Jon Dillow Counseling

Counseling, Coaching, and Seminars

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Establishing a new routine during the Pandemic:

The Importance of Routine

One of the more subtle yet significant challenges we face in this pandemic is the loss of our normal routine. The rhythms of life, how you start your day, your schedule at work, trips to the gym, sporting events with kids… all of these provide a sense of stability and predictability to our lives.

Having these suddenly removed creates a psychological stress that is easy to overlook. Thankfully, this is something we can all address by establishing new routines during this time.

The Components of a Healthy Routine

Your routine needs to fit your current circumstances and personality. It won't look the same as mine but needs to be tailored to you. But though there will be variance there are some important common components that your new routine should include. Here are some of the essentials.

Attention to your physical health: It's easy to neglect exercise, turn to food for comfort, and avoid being outdoors. Prioritizing the following in your new routine can keep you physically healthy *and* more mentally and emotionally sharp.

- **Include exercise in your day.** Studies continue to support the massive benefit of exercise on both physical and mental health. Many studies find regular exercise provides comparable benefits to medications for depression and anxiety.
- **Stay hydrated.** This is simple but easy to neglect. Staying hydrated will increase your energy, keep your mentally sharp, and boost your immune function.
- **Eat "better".** You don't need to be perfect but how could you make a few choices each day to include more healthy options.

Attention to your mental health: There is a connection between our mental and physical health. Promoting one, helps the other. Include some of the following in your new routine to support your mental health.

- **Practice gratefulness**. We face real challenges in this pandemic. Gratefulness doesn't need to ignore or minimize these. Yet in the midst of it all we can make a daily choice to find 3 to 5 things we can be grateful for.
- **Stay connected**. Whether you are home alone or quarantined with family members prioritize connection. Turn off the TV and play a board game, talk about favorite memories from childhood, cook a meal together, make daily video/phone calls to extended friends and family members.
- **Make space for the hard emotions.** Mental health is a lot like breathing. We need to inhale easy emotions *and* make space to exhale more difficult ones. The key is to maintain the correct balance. Setting aside time to journal or talk about your fears/anxieties/concerns is important.
- **Set goals.** We are creatures of purpose. We languish without it. How could you use this time to accomplish things you might not otherwise have time for? Set goals that are healthy and realistic for you. Small daily goals that you can reasonably accomplish can restore a sense of control over your life.
- **Spend time outside.** Social distancing doesn't mean isolation from nature. Several studies demonstrate the mental health benefits of being outdoors. Take a daily walk, spend time on your front porch, or even make sure to keep the shades open so you can see and experience a bit of nature.

Bringing it all together

The loss of your normal routine creates psychological stress. Establishing a new routine is key during this unusual time. Your routine will be unique to your circumstances and personality, and should include components that support your physical and mental health. To get you started with your routine I'll share mine as an example.

First thing in the morning: How we start are day sets us up for success. I start each morning with a very predictable routine.
- Start my coffee brewing - as important as breathing ;)
- While coffee brews drink 16 oz of water and straighten the kitchen
- With coffee in hand grab my journal and write for 5 to 60 minutes. I keep it flexible to meet the needs of the moment.
- List three things I'm grateful for
- Decide on three goals that I could accomplish to make the day feel like a "win"
- Remind myself of the type of person I'll choose to me that day
- Exercise. The amount varies day to day but I make sure to get my body moving first thing in the morning.

Throughout the day: The choices I make in the moring shape the rest of my day but this doesn't mean I can go on autopilot.

- I schedule my days in blocks. This accommodates the goals I've set in the morning but isn't fixed to specific hours to provide some level of flexibility.
- In my schedule, I prioritize breaks in which I'll take a 10 minute walk outside, often inviting one of my children along or calling a friend or family member.
- I write down my accomplishments - big and small. We all have what researchers call a "negativity bias". I need to daily cultivate my ability to see the positive.

Ending my day: I'm an extreme morning person. So the end of *my* day often sees me falling asleep on the couch :) Despite this penchant I work to end my day with connection with my family. Cuddling with my younger kids - where Invariably fall asleep and then being woken by my 14 year old to go watch a show together are hallmarks of my evening.

Your routine will look different than mine but establishing a new rhythm will help you thrive rather than just survive in this unusual time. It doesn't need to be perfect. Be gentle with yourself. Set a routine that works for you. Know that it may take multiple attempts before you find just the right balance.

If you need more help there are resources on my website jondillowcounseling.com I'm also offering 100% free 30 minute counseling sessions to help people during this time. If you'd like to sign up for one of these times simply go to my website, fill out the contact form, and indicate your interest in one of these free sessions.

You can do this. We will all get through this together.