

# Avoiding cabin fever

John Frew

*Editor's note: This article is drawn from John's newsletter he publishes each month for teachers interested in keeping up to date with a range of school-related behaviour management topics. You can access his blog that contains many articles on managing students with severe behaviours at <https://www.frewconsultantsgroup.com.au/blog>*

During this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic we have been forced out of the natural pattern of our normal life. The need to socially isolate is important and we all have to play our part if we are to get back to the things that we love, especially teaching the kids at your school. We are at the relative beginning of the lockdown and during the 'holidays' you may be feeling just a bit inconvenienced, however the experts are telling us this will go on for at least two weeks and may continue for months.

In anticipation of the worst scenario and given that, at this time we are still reasonably resilient, it is time to get prepared so we get out at the other end intact.

If you don't already, you may start to experience restlessness and irritability. Little things become major issues, especially in relationships. Things your spouse or the kids have always done that just annoy you can become appalling. The increase in your stress levels and the probability of considerable conflict are serious concerns for your mental health. Research has shown that having negative emotions increases the likelihood of getting a respiratory illness by 2.9 times. The evidence from China shows a three-times increase in domestic violence. This is not likely to happen but lessons from other times of crisis and the current overseas experience should make us be prepared for the dangers. Don't forget the video of the people fighting over toilet paper!

You may experience some of the common effects of isolation which are:

- Restlessness
- Lethargy
- Sadness or depression
- Trouble concentrating
- Lack of patience
- Food cravings
- Decreased motivation
- Social Isolation
- Difficulty waking
- Frequent napping
- Hopelessness
- Changes in weight
- Inability to cope with stress.

There are some actions we can take to get through this very difficult time. These are:

## 1. Have a routine

Plan your day, what time you get up, meal times, work times and some time for fun. Structure gives us predictability and a sense of safety that makes us calm.

## **2. Don't surf television, social media or the net**

Don't just grab the remote and channel surf – it's a sure way to compound your feeling of isolation and hopelessness. Use your television and social media in a positive and constructive way. For example, plan an event such as watching a movie or a series, tell the other people in your house and invite them to join you. Maybe include an introduction to the movie, e.g. why you chose it, who directed it, what else they have done etc. A little research and some background to your shows will add value to the activity and enhance the viewing experience for yourself and others.

Plan your entertainment (reading, listening, viewing, streaming etc). Investing more in this process gives us more back by adding meaning to the things we do. Sometimes we need more than cotton wool for the brain.

Remember - the television doesn't have to be on. When the show is over, turn the television off, and turn it back on when there is something you know you want to watch.

## **3. Set goals**

Set out to achieve something each day. If you just lie about bingeing on TV shows then the feeling of powerlessness is reinforced. On the other hand, if you can achieve your goal (and it doesn't have to be too challenging) you get a feeling of achievement – you feel worthwhile.

## **4. Create 'zones' in the house**

Some will be working from home so have a designated place for work to be done. It could be the place the whole family uses, including the kids for their schoolwork if appropriate. Have other places for hobbies and socialising. The thing is, when you move from one place to the other, the change of location gives a small sense of being able to 'move about' – something that has been taken from us.

## **5. Exercise**

The least you should do is get outside and if possible, go for a walk while maintaining social distancing. If you have stairs, even walking up and down those for a few minutes will help. If you have a sport or hobby take this time to work on your 'skills'. Make this part of your routine. There are plenty of sites on the internet for appropriate exercises. I found 522,000,000 results in 0.69 seconds when I typed in 'exercise for golfers' – the same numbers are there for most activities!

## **6. Use your brain**

It is easy to become passive consumers and pass the time on mindless pastimes. I am not suggesting that you don't watch TV or participate in some video games but you do need to use your brain. Paradoxically you will become more mentally tired from not using your brain but invigorated when you do. Finish a crossword, read a book, write to friends, organise your photos, start-up a new hobby. There are plenty of things that will keep you occupied.

## **7. Look after your diet**

With so much time on your hands and with the temptation of a quick snack it is easy to overindulge. Increased food consumption is a danger, but with the extra time you have it is an opportunity to think about planning a better diet. Good health is linked to good eating habits and now might be a time to make that change.

Take control of your alcohol consumption. Most of us enjoy a beer, a good wine or the occasional spirit but like food, with the increase in anxiety caused by the current situation and the amount of time you could spend drinking, it is too easy to take refuge in the bottle.

## **8. Maintain your relationships**

Just as loved ones can annoy you they can make you feel special. Part of your daily plan should be to talk with the others in the house, your spouse and your kids. Talk about things you did in the past, holidays, any moments that were special to you (but turn off the TV and put those mobile phones away).

Have a 'Formal Friday' when you get dressed up and have a good meal, a favourite beverage with music in the background – it's your night out for the week.

Don't forget to stay in touch with friends and family while isolated. Make this part of your daily structure and plan to ring at least two people a day. It's not a bad idea to ring someone you have not called for a while. It will give you a chance to catch-up and give them a nice surprise.

## **9. Limit your exposure to news**

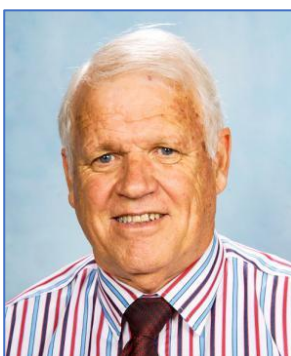
Limit your daily news to two reliable, accurate sources only, access them twice a day and don't Google your day away going down various rabbit holes that will take you nowhere and from which you will not gain personal growth, understanding, satisfaction or inner peace.

For some people this period of time, with its uncertainty and financial hardship, may require special help. Never be afraid to reach out to professionals, your GP or go to any of the online services like Beyond Blue, Mental Health Australia, Mental Health Support Services, Lifeline or the many others available online.

Stay healthy and safe.

## **Contributor details**

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John was the Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours and loves to travel!