

# CABIN FEVER

*To introverts and homebodies, a couple of weeks' quarantine or a period of isolation sounds like a good time. For others, it's a lonely nightmare with serious ramifications. So how can we keep healthy and live our best lives under lockdown?*

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

**T**he year is off to a rocky start, with the World Health Organization declaring the coronavirus (COVID-19) a global pandemic. Festivals, sporting events, concerts and car races are being cancelled and schools closed as we try to stop the spread.

There are no tumbleweeds rolling down the streets just yet, but more of us are keeping our distance from other people, whether by choice to minimise their chances of contracting the illness, because of work or because we have officially been placed under quarantine or lockdown.

All this adds up to a whole heap of people staying home and being bored out of their brains. Clinical psychologist Renee Mill says there's a reason solitary confinement is used as a punishment in prisons. Brain scans confirm that humans need social interaction to thrive. Being deprived of social interaction in the long-term can cause significant damage.

Mill says isolation has serious ramifications. "When adults interact socially, their brains light up. We have social brains and what goes on in my brain will stimulate yours. If I am happy, it is contagious. You will also feel happier and both our brains will light up in the same regions. Without stimulation from others, the brain gets 'lethargic' and the same neural pathways will activate.

"In other words, if the individual is worried, they will ruminate and there is no break in the circuitry."

In the absence of outside interaction and new things to think about, humans can experience a significant impact on their mental health, says Mill, and those with pre-existing mental health issues are the most vulnerable to the effects.

"Adults in short-term isolation will find their mood will lower, they will feel less energetic, and more bored and frustrated. Long-term isolation can lead to depression, anxiety, withdrawal, fear and paranoia."

## LIFE IN ISOLATION

These hermit heroes are no strangers to the loner lifestyle.

### Reality show shut-in

In 1998, Japanese comedian Nasubi ('Eggplant') was isolated, naked and foodless, in an empty apartment until he won one million yen's (around US\$10,000 at the time) worth of prizes from competitions he found in magazines. Unbeknownst to him, every Sunday for more than a year his exploits were aired on TV with a picture of an eggplant covering his genitals.

### Cash-strapped castaway

After losing his fortune in the 1987 stock market crash and subsequent marriage breakdown, former millionaire David Glasheen moved to Restoration Island off the coast of Australia, his only mate on the island being his dog. His neighbours now include dingoes and crocodiles. He travels to Cairns for his yearly shopping trip.

### Leopard-print loner

London-born Tom Leppard marched to the beat of his own drum, sporting full-body leopard-spot tattoos. The former special forces soldier lived in a small, remote hut on the Isle of Skye for 20 years until 2008. His self-made accommodation had no furniture or electricity and a roof made of plastic sheets. He died in a nursing home in Inverness in 2016.

The impact will vary from person to person, but worsens when people are afraid of infection, don't feel that they are receiving adequate information, have insufficient supplies, or are experiencing some other hardship such as financial loss.

What starts out as a break from everyday responsibilities descends into a source of stress.

To combat the downsides of being cooped up, Mill suggests making a concerted effort to stay in touch with others, for your mental health and theirs. "Minimise the effects by communicating in any way possible – Skype, phone, even live chat. Talk often with the people who are confined in the same space as you. Play games together. Have fun."

## THE INSIDER'S VIEW

Anthony Bianco, a travel blogger, experienced a fortnight under isolation when he contracted hand, foot and mouth disease from his one-year-old daughter a few years back. It's rare for adults to contract the disease, but when they do, the symptoms are more pronounced than in children.

Bianco had blisters over his hands, feet and mouth and was contagious. His wife did the shopping to keep the household ticking along and he was able to work from home, as he felt okay apart from being so itchy he had to plunge his face, hands and feet into ice water to find relief.

Bianco suggests finding plenty of tasks to do to take your mind off being confined, as well as engaging in some more enjoyable pursuits and staying in regular touch with your support network. "You have to keep yourself busy, one way or another," he says. "Try going through some of those tasks that you've been putting off, such as reviewing all of your bills and see if you can get a better deal, or it's a good excuse to binge-watch. Plus I did keep in contact with people – friends and colleagues – on a regular basis."

It's best to divide your time into manageable chunks rather getting overwhelmed by how to fill a large space of time, and reach out to others when you're feeling lonely. "Just remember it's not forever and take each day at a time. Don't let physical isolation lead to social isolation – keep in contact with your support group."

## LONGER-TERM LOCKDOWN

Similarly to Bianco, Sarah Ward has been experiencing an extended period of isolation due to the coronavirus. The Australian marine archaeologist is living in Dalian, China, for work. Ward has been cooped up in her apartment since 15 January this year, initially by government request. On 26 January, she was officially placed under in-home quarantine due to a family member flying into Dalian from Wuhan, despite travel bans. Once quarantine ended, the apartment complex went into "closed management", meaning surrounding streets were fenced off and they were issued permits allowing them out once every two days. This has since been relaxed to once a day, but they have not been informed when things will return to normal.

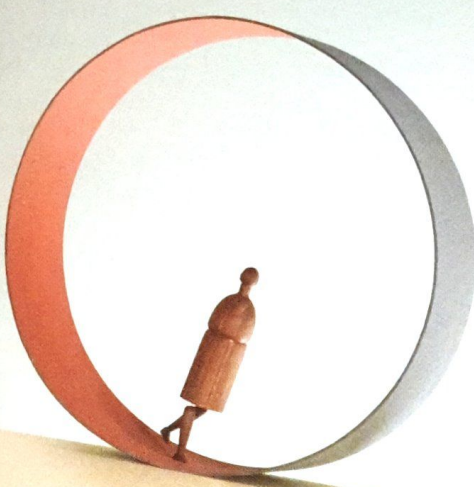
In the months during this period of lockdown, Ward has seen 12 people, excluding police and security staff. As a usually active and positive person, she has found this confined lifestyle challenging.

"I'm a high-energy person and used to being active. In the beginning, it was novel (no pun intended), however now that it is nearing three months, it has become physically and emotionally draining."

There have been benefits, though, including time for Ward to get to know herself better and bond with her partner. She's mindful that in stressful or unusual situations, people can react in ways you'd not necessarily foresee, and we need to be gentle with each other. "On occasion, I've felt like a caged tiger, so I have had to be really patient with myself and my partner. Inevitably, as in all extreme situations, people are going to respond to being shut up in ways you never expected."

Ward has maintained a routine to boost her happiness and mood as best she can under the circumstances, covering various aspects of her wellbeing. "Where possible, I have tried to keep to the same routine as before, so the day has a similar structure. That way, I go to sleep, wake, eat, meditate, exercise, play and work as before. For me, it minimises





## “THERE HAVE BEEN PANDEMICS AND EPIDEMICS BEFORE: IT WILL PASS.”

RENEE MILL

stress and uncertainty. I am exercising online to keep my energy up. Although it is still winter here and temperatures are regularly sub-zero, I air the apartment daily as the fresh air is mood-boosting.

“Most of all, I am trying to keep busy. Watching too much TV can adversely affect my mood, as can too much screen time on other devices. I try to be aware of my own limits and switch from screens to book, to games and back again, where necessary.”

### PREPARING FOR SOLITUDE

Keeping in touch with the outside world and making sure you have plenty of activities available to occupy your mind in various ways is vital for looking after your mental health, says Mill. “Make sure all communication channels are working – internet and phone, speaker and camera.

“Plan for times to chat with others and stimulate your brain in as many ways as possible – read, do puzzles, watch comedy, exercise.”

It's easy to despair and feel like everything is grinding to a halt, but by joining forces we can all get through this. Remember that talking and laughing with others can be like a salve to the soul. Simply voicing your worries and having them listen and understand will make you feel better, as will having a laugh and playing

### BUSTING BOREDOM

**1** Quarantine can be a chance to rediscover offline pastimes like board games and crafting.

**2** Make a home movie getting the whole household involved – at social distancing of course.

**3** Write to a friend far away (or close by) and tell them how much they mean to you. Or send them an unexpected gift.


**4** Engage in those jobs you've been meaning to catch up on – journal your feelings, learn a language, do some stargazing, declutter your wardrobe or organise old photos!

**5** Exercise is a fab stress reliever, so try an online yoga tutorial, fitness or dance video.

**6** For adults, hold a virtual happy hour. Connect with friends on video conferencing or FaceTime and enjoy a ‘quarantini’.

**7** Spending time with a pet is a lovely stress reliever. Your pet will appreciate it, too. Don't have a pet? Cute animal videos are sure to make you laugh. Or take a virtual tour of a zoo.

**8** Camp out. There's nothing stopping you from pitching a tent in your backyard and toasting some marshmallows. If you're in an apartment make an indoor version with sheets.



games. We've already seen examples of these types of interactions across the globe, with folks singing together from balconies and rooftops in Italy, while Chinese citizens have been holding dance parties in isolation centres and participating in online dance parties using social media platform WeChat.

Mill recommends finding out the facts from reputable media sources, maintaining perspective by comparing the number of people who have contracted coronavirus with the overall population, and using the experience of isolation as an opportunity to work on personal growth. Others, particularly children, will follow our lead if we stay strong and focus on the positives.

For people still suffering in solitude, professional services such as Lifeline and Beyond Blue remain open. You can phone them and others to ease your anxiety, which is completely normal in this kind of situation.

Experts say that humans are hardwired to become anxious in the face of uncertainty and forces outside our control, but we can take solace that scientists and medical staff are working hard to contain the virus.

Those who are spiritual can also seek comfort in their faith, as it can be helpful to view current events as the work of a higher power rather than random and senseless. If you're not

religious, finding some other meaning from this madness can make you feel better, whether it's assisting others or using it as a chance to work on improving yourself. You might consider fostering an animal in need while you're spending so much time at home, grocery shopping for an elderly or disabled neighbour, or leaving excess fruit and vegetables from your garden out for others to take free.

“Make this meaningful. Use this time to become more compassionate, helpful, patient, calm and resilient. Every challenge is a time to grow as a human being so we look back afterwards and say ‘Wow, I did that!’” says Mill. “There have been pandemics and epidemics before: it will pass.” Stand strong, believe in yourself and trust in the future.”



### VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

As the number of confirmed cases of the coronavirus rises, the likelihood of needing to go into self-isolation increases. Here are some self-isolation do's and don'ts. [mindfood.com/self-isolation](https://mindfood.com/self-isolation)