

Mental and social health during the corona pandemic

How to avoid cabin fever

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Cabin fever

Have you heard of the phenomenon cabin fever before? In psychology, cabin fever is a well-known phenomenon. Young people who are in the military have felt this on their body, especially soldiers stationed in northern Norway during the winter. The phenomenon is also well known at asylum reception centres.

The word "Cabin fever" is used as a description for the irritability and restlessness experienced by people who are isolated over a longer period of time, without being able to participate in the society. Over time, this can lead to various symptoms, hence the fever association. This is certainly not a new phenomenon. From August 1895 to May 1896, Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen stayed in a small self-built stone and mud hut, in the Russian Arctic. Understandably, they also experienced cabin fever.

Now that the Corona virus is raging in our country, many of us are quarantined and isolated, and many are staying home. Home office is the workplace for a lot of us. Many have also been temporarily laid off from work, which makes the days longer and more demanding. As a psychologist in the occupational health service, I have appointments with people sitting at home, either by video or telephone. I notice that more and more people are beginning to feel the challenges of being isolated, even though they have family around them. This is in many ways signs of what we call cabin fever.

What does it mean to have cabin fever?

First, I would like to say that cabin fever is not a diagnosis, but more of a collection of signs and symptoms that characterize people in isolation over time. Both isolation and time are essential elements in developing cabin fever. The degree, and the length of the isolation are important factors in development of symptoms. And last but not least, how people handle the isolation, what strategies they use and how they spend their time (managing and planning) are important. The term "Time Management", which many people recognize from work, can be of great importance for the experience of time in isolation. But I'll come back to that later.

What are the symptoms of cabin fever?

Many of the symptoms of cabin fever have resemblance to symptoms of depression and feeling down, but also of stress. We can see stress reactions such as anxiety, impatience and irritability. I had a conversation with someone who expressed the following: "I'm about to snap, I MUST get out and do something". People may feel tired without having physically used their body, which may seem a bit strange. It is as if your body goes into some kind of hibernation, where you may feel that you no longer have the energy to do even the smallest tasks. The sofa quickly becomes more than just a furniture and it's hard to get out of it and start moving. Further on, this leads to you becoming less physically active. A biofeedback occurs between your actions and your body - I do less, I cope less, I do less! One should think it was the other way around. You rest and you get more energy, but that is not the case with cabin fever, unfortunately. When you manage

less, but wish you could do a lot, negative thoughts and bad conscience appear quickly. These thoughts amplify the negative feelings you already have, and you can get into a depressive pattern.

Cabin fever can appear differently depending on your situation, your daily tasks and whether you have other people around you. It is not always the case that the cabin fever will be less present even though you have people around you. In the military we have seen that cabin fever also can occur in groups, a kind of joint cabin fever.

How to avoid cabin fever?

A woman, with two teenage boys, was of the opinion that her boys would do extremely well for a long time in isolation and with little physical contact with others. She explained this by pointing out that they normally sit inside by the computer, and as long as they could continue doing so, they had contact with the outside world. This is an example of the fact that physical isolation does not necessarily lead to an experience of isolation. It is precisely the experience of isolation that is the main point! For the two teenagers a quarantine or an isolation did not necessarily cause a big change from everyday life, although they were now obviously less outside, not at school or at McDonalds with friends. This means that the experience of the degree of negative change is also of great importance. Then there is also the experience of time. We know that the experience of time differs from person to person. The experience of time will also be different whether you are doing something or if you are sitting down with nothing to do.

Time flies! This is a saying we all know. The challenge, however, is that when you're having fun, doing something you like or have a lot to do, time flies a bit too fast sometimes. When you get bored or wait for something, time goes by very slowly, and it doesn't fly at all! This can quickly become the situation when you are isolated, quarantined or have to spend long days at home. Then time goes sooo slooow. For those who are temporarily laid off or have less work to do at the home office, time itself can be one of the biggest challenges. If you on top of this also have children at home who are bored, then it might get even worse!

Ok, so how can I handle all this?

Before I make any suggestions, let me summarize some of the factors that cause cabin fever, as mentioned above:

- Less physical activity
- Fewer tasks and less things to do
- A lot of time spent inside, less time spent outside
- Less physical and social contact
- An experience of being isolated
- An experience of a negative change
- An experience of time passing slowly

The first four elements are primarily about actions, while the last three are about perceptions.

By changing some of the actions, I will be able to change some of the perceptions. But not necessarily! It is important to try to change both actions and perceptions! Let me go through the seven points mentioned above and give you some suggestions on how to proceed. Think about applying this daily and make yourself a plan, day by day. Don't worry about next week, or on how long you have to be in this situation. Your worrying thoughts will not change the situation, so why spend time thinking about it?

Less physical activity

Solution: **More physical activity**

As humans we need to move and be physically active. It is not necessarily about physical exercise, like jogging or cycling, but about moving your body. It's amazing what you can do at home. You can work out, for instance by following programs online, you can walk up and down the stairs a couple of times, you can do various exercises in the living room. Your imagination is the limit. If you have the opportunity to go outside, you should do it every day. Take a walk, go for a run, walk around outside the house. If you are at home with children, make sure you all get physical activity every day!

Fewer tasks and less things to do

Solution: **More tasks and more things to do**

If you are working from home, you may have many tasks to do for your company. This will apply to some, but definitely not all, and certainly not to those who are temporarily laid off and/or quarantined.

Make a list of daily chores and do things that you would not normally prioritize. Especially positive things, but also chores you have postponed, such as cleaning the wardrobe, or sew yourself the dress you have dreamed of. If you don't usually cook, try it out now, test your culinary qualities. Maybe you can really bake? Think about something you previously used to enjoy but haven't done in a long time. Maybe you liked drawing and now you can try to painting your first painting? How about wood carving or play the guitar? Go through photos from previous vacations, make an album? Maybe you can post a slideshow on Instagram? In the evenings, you might want to watch a series on the tv that you haven't seen before or watch your favorite series over again?

As a mother or father these days, you may be "the teacher" for your children. This could be demanding and challenging to many. Maybe you can challenge your children to be your "teacher"? You can plan for fun activities at home with the kids, play both boardgames and games online. Maybe you can try something new? Your imagination sets the limit, the most important thing is to decide to do this every day.

A lot of time spent inside, less time spent outside

Solution: **Spend more time outside**

Some people need to stay inside because of different diseases, and some because they have been infected or have symptoms of infection. Then the solution is to stay indoors. Otherwise a little fresh air could do you good. If you live alone, you can take a walk on the terrace or take a walk in the garden, as long as you keep distance from others. If you are quarantined you can go outside, go for a walk and be outside, as long as you keep your distance to others. If you are not quarantined, but still have a lot of indoor time due to the general recommendations, you need to make room for some time outdoors. Take a walk in the park, go for a run, walk the dog, take a walk with the kids, try out paths you haven't walked before or find your inner photographer and take some pictures. Schedule for outdoor time every day.

Less physical and social contact

Solution: **More social contact**

These days our social contact should be as non-physical as possible. Naturally, this is challenging and will quickly lead to a reduction in social contact.

If you have a large social network you can actually increase your social contact with others if you are quarantined or temporarily laid off. Fortunately, we have more opportunities today than what Nansen had in

1895. We can connect with others through phones and social media, use this digital platform for what it's worth!

If you have a job where you are working home office, you should keep contact with your colleagues every day. To have at least one meeting point during the day using video or telephone is recommended. It could be formal meetings or just having everyday conversations.

An experience of being isolated

Solution: Change your way of thinking about isolation

Many people will, during these circumstances where they spend most of their time at home, experience a feeling of being stuck/trapped. This will apply especially to those who are isolated because of a confirmed or suspected corona infection. Thoughts that tell you that you are stuck/trapped, isolated or alone can make you feel both depressed and anxious, which can quickly strengthen the negative thoughts about the situation you are in. If you get a lot of worrying thoughts, you should read the article that I wrote; "How to handle worrying thoughts".

If you are sick and unable to have contact with others, it is important that you remind yourself that this is a temporary situation. By keeping to yourself you are doing something good for both yourself and others. In fact, you are doing an important job for the whole society by not spreading the virus. And that's a good thing! For those of you who are not sick, whether you are quarantined or not, it is important that you tell yourself that you are completely free to do as you please, but that society has taken some steps to keep the virus from spreading. You are not isolated, although it may feel that way. Spending more time inside and having less physical contact with others can be a good thing right now. You are preventing the virus from spreading and in that way you are protecting vulnerable/risk groups.

The fact that you cannot travel to your cabin or go on holiday right now does not mean that you are isolated from the outside world. Most countries have these restrictions right now, but its only temporary. You can still travel the world online and on social media. Actually, in your mind you can travel exactly where you want, and it is amazing how strong the positive mental force can be! Try visiting www.youtube.com and search for "Most beautiful places in the world". You will not feel so isolated if you allow yourself to get carried away on a virtual journey by watching some of these videos. Just try!

An experience of a negative change

Solution: Change your thoughts about change – more positive thinking

All that society has done and continue to do to prevent the spread of the virus is a huge change for everyone, there is no doubt about it. You have probably never experienced a bigger change in the society than the one you are experiencing now. This change can cause major socio-economic consequences and as well as consequences for your personal economy. If you are temporarily laid off, you will know the feeling. Surely these changes cannot be interpreted as anything but negative?

The change you are experiencing now applies to most people in the community, also internationally. This is something we do together to reduce the consequences of a virus that was previously unknown to us. From a positive point of view, this creates more unity, it's something we do together. Right now, you are doing your share, whether you are quarantined or not, this is something you should actually be proud of! You are making a difference just by staying home! Imagine that! How often will you get that opportunity again?

Another positive thought is that all the measures we take to prevent infection are actually value-based health measures. It is to prevent vulnerable, sick and old people from dying. This can't be anything but positive,

right? That we have a society that is concerned about the health of our sick and old citizens? That we have a value-based society that is pro humanity? You are a part of this community. Think positive thoughts about the values that you are actually a part of.

Many people might struggle with the economy in times to come, but there are ways think positively about the power of action shown by the society. While there are certainly different views on the financial measures that are taken these days, you can tell yourself that your community will help you as much as they can to overcome any financial problems. Right now, we are fortunate to have a large oil fund and that the parliament and the government are already finding money to help those who is struggling financially. This is also something to positive about - we help each other through tough (economic) times!

An experience of time running late

Solution: Make the six changes above and you will change your experience of time. Maybe today went by too fast? Or maybe today went by too slow? Then you must plan more of the six changes for tomorrow.

So, what are you waiting for? Plan your tomorrow now