980s studies that set out to determine how long humans could survive in space, researchers found that radiation or zero-gravity were arguably less of a problem than interpersonal conflict caused by isolation. "There is a first stage of heightened anxiety, a second stage of settling down to routine marked by depression, and a third stage of anticipation marked by emotional outbursts, aggressiveness, and rowdy behaviour." (1985 Living Aloft: Human Requirements for Extended Spaceflight) Three broad stages of reaction to prolonged isolation were identified and the third stage depends on the relative passage of time — in a six-month mission it could happen at around the four-month mark, while in a one-year posting it might appear at the eight-month point. Flattening the COVID-19 curve makes us think we've done it, we've beaten it and re-energises hope that this nightmare is nearly over. But we are not even close to half way.

Both infectious disease experts and the politicians responsible for the restrictions say we're not even close. Social distancing restrictions are likely to remain in force until at least October, potentially for as long as 18 months, as epidemiology modelling shows that allowing people to mix freely too soon would trigger a second-wave of infections in the absence of a vaccine. Restrictions may be repeatedly eased and reinstated in response to fluctuating case numbers. This turmoil will make re-integration harder. This lack of certainty and predictability is likely to compound mental health challenges.

Moving Forward Through Uncertainty

We have effectively been managing COVID-19 in isolation from one another which means that our frame of references, our experiences, our pre-morbid mental health functioning, are all different. Time together helps establish normality and we will need to develop shared experiences again, as the world itself has changed and we as people have changed too. We need to appreciate that some dip in mood is inevitable.

Isolation affects people in profound ways, and how we respond to the COVID-19 restrictions is partly out of our control. Even professional astronauts and polar explorers take a hit to their wellbeing simply by not having people around and freedom of movement being restricted. Review of the psychological impact of quarantine, published recently in The Lancet, highlighted numerous adverse effects of being quarantined, including emotional disturbance, depression, stress, difficulty sleeping, low mood, irritability and anger

(Brooks et al., 2020). Mass social isolation is likely to result in mental health difficulties for a considerable number of people for an extended period of time.

Like ICE workers (operating in Isolated, Confined, and Extreme work environments), a quarantined population will likely experience periods of monotony and boredom, suffer from low mood and motivation, and need to tolerate being in close proximity to a small number of other

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> "People start getting lethargic when they don't have positive inputs into their small worlds. We can expect depression to kick in, and depression and anxiety are kissing cousins."
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> John Vincent, a clinical psychologist at the University of Houston
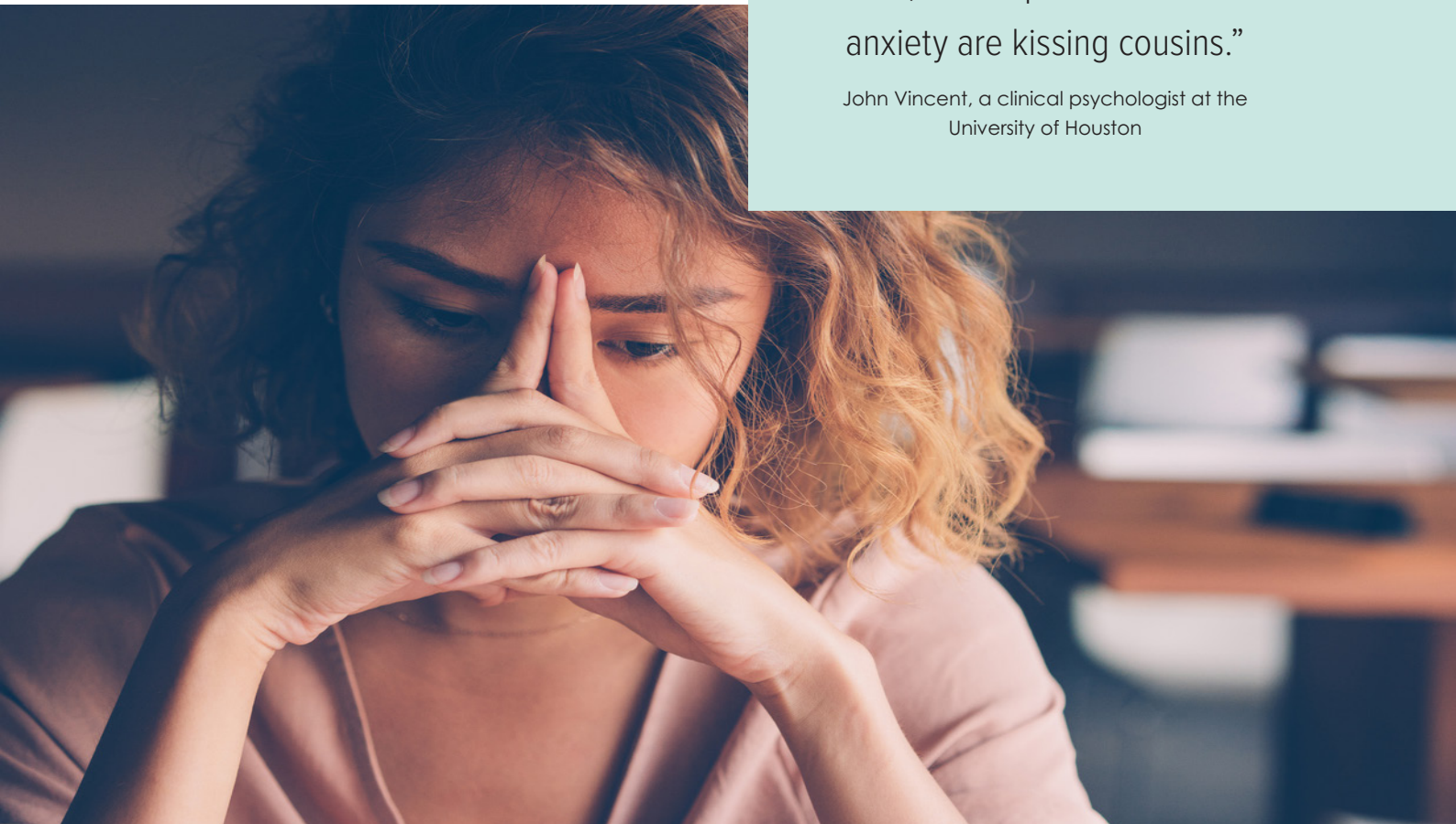
people, while potentially separated from other friends and family for long periods of time (Barrett & Martin, 2014; Bartone et al., 2017; Leach, 2016; Lugg, 2005; Sandal et al., 2006; Smith & Barrett, 2018). The negative feelings and experiences associated with prolonged isolation with the overlay of viral threat is likely to have some impact on all of us. Humans are social creatures.

Flattening the mental health curve during COVID-19

An April US survey of 2,032 U.S. adults using a standard measure of mental distress compared the responses with a sample of 19,330 demographically similar people in a 2018 government-sponsored survey of U.S. adults that used the same measure. The results were staggering. The 2020 participants were eight times as likely to screen positive for serious mental illness – 28%, compared to 3.4% in the 2018 survey. The vast majority of the 2020 participants, 70%, met criteria for moderate to serious mental illness, compared with 22% in 2018. Clearly, the pandemic has had a devastating effect on mental health. (The Conversation May 2020).

Adaptation
Adapting to social isolation and quarantine disrupts a person's normal way of life. This is a major challenge identified by groups that deploy to ICE environments. When transitioning into and out of unusual environments, it normally takes up to 10 days for people to adjust to their new situation.

Threat, danger and uncertainty
The uncertainty of not knowing what lies ahead, especially in times of adversity, can lead to feelings of anxiety and fear. Populations that choose ICE settings feel similarly anxious about their situation. Research suggests that efforts to reappraise these feelings and search for the positives in the situation are helpful (Smith et al., 2018; 2019).

Monotony and boredom
As isolation and quarantine measures continue, monotony and boredom will likely set in. Adhering to a routine and daily structure, self-care activities and trying new things can help to alleviate these emotions.

Low mood and motivation
It is almost inevitable that at some point during isolation and quarantine people will experience feelings of low mood and a lack of motivation. This is also not unusual for people living in ICE conditions. Knowing

that it is perfectly normal for mood and motivation to ebb and flow and that there will be some good days and some bad days can be comforting. Ways of coping with low mood and motivation in ICE conditions include acknowledging progress and focusing on small achievements to help foster a sense of competence.

In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety. But as new measures and impacts are introduced – notably quarantine and its effects on many people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods – levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise. (Source – World Health Organisation)

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> "Common consequences of disease outbreaks include anxiety and panic, depression, anger, confusion and uncertainty, and financial stress with estimates of between 25% to 33% of the community experiencing high levels of worry and anxiety during similar pandemics."
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> Black Dog Institute

COVID-19 is having a big impact on Aussies' mental health

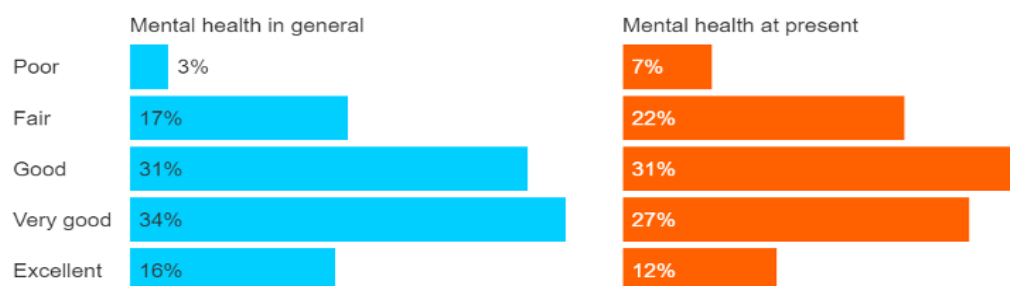### More than twice as many people report their mental health is 'poor'

Mental health in general

Poor	3%
Fair	17%
Good	31%
Very good	34%
Excellent	16%

Mental health at present

Poor	7%
Fair	22%
Good	31%
Very good	27%
Excellent	12%

Chart: ABC News Story Lab • Source: Vox Pop Labs/ABC • Get the data • Embed

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> "The COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to our population, not only for its risk to human life and ensuing economic distress, but also for its invisible emotional strain. Recent days have seen the sharpest economic pullback in modern history and a record-breaking spike in unemployment. It is inevitable that the global pandemic, compounded by financial crisis, will have a material impact on the behavioural health of society."
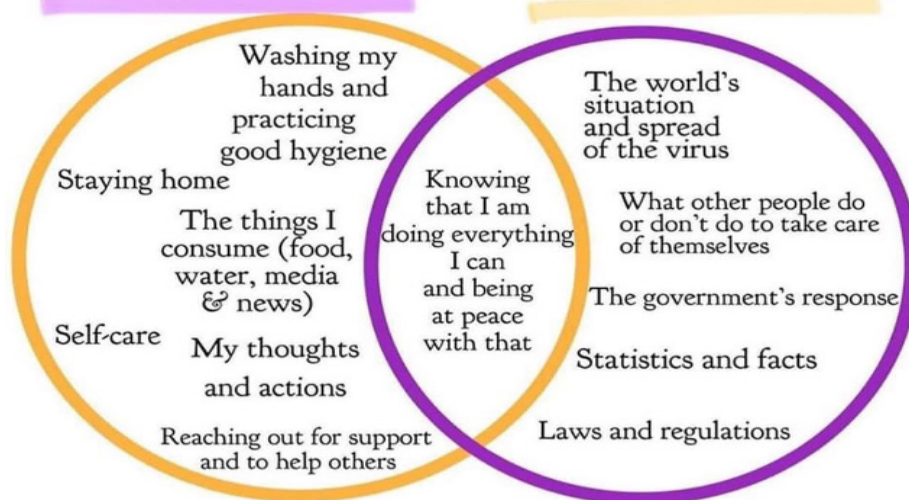>
> McKinsey May 2020

Mental health fallout from COVID-19 'absolutely terrifying'

12/04/2020 | 6min

Registered paramedic Paul Spinks says "the mental health fallout" from COVID-19 "absolutely terrifies" him.

THINGS I CAN CONTROL

Washing my hands and practicing good hygiene

Staying home

The things I consume (food, water, media & news)

Self-care

My thoughts and actions

Reaching out for support and to help others

Knowing that I am doing everything I can and being at peace with that

THINGS I CAN'T CONTROL

The world's situation and spread of the virus

What other people do or don't do to take care of themselves

The government's response

Statistics and facts

Laws and regulations

What can you control?

Take it easy on yourself. The next few months may be hard.

Be patient with yourself and others, both now and when this strange time eventually ends. People who go through a period of isolation, whether they've been on the International Space Station or in quarantine, often experience trauma symptoms and struggle while reintegrating back into their ordinary routine. Social isolation may gradually become your normal, and losing it may still be a shock.

Beyond the negative impact of a traditional economic downturn, COVID-19 presents additional challenges - fear from the virus itself, collective grief, prolonged physical distancing and associated social isolation - that will compound the impact on our collective psyche.

The modelling shows that there may be a 25 per cent increase in suicides, and it is likely that about 30 per cent of those will be among young people. If the Australian economy deteriorates further, this number may increase. We are facing a situation where between an extra 750 and 1500 more suicides may occur annually.

The duration and depth of the disruption to our lives is not yet known. However, we do know that people living in outer urban areas, rural and regional Australians, casual workers, those recently unemployed, and older workers will likely be most affected by the social and economic impacts.


1 SOCIAL DISTANCE
2 WASH HANDS
3 CLEAN SURFACES

"

"As we break our normal routines and lose most of our usual activities, Australians are learning more about what is most important to keep us mentally healthy and positive. Whether it's dealing with the increased stress of an uncertain financial future or facing boredom from losing social outlets, people are recognising the critical role certain elements of their daily life play in helping them maintain resolve.

Despite the "always on" nature of popular online social platforms and digital communication technologies, we observed among our families a desire for true social connectivity, underpinned by direct human-to-human contact, and to some extent, a decoupling from our digital self."

McKinsey May 2020
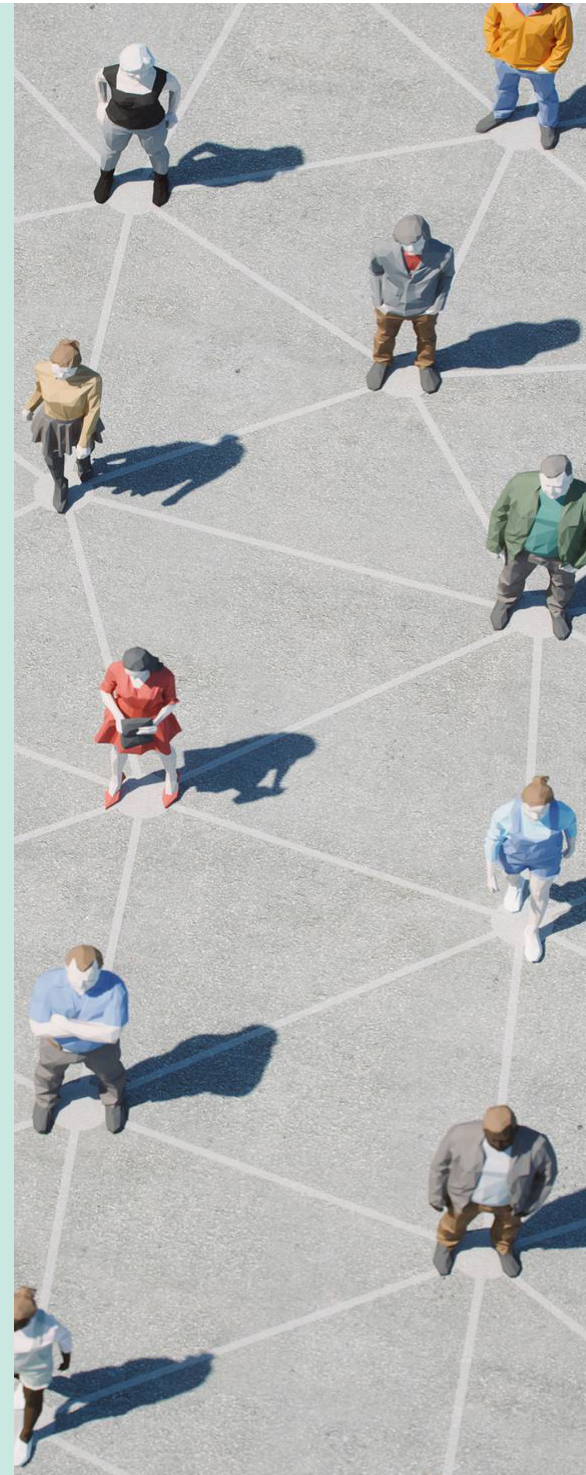
Give Yourself A Break

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, have you had multiple episodes in which you:

• Planned productive activities that you haven't been able to get yourself to start or complete?

• Had trouble feeling motivated or energetic enough to plan productive activities?

• Attempted to do something productive but had trouble focusing?

• Had trouble sleeping and/or getting up in the morning? (And/or taken long naps during the day?)

• Spent several hours passively watching TV, surfing the internet, or doing other things just to pass time?

• Eaten more food than you'd like and/or less-healthy food than you'd like?

• Experienced feelings of loneliness, anxiety, panic, depression, boredom, irritation, and/or numbness?

• Felt anxious, guilty, or upset about experiencing these emotions, especially since so many people are in worse situations than you are? (Or felt guilty whenever you felt happy, since so many people are suffering?)

• Felt anxious, guilty, and/or frustrated with yourself because you know (or at least assume) that you're having episodes when you're not coping as well as it seems most people are?

• Felt like you should be handling things better than you are?

Give yourself one point for every "yes" answer.

If your total number of "yes" answers falls in the range of 2 to 11, that means that you are dealing with this crisis much like most of us are handling it. And if you answered "yes" to fewer than 2 of the questions, then you are travelling exceptionally well under the circumstances!

Everyone's work, personal and domestic situations are different, but speaking with dozens of clients over the past few weeks I have noticed one commonality regardless of individual circumstances - Almost everyone has episodes when they feel like they should be handling things better than they are.

Any Additional Time At Home During The COVID-19 Pandemic
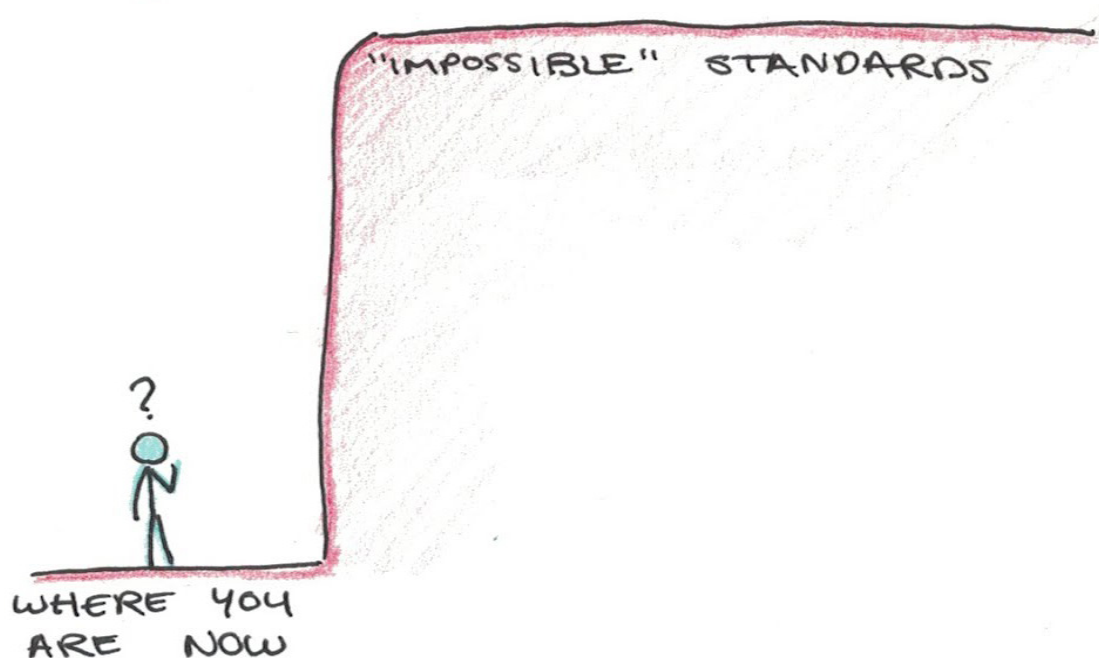
Is Not A Holiday Or A Break.

Nothing about this time is business as usual. The world has suddenly morphed into a dystopian film, and nobody knows exactly how or when it will be over. Everyone is experiencing a tremendous amount of stress and other difficult emotions, and almost everyone is having at least some trouble functioning.   Work to modify your expectations based on these unprecedented circumstances. There's no one "right" way to cope during this time. On some days, a realistic expectation might simply be just to get through one more day.

Almost everyone is having at least some difficulty coping at the moment. Judging yourself harshly will only increase the stress and negative emotions, which will leave you feeling less motivated and even less able to function adaptively. The way you're functioning in this once-in-a-lifetime traumatic situation is not predictive of how you will function once the pandemic subsides.

"Experiencing anything difficult right now is a normal reaction to a deeply abnormal situation."

What is your goal during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Being tough on yourself will increase your stress and decreasing your perceived ability to function. A healthier goal is to get through the crisis as effectively as possible, even if it means that you may experience some bumps along the way.

Re-Integration Leadership Tips

Made it a safe place to work
Upon returning to work after COVID-19, health and safety should be your biggest focus. The first step is ensuring the physical workplace is safe to work in. Think about hiring a cleaning service to deep clean the entire office. A deep clean will put employees' minds at ease and make the office fresh and sparkling for their return. Increase the standards of daily

cleaning for your office. After cleaning the workplace, it's important to encourage employees to keep it safe and healthy. Put up information in common areas about cough/sneeze etiquette (into a tissue or elbow), social distancing reminders, hand washing practices, not coming into work when they feel ill and COVID-19 symptoms. Lastly, make it easy for employees to follow good hygiene practices by ensuring plenty of supplies are available (disinfectant wipes and/or spray, hand sanitiser, hand soap, paper towels, tissues). Keep disinfectant in common areas so employees can wipe down counters, door handles, elevator buttons and appliances after use. Place hand sanitiser around the office or quick disinfecting when employees can't wash their hands.

Update Policies and Procedures
Dealing with reluctance to give up remote working will be one of the biggest challenges for many staff returning to the workplace. To ease the transition:

- Be flexible with work hours for the first few weeks

- Encourage discussion of revised performance metrics and deliverables

- Provide employees with a list of productivity resources to get them back to their routine

- If their job allows it, let employees work remotely for longer if they are anxious

- Look at sustaining partial remote work where appropriate

Employers should anticipate that social distancing measures may be revisited by the Government should the need arise, for example, as a result of a second spike of COVID-19 infection. Employers should ensure they have a plan in place in case they need to re-close business premises and/or require employees to work from home again.

Leadership
In times of crisis, we know that leaders:

- Don't have all the facts

- Can't remove all risk

- Can't promise zero loss

- Can't eliminate all the pain

Take the pressure off your teams. Productivity drops make employees feel uneasy too. We need to normalise stress as an adaptive response to these uncertain times. Acknowledge that you anticipate that business might slow and employees will be less productive for a period of time. Recognising that your employees are human and that they will be more distracted right now, will create more psychological safety. Set expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence. Ask staff to speak up. Say things like: *We've never faced anything like this before so there are a lot of gaps in what we know. We need to hear from everyone. If you're worried, please speak up.*

Practice active, frequent and honest communication and keep employees informed about important issues and changes, while ensuring leaders and managers are accessible for questions and willing to give straight answers. Still be clear on behavioural standards and ensure they are shared, understood, and consistently applied. Sanction clear violations. Say things like: *We always treat each other with dignity and respect, especially when things are tough.*

Try to host meetings sometimes without an agenda with no order of business but to share feelings or concerns. This time can provide mental relief for your team - a space to connect about non-work related matters. You could even involve people from other teams, creating a stronger sense of cohesion across the organisation.

Mental Health and Wellbeing
Employers should revisit and recommunicate their strategy for supporting employee mental health. Many employees are feeling unsettled or uncertain during this time, so employers must ensure everyone in their organisation feels safe, informed, and supported:

- Promote your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and normalise access to counselling services. Consider establishing an EAP if you do not have one.

- Provide web-based mental health services. Offer employees telehealth sessions including training in resilience and wellbeing.

- Offer online self-guided mental health programs. research has found that self-guided mental health interventions are effective at reducing stress.

- Maintaining workplace wellbeing information in a central hub such as an intranet website.

- Acknowledging employees' feelings about COVID-19 and consult them about their perceptions of risks to psychological health.

- Take steps to identify the risks of family and domestic violence, such as providing a safe environment for disclosure, ensuring confidentiality and not requiring employees to divulge unnecessary personal details. Employers should consider circulating a family and domestic violence policy, which may need to be adapted to accommodate for the circumstances of COVID-19. If it is not possible for an employee to be safe at home, an alternative work environment must be provided, so far as reasonably practicable.

Caring during a crisis

In moments like this, every interaction we have is telling a story about our leadership. Being vulnerable is one of the most courageous things you can do as a leader. Engagement is going to require concerted effort and attention from leaders to build and retain trust and engender a sense of purpose and worth in their teams. Perhaps most importantly, in the words of Napoleon Bonaparte, leaders need to be dealers of hope.

Leading during COVID-19 will require sustained energy in the face of disappointment. Passion to try again and persistence to press through obstacles. Boldness during uncertainty and endurance when it is tempting to quit. Belief precedes hope so give people something to believe in. Connect effort and sacrifice to the big picture.

Hope does not make a bad idea better. But hope can make a great idea possible. *What* and *how* will take you down when

hope is fading. Keep the *Why* front and centre. Why keeps everyone at the table until what and how can be figured out. Focus just on what and how and you will lose heart. Focus on why and you will unite and keep going. We are in for a long and bumpy ride through COVID-19. Now more than ever, we need brave leaders, dealers of hope, who can inspire, engage and genuinely care. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

"

"The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive—the hope that we can finally find our way through to a better world—despite the day's action, despite our own inertness, shallowness, and wavering resolve."

John W. Gardner

CHANGE WILL NOT COME IF WE WAIT FOR SOME OTHER PERSON OR SOME OTHER TIME. WE ARE THE ONES WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR.

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As mental health professionals, we understand the impact of this pandemic on you, your employees and organisation, both now and into the future. In an unprecedented time for Australian workers and businesses, we have combined the expertise of our clinical team to pivot services to support you and your workplace during this challenging time however we can.

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