

We explore the valuable lifestyle habits adopted during isolation and why you should keep them going

HEALTHY LOCKDOWN HABITS TO KEEP



Lockdown threw us many challenges, but it also forced us to slow down, examine the way we live our lives, and put greater importance on our health. So, as we begin to move forwards and establish a new normal, how can we avoid falling back into our regular hamster wheel lives, and cling on to the valuable lessons we have learned? 'Human beings have an innate ability to adapt, so many of us developed positive new habits during lockdown', says leading psychotherapist and founder of headucate.me, Mark Newey (markneweymethod.com). 'At the same time, we realised just how fast, stressful and pressurised daily modern life is. For our wellbeing, both physical and mental, it would be so advantageous if we could take those new habits forward and consciously make them a part of our everyday life to prevent the toxicity returning.'

Want to keep the calm going long after the storm? Read on to discover which newfound habits you should hold onto and how you can keep incorporating them into your life once normality kicks back in.

EXERCISE FOR ONE HOUR A DAY

As one of the only means of escaping our homes, exercising outdoors for an hour every day fast became the new norm, while online searches for home workouts and home gym equipment increased by up to 600 per cent worldwide in the first few weeks of lockdown. The result? Recent research by ASICS shows 43 per cent of Brits are exercising more now than they were when the pandemic struck. 'Lockdown made us realise the huge importance of exercise, and it's a habit worth prioritising now restrictions are lifting, not least because it has countless scientifically proven benefits, from controlling your body weight, to reducing the chances of having heart problems and improving your sleep, so you can live longer and with more quality,' says Maximuscle fitness

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RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

Lockdown taught us the importance of trying new things. 'Embracing challenges, mental or physical, gives us an opportunity to grow and improve ourselves', says Abreu. 'I recently learned to ride a bike and, now I've broken this fear, I have the opportunity to ride to work if I want. By getting out of your comfort zone, you can discover new hobbies and potential passions. Taking on challenges is accepting that you will face adversity, but that you'll overcome it and emerge far stronger than you thought.' Whether you want to sign up for a charity mountain climbing event, travel on your own or learn to swim, now's the time to feel the fear and do it anyway.

expert Nadia Abreu (maximuscle.com). 'Experts say it takes an average of 66 days to create a new habit, so if you've been exercising for more than two months, why would you stop now?' she adds.

Ditching public transport for active commuting is one way to fit exercise into your schedule if distractions take over once you're at home. Scheduling workouts into your diary and committing to them as though they were an unmissable GP appointment is another, as is turning workouts into a social occasions with friends. And if one solid hour seems like too much time out of your day, break it up into smaller, manageable chunks to fit it in, like a 20-minute HIIT session before work and a brisk 40-minute walk in your lunch break.

MAINTAIN A ROUTINE

The pandemic threw all our regular routines up into the air – one of the principle causes for our escalating anxiety levels, say experts. 'Routines help us to create an easy, calmer and more comfortable reality. We thrive on order and certainty for safety, and to improve our mood and thinking patterns,' explains Newey. 'But while many of us have intuitively created new routines during lockdown, it might not be so obvious to take them forward with us.' The best routines, he says, are ones that coincide with the slowing down of daily life, including regularly taking five minutes out to breathe and 'just be', allowing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol to flow away so we can rebalance our bodies and minds. If you managed to develop a fail-safe bedtime routine to help you sleep during lockdown, stick with it, making sure you go to bed at the same time each night. And if you're worried a new healthy eating regime will

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falter once you return to work, commit to planning meals, eating at regular times and batch cooking to avoid the temptation of takeaways.

WORK OUT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A report by Sport England in the first six weeks of lockdown showed that 63 per cent of people exercised for mental health. 'Many of us used exercise as a tool to stay sane rather than chase the "dream body", and that's how we should exercise in general,' says Abreu. 'While there's nothing wrong with training for a six pack, the moment you start seeing beyond that is when you no longer become a slave to the word "should", and are more in control of "wanting" to work out. The more you exercise, the more you benefit from the release of endorphins, which help to relieve depression and anxiety.'

A study conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that running for 15 minutes a day or walking for an hour reduces the risk of depression by 26 per cent.

LEARN A NEW SKILL

Many of us used the unexpected spare time during lockdown constructively to learn a new

language, get creative with art or study for a new qualification, which gave us a sense of accomplishment. Don't put your cognitively stimulating hobbies on hold. The brain is like a muscle that can change physically in size, shape and functionality, so the more we stimulate particular neural pathways, the easier we find the task. 'Learning something new causes the brain to build connections between neurons – replacing some of those we lose over time – and produce myelin, which makes the signals in our neurons move faster, helping our brain become more connected and feel like it's working more quickly', says Newey.



This Morning's resident GP Dr Zoe Williams offers her tips for forming new habits...

- 'Try linking a new habit to an existing good one for greater success. For example, if you want to be better hydrated, drink a glass of water after brushing your teeth, which is already an established habit.'
- 'Studies show that if you repeat something 15 to 20 times, it becomes habit and you do it without thinking. The more straightforward and simple the habit, the better.'
- 'Start with tiny changes that are ridiculously easy. Choosing to put on your trainers and activewear in the morning might be the difference between a leisurely stroll and a full-body workout later in the day – or not exercising at all.'

'I trained to be a PT during lockdown!'

As an avid gym goer who works in fitness public relations, I've been meaning to do a PT course for years, but never found the time to commit. So, I used my free time constructively during lockdown to learn a new skill and educate myself in body movement and personal training. I hope this qualification will boost my credibility in the industry, and I would love to put my new skills into practice when studios reopen, as I live for the energy of exercise classes and would love to teach them alongside my full-time job.'

Tori Porter, London

