

## Managing the world from home – Ms T-H’s guide for students

So it’s a strange world and you certainly weren’t expecting to be stuck at home and social distancing for the next few months. You may have some anxiety, some sadness and certainly some uncertainty about what will happen. Not to mention irritations of being more cooped up than you are used to! So here are a few ideas to help you manage the next few weeks and months.

### Routine

While you may not all have actively *liked* school all the time, it’s actually really good for our mental health to have a routine. It helps create and meet the patterns that our brains are expecting and gives us a sense of meaning and purpose. All the more reason to try to have some sort of routine while you are at home.

People will do this differently – some of you will feel better with something very structured, almost like a school timetable, while others may just want a daily ‘to-do’ list. Whatever you do, don’t make it so rigid or demanding that it will stress you if you can’t keep to the letter of it – build in flexibility and breaks. But also don’t ignore your need for routine or you could become demotivated and your mood will dip. You want to include a range of things which will give you a sense of achievement and keep your brain working. It should include:

- Your school work. More about why it’s important to still be working later (see **Education** below), but you are still in education and work is there for you to do. It will make you feel better if you accomplish this. Aim to work for roughly as many hours as you would have done in school.
- Some exercise or movement. Physical exercise is good for both body and brain. We all know it is essential to keep the body healthy, but it is also critical for brain health. It burns off the stress hormone cortisol, releases endorphins to make you feel happier and will also help you sleep better. You may have to adapt your usual exercise routine, but consider Youtube videos – from Yoga to Aerobics or weights; dancing in your bedroom; walking outside if you can; gardening; skipping in the garden. Young people should have at least an hour a day five days a week.
- Some relaxation time. A bit of Netflix is fine, but also include things away from a screen, like reading, meditation, playing with the dog, sorting out your bedroom/tidying drawers/organising your books or that kitchen drawer that’s just full of random things. Some of these sound like chores, but actually they will give you a sense of purpose and be a relaxing break from the work you need to do.
- Something new. Here is an opportunity to stimulate and reward your brain by learning some new skills – this will give you a sense of achievement and keep your brain working. You could learn to cook, learn a musical instrument, learn a language

through something like Duolingo, learn how to garden, redecorate your bedroom, learn to draw, knit or crochet. There are lots of YouTube tutorials for any of these and more – be creative and find something new.

- Stay connected. We all need to connect with people and social isolation makes this hard. You may not be able to meet up but do make every effort to keep in touch with your friends. Social media is great, but also use the phone or Skype/facetime etc as well as the various messaging platforms – being able to see each other or hear each other’s voices gives us a much better sense of the connections we all need to have for our wellbeing.
- Good sleep. Having a regular bed time and getting up time reassures the brain, helps us get good quality sleep and reinforces the value of the daytime routine. Good sleep is vital for our wellbeing, both physical and mental. Teenagers generally need to sleep more than adults (10-12 hours!) and are programmed to sleep later in the day. So now that you are setting your own routine you could use this to your advantage and work with your body clock. BUT, you still need it to be **regular** to work at its best, so even if you want to shift your sleep to midnight to 10am, make sure you get up at a regular time and use your awake hours productively.

### Parents

So you’re at home and the chances are they are at home too. This is a real pressure point when you are not used to it and can easily lead to arguments and misunderstandings! Remember it’s going to be as tough for them to be at home with you as it is for you to be at home with them! Just recognising this together can be a helpful step. You can make things easier with a few ideas here:

- Share your routine with them and ask them how they need the space to work for them. Don’t assume you can have full run of the house/TV/internet etc as they will need them too. Make it clear you need to work too and won’t just be sitting around and chilling out.
- Make sure you allow time for privacy and your own space too. Build in time to yourself as part of your routine and make sure you don’t plan it for when they need you to do something for them.
- Share the space respectfully – you will all have things you need to do but there are also shared domestic tasks that need to be done. Pull your weight here, and if you are quick you can offer to do some of the things you would prefer to do rather than being given the things you don’t want to do (though expect some of these too!).
- Check in with them – they are likely to be anxious too and your support now will help keep strength and harmony in the whole house.

## Education

How can you feel a sense of urgency or motivation for your education, when exams are cancelled, you're at home and your teachers are all at a distance? There are some really good reasons why keeping focused on your studies is as important now as ever:

1. **Qualifications.** If you would have been doing exams next term then what you do now is being used by your teachers as part of the evidence for any final grade that gets awarded. Here's your chance to make that as good as it can be.
2. **Knowledge.** If you are hoping to use your qualifications for the next step, whether that's college, A levels, university or a job, then you will need to know this stuff to make the next step accessible. This may not apply to every subject you do, but if in doubt assume you will need it!
3. **Keep your brain going.** Even if the subjects you are doing now are not relevant to what you would be doing next year, you still need to keep your brain working. It genuinely gets rusty when it's not used and you will certainly need to use it again at some point, whether in education or the workplace, once all this is over. If you let your brain take a six-month holiday now it will really struggle to re-engage and if you are moving to a higher level of education, this will be a real challenge.
4. **The purpose of education.** More philosophically, remember what education is for. We confuse education for qualifications, but it's much more than that. Education is about self-improvement, self-development and making you more equipped to think for yourself in the world. Being able to think and learn, to question and be critical, is essential for your own self-improvement as your life develops in whatever direction(s) it will take. It can also be fun. Yes really. The brain actually likes being challenged and stretched and will reward you with endorphins and a sense of achievement.

## Anxiety

The whole country – in fact the whole world – is in a heightened state of anxiety at the moment. You may be particularly susceptible to anxiety or you may not, but either way there is a lot more of it about and it's as contagious as any virus. So here are some tips to lower anxiety:

- **7-11 breathing.** When we are anxious, our breathing gets shallower and our heart rate increases. This activates the fight-or-flight response and makes us even more anxious. To reverse this we can make a conscious effort to breathe in a way that calms down this physical response. Two things to remember: 1. Breathe down into your belly and make sure you take the breath all the way down – check this by putting a hand on your tummy as you breath and make sure

it expands as you breathe in. It can be easier to notice and manage if you lie on your back. 2. Make your outbreath longer than your inbreath. You could count to seven for the inbreath and eleven for the outbreath, but the numbers aren't important so long as the outbreath is longer. Do this when you feel anxious and it will reverse the anxiety response. Try to do it for a minute or so several times a day and it will make a real difference to your overall anxiety levels. There's a good video on this here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-F9CuWE3UCg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-F9CuWE3UCg)

- **Notice and challenge unhelpful thinking patterns.** When anxious we can get into the habit of catastrophising (assuming the worst will happen), generalising (allowing one thing to colour your feelings about everything else), and one-sided thinking (seeing only the negative and not anything else). If you find your thoughts spiraling down these lines try this:
  - Notice the thought.
  - Take a deep breath or try a minute of 7-11 breathing, as this calms you down and brings your rational brain back online.
  - Challenge the thoughts and find thoughts and evidence to the contrary.
  - Write down all the positive alternatives to the thought.
  - Find something positive to do that takes your mind away from the thought (see **routine** above).
- **Turn off the news.** We need to know what the advice is, but endless obsessing and a focus on the worst will make us feel much worse. So limit your news intake and turn your thoughts to more enriching things.
- **Gratitude.** There is strong evidence that turning our thoughts externally also helps us regain emotional balance. When we are stressed and feel threatened there is a natural self-protective mechanism that turns our thoughts inwards, but this can become unhelpful and lead to more worry and stress. A deliberate focus on gratitude seems to reverse this. There are lots of great gratitude prompts online (try these: [www.developgoodhabits.com/gratitude-journal-prompts/](https://www.developgoodhabits.com/gratitude-journal-prompts/)) and you can set yourself one (or more) prompts a day to keep your focus balanced.
- **Mindfulness.** A bit of a buzzword, but there's some genuine evidence that paying attention to the world around us and the *right now* can help balance our thinking and help us to feel less stressed. A popular app is Headspace, where you get ten meditations for free, so no need to pay to subscribe. Or invest in a mindful colouring book. Or just pay attention. Take five minutes to notice the things around you, using all your senses and trying to stay non-judgmental. It can be tricky at first, but don't worry if your thoughts wander. Just notice that they have and bring them back. Then just keep practicing.

It's a strange world right now, but hopefully these tips will help the new normal to feel ok while we manage this extraordinary time. 😊