

## **An Open Statement by the Psychological Society of South Africa Psychological Well-Being During Isolation and Quarantine**

The global reach of COVID-19 has led to varying reactions from individuals, companies and governments, with some exercising a cautious approach and others taking harsher steps to manage the spread of the disease. Officially recognized as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) earlier this week, the global impact of COVID-19 will undoubtedly see temporary changes in many parts of our lives as we know it. While medical aspects relating to symptoms, prevalence, incidence, diagnosis, prevention and management have been widely circulating, the psychological toll of this pandemic is only beginning to be unpacked. Concerns related to such issues as panic, hypervigilance, anxiety and trauma surrounding the pandemic are beginning to come to the fore. The WHO have released a set of mental health considerations in response to COVID-19 (WHO, 2020).

The fear surrounding the disease is evident with some people stockpiling supplies such as hand sanitizers, masks, non-perishable foods and toilet paper, the closure of some schools; and companies enforcing international travel bans and encouraging employees to work from home. Social distancing is encouraged by organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but the psychological impact of these measures are only starting to emerge.

Both self-isolation and quarantine present circumstances that can negatively affect psychological well-being, although to different extents. Quarantine refers to the separation and restriction of movement of individuals who may have been exposed to a contagious disease in order to reduce the risk of infecting others and is usually quite strictly enforced, as we have recently seen. Usually the number of individuals in quarantine are relatively low, but we have seen countries such as Italy in quarantine due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This separation and restriction of movement can be an isolating and disempowering experience that can be incredibly challenging. A recent rapid review in the *Lancet* found that negative psychological effects of quarantine include anger, confusion and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Brooks et al., 2020). It is common for quarantined individuals to experience stressors such as stigma, boredom and frustration, inadequate information and supplies, fear and financial loss. Considering the toll that quarantine can take on individuals, officials are encouraged to not extend stays in quarantine longer than necessary, provide quarantined

individuals and their families with adequate information about the reasons for quarantine and quarantine protocols, and ensure that ample supplies are provided.

While quarantine may be necessary for those diagnosed with the disease or individuals with a high risk-profile, the majority of individuals may choose to self-isolate or reduce their social interactions. Large gatherings are discouraged and companies urge employees to work from home and conduct meetings online. Similarly, schools and universities use online learning platforms. While at first, these approaches may seem novel and a minor inconvenience, over time they too can have a negative impact on psychological well-being. However, individuals who self-isolate may have greater agency than those who are quarantined and can play an active role in managing their well-being. As such, they are encouraged to maintain a daily routine, engage in self-care, maintain social interaction with the use of technology, such as video calling and social media, exercise regularly, maintain regular sleep patterns and eat nutritious food.

Technology can play a useful role in limiting feelings of isolation but can also have a negative effect. The constant barrage of information about the disease can lead to feelings of anxiety and hypervigilance. One way to reduce these feelings is to limit exposure to this information by imposing restriction on how often one accesses this information from the media and only engaging with media from reputable sources. It is pertinent to keep abreast of developments but this does not mean constantly seeking information.

**While an emphasis must be placed on containing COVID-19, its impact on psychological well-being should not be ignored. Anyone experiencing declining mental health should contact a professional for assistance. Individuals should note the problems of social panic, the atomisation and individualism that it creates, the subsequent collapse of social cohesion, and the need for thoughtful assessment of the crisis as it unfolds, so that our actions are guided in the direction of the public good and not the individual self-interest.**

Email: info@psyssa.com  
Website: www.psyssa.com  
Address: Oakhurst Business Park  
Northwing, Ground floor  
13 St Andrews Road  
Parktown  
2193  
South Africa  
Tel: +27 11 486 3322  
NPO: 013-083



Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020).

Rapid Review. The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395, 912–920. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)

WHO. (2020). *Mental health considerations during COVID-19 outbreak*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO.

Psychological Well-Being During Isolation and Quarantine