

Maintaining Motivation and Managing Expectations

A guide for Young People during the Covid-19 lockdown



A lot of us, adults and younger people alike, are finding it more difficult than usual to motivate ourselves during the pandemic and lockdown. This isn't surprising – we're all having to deal with huge changes to our usual routines, and equally huge levels of uncertainty about the future. There is a certain amount we can do about this, to help motivate ourselves, but we can't do much right now to change the situation we find ourselves in.

So the first thing we'd advise is to keep your expectations realistic! We've all had to make changes to where and how we're learning, and it's important to be kind to ourselves during this difficult time.

Below, we explain how the stress of lockdown might be affecting your brain, and then look at practical ways to help yourself.

Studying, Stress, and Neurochemistry

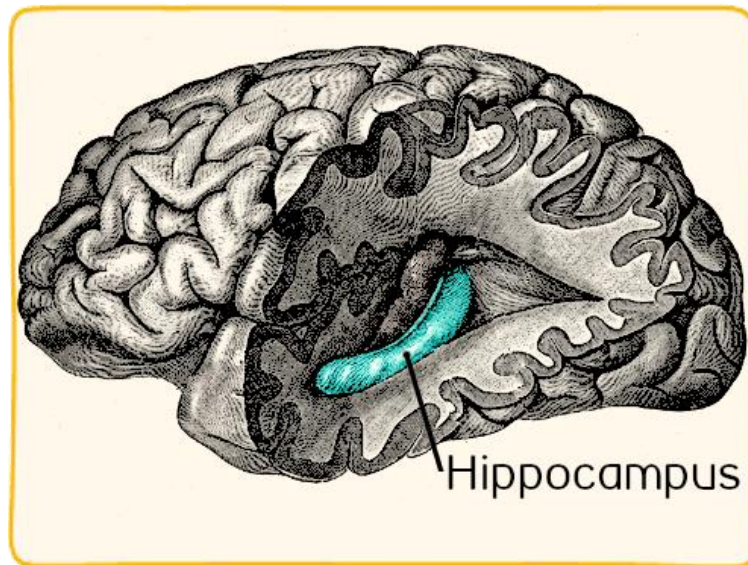
The Coronavirus pandemic is causing everyone stress, both directly, as it impacts our personal lives, and indirectly, as we try to deal with all the social changes that have happened as a result.

Too much stress makes mentally challenging tasks (e.g. studying) more difficult. There are two main reasons for this - one psychological and one neurochemical: The psychological reason is pretty straightforward - it's very difficult to concentrate on the task at hand if you're also worrying about something else. Half your attention might be taken up by writing an essay, for example, and the other half by worrying about whether this lockdown is ever going to end. It's distracting.

The neurochemical reason is more complicated, but worth knowing if you want to do something about it. The part of our brain that stores and organises long-term memories is the hippocampus, right at the centre. Unfortunately, it is very sensitive to the stress hormone **cortisol**.



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Cortisol is released into our bloodstream when we are under physical or psychological stress, and when we're under stress for a long period (e.g., pretty much the whole of 2020 so far), the level of cortisol in our body gradually builds up. One of the effects this has on the hippocampus is to make it less good at its job of storing long-term memories. So when you're under stress your brain is less good at making memories. This is why people often have jumbled or fragmentary memories of traumatic or stressful events, and it's also one of the reasons why many of the students we're working with are finding it so hard to study at home right now.

So how can I stay motivated?

The good news is that you can do two things to manage the level of cortisol and other stress hormones in your system and help keep yourself motivated.

Take Regular Breaks

At school or college you've got the breaks programmed into your timetable already. But at home you've not got that structure, so it's up to you to give yourself a break when you need it. How frequently you take a break is up to you, but you might need one more often than you think! Some people advocate working for twenty-five minutes, then taking five minutes off (look up "Pomodoro Technique" on Wikipedia for more information about this idea). Other people point to research suggesting that we have a natural ninety-minute cycle, so we should take a longer break every hour and a half.

Eat Something!

Apart from stress, the one other thing that can cause cortisol levels to spike is low blood sugar, which happens when you're hungry. You forget to eat, blood sugar goes down, cortisol goes up, and you suddenly find you can't concentrate (and probably have a headache). When you're taking your regular breaks, ask yourself if you're hungry.

...and what should I not be doing?

Sometimes the biggest barrier to motivating yourself is your own thoughts – it's difficult to concentrate on anything when part of you is telling yourself that you're not good enough to do it, that there's no point in doing it anyway, that your time would be better spend elsewhere... Cognitive Behavioural Therapists call these "Unhelpful thinking Styles" and they've identified a lot of the most common ones. Everyone has these unhelpful thoughts occasionally, but if you know what they look like, then you'll be able to spot them in yourself.

If we think of a situation where someone is sitting down to read a difficult book for school, maybe something they've been avoiding, then unhelpful thoughts might include:

I have to read this whole book or there's no point starting

This is an example of **All-or-Nothing Thinking**, or "**Black and White Thinking**". We see a stressful situation as a dilemma between two extreme positions, without recognising that there are usually lots of options in the middle ground. Sure, it might be best if we'd read the whole book, but reading the introduction and one or two key chapters will be a lot better than nothing.

I know I'm going to waste the whole day struggling with this book

This could be an example both of **Catastrophisation**, which means putting the worst possible interpretation on events, and **Jumping to Conclusions** – guessing what's going to happen without much evidence. You don't know for sure you're going to fail, but if you tell yourself you will before you even start, it's not surprising if you find it hard to motivate yourself.

I'm too stupid to understand this book

This is called **Labelling** – making a general statement about yourself (or other people) based on our past experience or expectations. It's unhelpful because you're putting limits on what you can achieve before you even try. It's also another example of **All-or-Nothing Thinking** – a more moderate, reasoned thought might be "I've found books like this difficult in the past, but if I give it some time and effort I should understand some of it at least".

I should have read this book last week

Watch out for words like "should", "ought to" or "must" in your thinking! They aren't always signs of unhelpful thinking, but they can result in you making unreasonable demands or unhelpful moral judgments of yourself. If you're thinking about something you "should have" done in the past, it's doubly unhelpful, as there's nothing you can do to change it. Try to change "should" thoughts into purely factual ones – rather than "I should have read this last week", think "I didn't read this last week, so I'm going to have a go at it now".



Okay, but what if I'm really stuck? I just can't get started on anything!

Sometimes the barrier to motivating ourselves are so great that we can't even get started. Then, faced with our inability to get anything done, we start feeling anxious, which makes it even harder to get started, and we start to spiral into full-blown panic...

The good news is that this is a common problem and people have invented a range of exercises and techniques for dealing with it. It's very similar to what people call "writers' block" but is also known as "performance anxiety". It can be caused by the sorts of unhelpful thoughts we were looking at on the last page – most common is the fear that what you produce might not be good enough.

This can be a tough one to overcome but it basically comes down to being able to “turn off” the part of you that's criticising and judging your work while you're actually trying to do it – to put all the unhelpful thoughts to one side and to get on with something anyway.

If you're struggling to get started, doing something – anything – is better than just sitting there feeling miserable. If you can't work for a full hour, try fifteen minutes. Try five minutes! Set a timer on your phone. If you can't get started on that essay, write something else. An email to a friend. A journal entry. The first thing that comes into your head.

If you're really stuck, and this approach feels like it might work for you, Mind Youth Service has a whole separate document called “Help I'm Stuck” full of more detailed advice and exercises designed to take you from a state of complete panic all the way through to actual productive work – get in touch and we can email a copy out to you.

Remember, this pandemic will go away. Maybe not tomorrow, but it will end!

Take care of your physical and mental wellbeing, this can be a difficult time if you are feeling anxious, but there are many websites you may find helpful:

- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-you-re-anxious-about-coronavirus/>
- <https://www.themix.org.uk/your-body/using-healthservices/help-im-worried-about-coronavirus-35643.html>



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