

Even at Home, Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste



By *Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA* — March 23, 2020

"You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." -- Rahm Emmanuel [1]



Image courtesy of ezeileagu chibisi chidubem on [wikimedia](#) [1]

We are going to be at home for a while, and those not working at home face hours of free time. And let's be real; you can only fill so many hours on social media or newscasts before the incessant words of hope and doom catch up with you. The newly imposed isolation requires some distraction. It's time to flip the script, take back some control of your life, and that begins with your new friend, structure.

By structure, I mean creating a flow for the day, filled not with appointments or small moments, but with longer intervals where you can settle in and focus for say 90 minutes. It takes a few minutes, at least for me, to set up and settle into a project, so that 90 minutes to 2 hours is a sweet spot, enough time to get some depth and not too long to become bored.

Idle hands are the devil's workshop

In this case, the devil's workshop includes anxiety and depression. How do you fill those new intervals I suggested, it is time to change up those bad habits you've meant to tackle. Let's consider three health-related habits. Sleep, however disturbed in may presently be, is essential in restoring your body and brain; you still need 6-8 hours. The usual advice applies wind down your

day; enhance or at least do not repress the release of melatonin, your internal sleep messenger, by avoiding the blue end of the light spectrum – that emitted, in the home, primarily from screens.

Exercise continues to be important because anxiety and stress do not consume as many calories as you hope. For the majority of us without a home gym, that means one of two approaches. There is, of course, getting outside and walking (at an appropriate social distance). That, too, can be problematic, especially in areas of high population density. But another alternative is the updated versions of Jack Lalanne [2], the plethora of video content on Youtube. Granted, there is more commercial hay than healthful needles, including exercise videos labeled CoronaVirus, but it is a place to start. Changing routines is difficult, so take little steps first, begin with 15 minutes and build from there. As to the exercise, it need not be jumping jacks and situps. I am a big fan of yoga and tai chi. It is not all about bending yourself into a pretzel, it is far more about getting the kinks out, reestablishing balance (a significant cause of falls), and breathing.

A quick word about breathing, which we take for granted. Controlling our breath is one of the few voluntary ways we have of controlling our nervous system. In stressful times, our sympathetic, fight, or flight systems are in overdrive. You can down-regulate the sympathetic system by slow, deep breathing, yoga's pranayama. And reducing the sympathetic outflow increases the outflow of the parasympathetic, our rest and digest system. The essence is to slow your breathing down and make exhalation longer than inhalation. It is blowing out the candles on your birthday cake - a slow breath in through your nose and breath out as if you are gently blowing out the candles on a cake. [3]

We have all been to the grocery stores at this point, seen the empty shelves of toilet paper, the empty meat cases, but they are coming back. I would not be so presumptuous as to recommend a diet, but I will recommend you change things up and begin to cook your meals. It is an important survival skill, and many of us now have the time, but not the skills. It is amazing to see what can be made from foods that are not necessarily in short supply, vegetables, grains, the foods you ordinarily ignore. But the important part is not the nutritional value; it is the act of cooking. It's time to learn a new skill. [Gordon Ramsey](#) [2] may be a place to start. And while you're learning a new skill, it may be time to try different cuisines, cooking the food of the Mediterranean and Asia are both accessible featuring lots of easily found ingredients, even in those stores with empty shelves.

It is a good time to change up your media.

Books do not need to be recharged, are very portable, and easily marked up; they also can be purchased online without them being back-ordered. If reading is too taxing, how about audiobooks or even better the wealth of podcasts. Perfect time to combine two new activities, cooking a meal, and listening to a podcast. For the adventurous, there is a wealth of distance learning to be found. Always wanted to go to [Harvard](#) [3], now's the time. And the same holds for a number of our universities. Many of the courses are free, and you would be surprised how different a class feels after being away from school for several years.

One of my daily routines, when I was in clinical practice, was making daily rounds of my patients. We are social animals, and this imposed separation wears upon us differently. But one way to reduce the separation anxiety is to remain connected to your friends and family. I would call it

wellness checks. So many ways to reach out, text messages, phone calls, any of the video chat apps, and if you want to impress, write a note or letter. Putting your thoughts down on paper often clarifies your thoughts and feelings, so that short note boosts both the reader and the writer.

Our lives are disrupted, our normal patterns broken. Now is the perfect opportunity to change things up and make a dent in that list of things you were "going to do" when you had time – you have the time. And one last thought, do the best you can to support your local businesses. The corner store and local shops are your neighborhood's infrastructure, and they need to be maintained; otherwise, the impact of the Covid-19 on our daily lives will be significantly magnified.

"Finish every day and be done with it... You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. To-morrow is a new day; you shall begin it well and serenely, and with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense." Ralph Waldo Emerson

Notes

[1] That specific quote is from Mr. Emmanuel, but is attributed to Winston Churchill and evidently used in an essay in Medical Economics written by M.F. Wiener

[2] Jack Lalanne was the original fitness guy, at least of my generation. He was promoting a healthy lifestyle long before it moved mainstream. His television program began in 1951. Here is a sample [episode](#) [4].

[3] Thanks to Ally Love of Peloton for that description.

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[1] <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WOMAN-HOME-ALONE.jpg>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJy1ajvMU1k>

[3] <https://online-learning.harvard.edu/>

[4]

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