

Pandemic Life Hacks

How to stay happy, healthy, social, and productive while social distancing at home.

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Disclosure: I've helped create several of the mental health resources on here – UpLift, MoodTools, FearTools, CBT Thought Diary.

Mental Health

Being stuck at home can definitely take a toll on your mental health, especially when all of the news is anxiety-inducing. Luckily, there are a lot of online apps and resources that can not only help in the short-term but even improve your 'emotional toolkit' for the long-term. If you can take advantage of this time to put in effort towards improving your mental health now, you could leave this pandemic even more resilient than before.

Basic Tips

- Stay in the loop, but if obsessively checking the news is negatively impacting your mental health, consider scheduling a time only once a day.
- Staying productive, exercising, and connecting with others (the other 3 sections) will contribute to your mental health.
- Set up, stick to, and optimize a daily routine as best as you can.
- Make an effort to intentionally keep a positive mindset.
- Try focusing on what you can control instead of events outside of your control.
- Don't be afraid to reach out for professional help when needed like, [CAPS](#) and [Wellness](#).

Meditation Apps

There are a lot of different meditation apps out there and your favorite one might come down whose narrator's voice you like the most. Mindfulness in particular has a lot of evidence behind it. Here are three of the most popular meditation apps:

Name	Summary	Price	Link
 Headspace	Great variety of meditations with a streamlined interface and a British narrator. They offer \$10 / year for students .	Freemium \$70 / year \$13 / mo	Website iOS Android
 Calm	Packed with a variety of content from different voices including celebrities. Less structured than Headspace if you're more familiar with meditation.	Freemium \$70 / year	Website iOS Android
 Insight Timer	An option with very generous free offerings, including over 30k free meditations.	Freemium \$60 / year	Website iOS Android

Depression / Anxiety Apps

If you're specifically dealing with mood or anxiety issues (doesn't have to be severe), these apps can really help.

Name	Summary	Price	Link
<p>UpLift</p> 	<p>Depression & Anxiety - Learn Cognitive Behavioral principles with a comprehensive course. Contains 12 interactive sessions and 10 tools. Also offers a free coronavirus anxiety tool!</p>	<p>Freemium \$70 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS</p>
<p>MoodTools</p> 	<p>Depression - 6 simple tools for depression based on Cognitive Therapy, Behavioral Activation, Safety Planning, and more.</p>	<p>Free</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>Sanvello</p> 	<p>Anxiety – 6 simple tools and guided journeys as well as a support forum. All features are temporarily free due to the coronavirus pandemic.</p>	<p>Free</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>FearTools</p> 	<p>Anxiety – 6 simple tools for anxiety based on Cognitive and Behavioral therapies.</p>	<p>Free</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>

Chatbots

If you want to chat with robots, there are a lot of chatbots out there that can help you monitor and improve your moods in a chatting format.

Name	Summary	Price	Link
<p>Youper</p> 	<p>Has the highest ratings out of all of the chatbots. Good for mood tracking. Tries to be your emotional health assistant.</p>	<p>Freemium \$60 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>Wysa</p> 	<p>Chat with a cute penguin buddy. A “therapy chatbot.”</p>	<p>Freemium \$30 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>Woebot</p> 	<p>Another chatbot, this one featuring a cute robot. This one is also totally free.</p>	<p>Free</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>

Mood Journals / Thought Records

These apps let you track your mood, find what thoughts contribute to it, and apply an effective CBT technique – thought records – to improve your mood by re-analyzing your thoughts.

Name	Summary	Price	Link
CBT Thought Diary 	Mood Tracker + Thought Record + Gratitude Journal all in one application with all core features available for free.	Freemium \$30 / year	Website iOS Android
MoodNotes 	iOS-only Mood Tracker and Journaling app to capture your mood and help you improve your thinking habits. Free version limits the number of entries you can make each day.	Freemium \$40 / year	iOS

Online Therapy

Tired of all of these apps with no human interaction? Talk with a real, licensed therapist virtually with these online therapy options. There are a lot of options here and what it comes down to is it's not the platform that matters – it's the therapist.

Name	Summary	Price	Link
BetterHelp 	Unlimited video sessions and messaging, but pricing isn't available until after you sign up.	\$35-70/ week	Website iOS Android
Talkspace 	Half an hour video sessions each week combined with unlimited messaging. You can easily switch therapists until you find one that you like.	\$100/week	Website iOS Android

Physical Health

Social distancing means no more gyms, no more in-person classes, and no more group sports. If you, like a lot of others, relied on one of these means to get fit, you'll be itching for a way to stay fit while stuck at home. Here are some ideas and resources that can help you exercise:

Outdoor Exercise – Running, biking, hiking, and walking is great for both your physical and mental health as long as you can maintain 6 feet of social distancing. Your access to this depends heavily on your location's population density and climate. Also keep in mind local regulations, but most stay-at-home orders provide exceptions for outdoor exercise.

Housewalking – If you have a fitness tracker, try and walk around the house to hit your daily step goal. Any fitness tracker will do, but some good ones include [Apple Watches](#), the new [Fitbit Charge 4](#), and the affordable [Wyze Band](#).

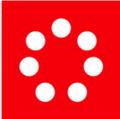
YouTube Videos – A great source of free at home workout routines. Just put it on the TV and exercise in front of it! There are a ton of popular YouTube channels covering all sorts of things like yoga, Pilates, strength training, and cardio. Here are the most commonly recommended:

Name	Topic	Description	Links
 Fitness Blender	A variety of at-home workouts	Kelli and Daniel are a husband wife combo of personal trainers with a bunch of videos covering HIIT, cardio, strength training, and more.	YouTube Website
 YOGA with ADRIENE	Yoga	Free, full-length yoga videos by Adriene, an accomplished yoga instructor, for all difficulty levels.	YouTube Website
 BLOGILATES	Pilates	Cassey creates peppy, short and quick Pilates-adjacent exercises usually ~15 minutes long.	YouTube Website

<p>Athlean-X</p> 	<p>Strength training</p>	<p>Jeff is a physical therapist and strength coach with a channel full of reliable information on strength training.</p>	<p>YouTube Website</p>
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Maintaining Motivation – This is one of the more difficult parts of exercising at home if you're accustomed to going to the gym with a buddy or going to workout classes with cancellation fees. A life hack here is to exercise with a virtual workout buddy – video chat with a friend while exercising at a specified time and keep each other accountable!

Apps – Even more than in the area of mental health, there are a lot of fitness apps out there. Many of the YouTube channels above also have their own apps. Here's a list of some highly recommended apps, but there are many more quality apps out there.

Name	Topic	Summary	Price	Link
<p>Strong</p> 	<p>Strength Training</p>	<p>Simple, straight forward app for tracking workouts.</p>	<p>Freemium \$30 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>Adidas Running</p> 	<p>Running</p>	<p>Track routes, time, and pace for outdoor runs. Used to be called Runtastic!</p>	<p>Freemium \$50 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>Down Dog Yoga</p> 	<p>Yoga</p>	<p>Extremely customizable yoga application for all skill levels.</p>	<p>Freemium \$50 / year</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>
<p>7 Minute Workout</p> 	<p>Short</p>	<p>Short on time? As you can probably guess from the title, this workout only takes 7 minutes.</p>	<p>Free</p>	<p>Website iOS Android</p>

Video games – A gamer at heart? I have 3 recommendations for games that get you sweaty while still being fun:

Name	Platform	Description	Links
<p>Just Dance</p> 	<p>ALL platforms: Phones, PS4, Xbox One, Switch and Wii.</p>	<p>Copy someone on the screen dancing hit songs and get scored on how well you do – can play with up to 4 players. If you don't own a console, just a laptop and a phone works with Just Dance Now.</p>	<p>Just Dance Now (phone) Just Dance 2020</p>
<p>Ring Fit Adventure</p> 	<p>Nintendo Switch</p>	<p>Defeat monsters, level up, get skills, and get fit in this surprisingly fun RPG. However, as of March 2020, it is hard to find in stock.</p>	<p>Amazon</p>
<p>Beat Saber or Pistol Whip</p> 	<p>Virtual Reality Headsets (Oculus, Steam)</p>	<p>Beat Saber is Dance Dance Revolution meets Star Wars. Use your light sabers to slice through boxes as they fly towards you. Pistol Whip is Beat Saber with guns. Hardest part here is you have to own a VR headset – I recommend the Oculus Quest (\$400).</p>	<p>Oculus Quest</p>

Socializing

Just because we're all stuck in our homes doesn't mean that we can't stay social! It might take some extra effort, but with the help of technology we can be as social or

even more compared to before. Here are some specific ideas for connecting with others:



Individual / Group Video Chats – At the most basic level, you can use different apps to chat with your friends. Many apps do this effectively – Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Duo/Hangouts, Houseparty, and Discord. In general, whatever platform your friends are already on is the easiest.



Simple Ideas for Group Chats

- Happy Hour! Prepare your own drinks and talk about life.
- Charades / Heads Up (mobile app)
- Whiteboard feature in Zoom can be used in creative ways like Pictionary & Hangman



Virtual Jackbox Party Pack Game Night – Host a virtual game night with your friends! Jackbox games are perfect for this since it only requires one screen and everyone else can play along on their phone. The only requirement for this is one person has to own any of the Jackbox Party Pack games on their computer. Then that person opens up Zoom or Discord and shares their screen (along with the computer sound). Overwhelmed by the number of games? Make your way down [this ranking](#).



Watch Netflix With Your Friends – Watch Netflix together remotely with the free Chrome extension [Netflix Party](#). You and your friends need your own Netflix accounts or profiles, but the extension syncs the video across your individual accounts. The extension provides an easy text chat, but you can also set up a video call either on your computer or your phone.



Virtual Board Games - This can sometimes be difficult to set up but there are some creative ways you can get these set up. Here are some examples:

- Codenames - use [this website](#) if you trust your friends not to cheat, play [codenames on slack](#), or point a camera at someone's table and work it out (share the board from one spymaster via private message)
- Ticket to Ride – the easiest way to do this is for everyone to buy this app on their phones and then play it with your friends while on a video chat.
- Settlers of Catan – there's an online version you can play for free with [Catan Universe!](#)



Play Multiplayer Video Games – There's a whole world of multiplayer video games out there that you can play with your friends. We could write whole articles on this, but here are some quick recommendations:

- Fortnite, Minecraft, or Roblox if you are a Gen Z-er or if you want to connect with a Gen Z-er in your life.
- Animal Crossing if you have a Nintendo switch and want to escape to an island paradise.
- Apple Arcade if you have apple devices and want to explore a giant library of games, including some multiplayer ones like Crossy Road Castle.
- MOBAs (multiplayer online battle arena) like League of Legends or Dota 2 if you want to get together with 4 other friends and fight as a team.
- MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role playing games) like World of Warcraft or Final Fantasy XIV if you want to adventure in a huge world for endless hours.



Helpful Technology for Connections

- Facebook Portal devices for super simple video chats – they even have one that can turn your TV into a video chatting device.
- AirPods or gaming headphones if you're having trouble with your mic quality.
- If you're struggling with an old laptop, now might be a good time to upgrade! For the average person, I'd recommend the new MacBook Air (with i5 processor) or the new Dell XPS 9300 (1080p screen).

Productivity

For some people, being stuck at home might actually increase their productivity. But if you're like most of us, you're probably feeling less productive than before and that's OK. It takes time and effort to learn how to optimize yourself to work productively without the social pressures and expectations of being in a traditional work environment. Here are some tips that can help you increase your productivity.



Space - If possible, create a separate office space that is only for work. Ideally, fill it with natural light and plants.



Boundaries - Communicate boundaries to others so you aren't unexpectedly interrupted while you work. Post "do not disturb" or "meeting in progress" signs on your door if need be.



Scheduling – Try setting yourself a schedule in your calendar either the day / week before or at the beginning of your day.



Self-Control Apps – Try using self-control applications like [SelfControl](#) or [HeyFocus](#) on Mac or [StayFocusd](#) (chrome extension). These apps block off certain websites and you can even schedule when they are active. If you find yourself checking your phone instead, try using the Forest app.



To-do Lists – Use a to-do list app to keep yourself accountable. My favorite is [Microsoft To Do](#) and it happens to be free, but other good (paid) options are [Things](#) (Mac-only, one-time fee), [Todoist](#) (subscription), & [TickTick](#) (subscription).



Music – A lot of people enjoy listening to ambient music that doesn't contain distracting vocals – like video game soundtracks or the famous [lo fi hip hop](#) YouTube channel.



Tracking – Each person is different. Track what works and what isn't working for you in terms of productivity and see if you can identify patterns. For example, if you are more productive in the morning, you should complete your harder tasks in the morning. [Toggl](#) is a good app for simple time tracking.

Focusmate

Work Buddy – Find a buddy and keep each other accountable by staying on a quiet video call, kind of like you're in the same room together working. If your buddies are too distracting and you would prefer to buddy up with strangers, you can try [Focusmate](#).

zoom

Virtual Meeting Tips –

- Zoom, Discord, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts / Meet, Skype, WebEx, etc. are all fine video conferencing software. If one doesn't work for you, you can quickly switch to another.
- Use the best microphone as you can.

- If you're having Wi-Fi problems, try moving closer to the router or upgrading your router / modem / internet plan.
- Look good by getting better lighting with lamps or windows and set up a nice background.
- In general, use the mute button when you're not talking.



Working with Kids - If you're struggling to work while dealing with kids who are out of daycare or school, you're not alone! The key tip here is to stick to a routine. Here are some detailed tips on how to keep yourself and your kids sane:

- Create a precise daily schedule for your kids, inspired by one they would follow at school. This keeps them in a healthy, new routine and gives you the capability to adjust their schedule to accommodate your own. [Khan Academy](#) even has some sample schedules for children in different grades.
- Realistically, it's going to be hard to give your child as high quality of an education as he or she would have gotten at school. That said, Khan Academy can be a great resource for learning. Here is a [Parent Quick Start](#) guide for setting it up for both yourself and your child.
- In the schedule, stick with set times for certain key activities - waking up, bedtime, exercise, breaks, learning, meals.
- It can be helpful to create goals, such as completing a class on Khan Academy. Then set up rewards and privileges as positive reinforcement for successfully completing those goals.
- Screen time limits are a useful tool especially in conjunction with the schedule. Be mindful that more screen time than normal might be OK during this period of time. You could even incorporate screen time into a reward system, having kids earn it each day.

That's all! I hope at least one of the tips in this document helps you substantially during this difficult time. Stay safe and healthy!

Cheers,

Eddie Liu