

Letter from the EUI Counsellor: Resilience in Covid-19 times

Over the course of the last couple of weeks the Counselling and Wellbeing Service has been frequently approached for advice on how to get through these difficult times. Many people have been asking the same questions and many people are experiencing similar difficulties and fears. So I have put this letter together which is based not only on my own personal hints and tips but those given by the people that we have spoken to.

I would really like to start this report by talking about my own fears writing it. This is because they echo the fears of so many academics when starting a new piece of research. Like you (I am fairly sure) I have been bombarded over the past weeks with tips and suggestions on how to keep myself safe and boost my physical and emotional resilience in the times of Covid-19. So what can I add?

I very much empathized with the short video made by Henrietta Fore from UNICEF on looking after mental health during these times <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb0uoJHNcNY>, sent to me over the weekend and I found it to be very comprehensive. I felt the need to try and provide the very best advice I possibly could. I felt completely blocked by the fear of not writing something that wasn't good enough. Thoughts flew around my brain such as: "what if I'm not providing enough cutting edge research? What if what I wrote was just a banal summary of everything that has ever been written? What if my point of view is totally irrelevant and not generalizable to others?" I know that those are many of the fears that academics experience daily, as I have talked about many of them over the course of time. So I did 2 things: I had a good long think about it whilst carrying out another task and then I reached out to people I know and asked them what helps. I hoped that by getting outside opinions by asking others I would be able to provide you all with a more rounded view of tips on what helps build resilience in Covid-19 times.

By reaching out to others, I hope that I can provide a more generalized view of this situation, but I am also sure that my perspective is also relevant and helpful. I love the metaphor of the academic setting as a beehive and the idea that by sharing our ideas we can collectively shift to different planes of understanding. Having the bravery to share our thoughts and understanding is what advances research and so I do hope that within this sphere people would share with us so that this piece of writing (which I hope doesn't last for too long) is a reflection on what a multitude of people are finding helpful. Any ideas that you have found helpful, websites that you have used, or thinking/behavioural strategies that you have used that you may feel could be of benefit to others please send to us (at: the counselling_service.eui.eu) and we shall try to include them in next week's update (which I hope you might find useful).

Emotional vulnerability is exacerbated by a huge number of different factors. Among the principle ones are sleep, diet, physical exercise, physical health and sense of mastery. So let's have a look at those one by one.

Sleep

An average adult requires about 7.5 hours of sleep. Some people need more and some less (but not much less). Sleep is a very complex process and serves a lot of purposes in terms of bodily/cognitive

functioning/memory processing....just let's say it is a very essential part of us and should not be taken lightly. The COVID-19 pandemic provides the right conditions for anxious and depressive thinking, which is probably not going to be helpful to us. The quality and quantity of our sleep plays a significant part in how we experience everyday life and our vulnerability to experiencing negative emotions. It is helpful to see having a good sleep/wake cycle as a priority, particularly when managing difficult or stressful events.

How do we do this? First of all, by picking a time by which you would like to get up. If the time you are actually getting up (e.g. 12.00) is far off from your desired getting up time (e.g. 9 am) then stagger this time, using 30 minute intervals over the course of several weeks, particularly if it is a routine that you have been in for a while (11.30-11.00-10.30-10.0-9.30-9.0).

When you get up, try to get your first sunlight. The release of melatonin (the hormone that makes us sleepy) is dictated by the first sunlight we get during the day. So if we stay in a darkened bedroom all day it is not conducive to the stabilisation of our sleep-wake cycle. Ideally, getting some exercise early on in our sleep/wake cycle is helpful. If this is not possible, then try to sit and do some exercise in a sunny spot as you wake in the morning.

Staying asleep

Each sleep cycle from start to finish is about one and a half hours long. Initially and finally you have the hypnagogic and hypnopompic states which are those times from wake to sleep and sleep to wake where thinking can be accentuated and often slightly surreal. You then have phases 1-4 non-REM sleep and then a phase of REM sleep; REM stands for rapid eye movement and is synonymous with dreaming. Have you ever seen a dog asleep? Sometimes you can see their eyes moving under their eyelids and sometimes they appear to be running. Well, in all probability, they are dreaming and running in their dreams. Their eyes moving rapidly under their eyelids is indicative of dreaming and their legs moving mean that the brain hasn't quite fulfilled the job of suppressing the dog's movement during sleep. Between the REM sleep phase and the next cycle (which starts at phase 1, a much lighter phase of sleep), there can often be a moment of wakefulness. The trick to stay asleep is to try and keep the brain as asleep as possible which means trying to limit stimulation to a minimum. A certain member of my family likes to let the rest of the family know when they woke up during the night so when they wake up they switch on the light and look at the bedside clock. These actions are of course stimulating the brain and hence are not conducive to gently slipping back into a sleep state. So even if you need to go to the bathroom try to do so with as little light and stimulus as possible.

Managing Night time/early morning anxiety

We all work on what is termed a circadian rhythm which runs its course over a 24 hour cycle.

This means that there are times when our brains work better than at others. Usually people have more motivation and find problem-solving easier at certain times of day. Usually people do not do their best problem-solving at night or in the very early morning. Often if we do try to solve problems

at this time what can happen is “rumination” that is when a problem goes round and round in our heads. If this is something that happens to you then you can use one of several strategies:

a) In general when you recognise that you are worried about something (this is a skill in itself!) a good first question to ask yourself is “Is this a solvable worry?” Some worries that we have are not solvable, such as “Will someone in my family get Covid-19?” Differentiating problems we can solve from problems that we can’t is an important step in taking control back from worries. Whether the worry be solvable or unsolvable, remember that in all probability 2 a.m. will not be the most productive time to solve it; and think, perhaps, about allocating some thinking time during the day to the difficulty. As an example, while I am under the shower tomorrow morning I shall try to think through the concerns that I have for my family in the UK given the very different information and guidelines that they are receiving from here in Italy. It then follows that whilst under the shower I come up with a plan to do that. When I am thinking about this, it may be helpful to keep in mind the old adage “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink”. I can only do what I can do!

b) Allocate between 2 and 5 minutes of time to think about the problem or difficulty. After 2-5 minutes ask yourself “Have I got any closer to solving the problem?”....if you haven’t, then recognise that it is not something that you will be able to solve now, and prioritize sleep.

If you are experiencing significant sleep difficulties then please feel free to get in touch with the counselling and wellbeing service or with the psychiatrists who collaborate with our service (their details can be found towards the bottom of the Counselling and Wellbeing Service web page).

Diet

Human beings tend to eat 3 times a day in most cultures. Our bodies are not machines and our thinking, motivation, memory....all bodily functions rely on what we consume. Regular food intake at regular meal times is important to our circadian rhythm. Eating well and picking healthy nourishing meals not only significantly contributes to our everyday functioning but it also feeds back into our sense of self-worth and self-esteem. What message are you giving yourself if you skip a meal or choose to eat a bag of crisps as it’s not worth cooking for yourself? Given the lockdown, this is a great time to explore new recipes and take the time to cook dishes that you wouldn’t usually have time to do. I and my children made some chicken liver pâté this week and we took the chance to learn about the functions of the liver at the same time.

When thinking about food choices remember that too much sugar, or not eating at all, can really make it hard to emotionally regulate. Have you ever watched children on Christmas day once they have consumed more chocolate than they ever have during the rest of the year? It invariably ends up in a fight or tears, as the excess sugar surges through the body and upsets the delicate balance of chemicals that regulate their mood. Do you or any of your friends and relatives experience “hangryness” that is, getting angry or irritable when you or they are hungry? These tips are worth thinking about in terms of providing the best possible foundations for keeping your mood buoyant over the course of the lock down.

In the UK, we have a kind way of describing hangovers (what happens when you have consumed excessive amounts of alcohol and poisoned your body), as feeling “tired and emotional”. Alcohol consumption can have a depressive effect on the brain so be aware of, and careful over how much you are drinking. Please remember that if you drink excessively, then the day afterwards you may well be prone to low mood and depressive thoughts. Drinking during the day, or drinking because you are feeling anxious, are also traps that people can fall into. Unfortunately, although alcohol may well have a short term positive effect on mood, in the longer term it is not going to help in terms of mood or sense of self-efficacy.

Physical exercise

Many of us will be feeling frustrated at not being able to complete their normal physical exercise routines. None the less, try getting creative in your sitting room or bedroom. There is a world full of virtual yoga classes, gym sessions, dance classes and even virtual dance parties (daybreaker.com) happening as we speak. Find physical activities to do each day in a satisfying and rewarding way. Regular physical exercise is very important in terms of emotional regulation so try hard to build it into to your routine daily. If you are struggling with low mood or sleep difficulties then try to exercise early on in your day. Some people find it harder to sleep if they exercise later during the day. Sometimes it is a case of trial and error to find the best time for you.

Routine and purpose

Having emphasized the importance of a good sleep routine and its association with emotional vulnerability, it follows that a good daily routine is also important. Give yourself several tasks and goals to get done each day. Think about when, during the day, you work best, academically speaking, and plan around those times.

Sense of mastery

Think about activities that you can do at home or things that you have always wanted to learn or where you are interested in broadening your knowledge. Doing things that you enjoy, are good at, or would like to learn more about, improve our sense of mastery. This will help us to continue to feel like we have a sense of purpose. Yesterday I fixed a bicycle tire and that made me feel very good about myself.

Some people I have talked to have learn't new methods of coding, making bread, making Chinese dumplings or exploring master classes in photography. Personally, I am exploring the exciting world of land drainage by way of a project I need to undertake in the future.

Try to stay on top of housework so that you don't feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed by untidiness in your living environment. This strategy can also be helpful in terms of self-efficacy and valuing yourself. If your living arrangements are particularly untidy, then set yourself a small goal each day by starting for example with a corner of a room. A tip from my grandmother: always open the windows for twenty minutes each day, to ensure a good supply of fresh air.

Academic work

Some people have reported feeling lucky to have work to concentrate on whilst others have felt so overwhelmed that they find it difficult to concentrate on academic work. Some people have found it helpful to follow academic twitter feeds (though almost all have reported considerable benefit from limiting time spent engaging with social media) whilst others have found it totally overwhelming. Some have reported that they are not beating themselves up for not feeling productive academically whilst they find a new routine. I think that this is a very good way of seeing the current situation particularly for those who are not used to working from home. Take time and be patient with yourself in finding a new routine.

Try not to avoid your academic work, as avoidance makes tasks more unpleasant; as an example, the more I avoid doing the washing up the more unpleasant the task becomes in my head. If you are struggling to approach your work, then ease yourself into it gently, making sure, for example you open the file you are working on every day or that you read at least one article a day (or a specific part, if they are long or particularly complicated articles); or task yourself to write at least 100 words a day. Your initial goal is to feel at ease with engaging with the work rather than trying to complete it.

Maintaining social contact

During these times it would be very easy not to speak to people for days at a time. In general, this is not good for our mental health, so make sure that you reach out to family and friends regularly. Family and friends are probably experiencing a similar situation to yourself, though people have reported not wanting to discuss reciprocal COVID-19 situations too much, as they prefer talking about other things as well. I have heard of families organizing virtual dinner parties and those reaching out to a different friend or relative as a daily activity. My family has organized a Whatsapp chat which has been very comforting to me over the last few weeks.

Information about COVID-19 and managing anxiety

Now I don't know about you, but since February, I have been bombarded with information about the spread of the pandemic. Globally the information around staying safe is to limit leaving the house as much as possible, staying away from other people and regular hand washing. Whilst there has been some conflicting information on covering your face, socially, it feels more acceptable than not whilst in shared spaces such as the supermarket. When I didn't cover my face to go to the supermarket last week it was commented upon loudly whilst I was queueing. As long as you carefully follow the advice, then you are doing as much as you can to stay safe and prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

You can reduce anxiety about whether you have the virus (because you're afraid that haven't fully followed the advice) by simply following the advice closely. For those who tend towards obsessively thinking about germs and compulsively completing actions to keep themselves safe such as

repeatedly washing hands, try to stick to the recommended World Health Organization advice rather than engaging in excessive routines as a way of managing your anxiety.

Similarly, speaking to people living in many different corners of the globe, many are struggling not to compulsively check different news sources many times a day. Compulsively checking the news from across the globe frequently is not going to keep you any safer from getting sick or give you greater control over the events that are unfolding globally. It can be very distracting (for more information on 'attention residue' please read <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/smarter-living/how-to-actually-truly-focus-on-what-youre-doing.html>) and many people have found it very overwhelming. Some have discussed new concepts such as Covid fatigue with me.

Many people have said that they are limiting themselves to looking at the news once a day for around 30 minutes. People have feedback that this has been a very helpful strategy to them and allows one to get on with a daily routine. I am limiting myself to reading the news in the UK and in Italy after my children have gone to bed. Others are looking in the morning, as it is helpful in terms of the evolving nature of the regulations that they need to adhere to. So think of a useful news-checking time of day and try to stick to it. One person suggested a couple of blockers that you can use so that you have uninterrupted work time whilst on your computer or devices listed here:

https://freedom.to/downloads?utm_source=frdmbjgtop

A few last things

I have really enjoyed writing this advice and it has given me a sense of purpose over the last few days. It has also really helped to have the advice and suggestions of many of the people that I talk to and I can see that many people are experiencing similar difficulties and worries. Many are finding similar strategies helpful. Please feel free, as I said in the beginning, to send us any helpful tips and strategies to the counselling_service@eui.eu and hopefully we can post them next week.

If you are struggling with your mental health or with any aspect of the current situation, or anything you are finding hard, and would like to talk to either myself or to Elisabetta Miglietta, please feel free to be in touch. We are both available to provide sessions via Skype. You can contact us by emailing gemma.fenton@eui.eu or elisabetta.miglietta@eui.eu