

# Isolate Like A Pro: 13 Tips for Resilience

Stuck at home? You should be, it saves lives. But we will be in for a long road ahead. So how does one best maintain their sanity when staring down the barrel of 30+ days at home?

**Here are 13 evidence-based tips I have put together to help us all with self-isolation surviving, maybe even thriving.**

Doing all might be near-on impossible. But trying for a couple each week, or at least developing your own routine off the back of my suggestions, gets a distanced high-five from me.

## 1. Structure is Gold.

Those who lead well through a crisis tend not to be particularly talented; but instead are disciplined. How? With structure. The first day or two of isolation may well be novel: Netflix, chocolate cake baking, neato-Gram updates, online drinks, and obstacle courses for the kids. But the novelty will change. You need to think about day 21 and potentially day 51, and the way to do this is by **separating the noise of the crisis from the system you have at home.**

The most important thing you can do (in these first few days especially, for it will be much harder to do on day 10), is set up a structured daily routine. Like the Saint-esque primary school teacher who manages 30 five year olds at a time, structure is your friend and saviour. In these first few days take time to:

- Predict, plan and jot down or post-it all the tasks, activities and priorities you will have over the coming week (include household chores, work activities, childcare and teaching, community involvement, R&R, exercise, screen-time, and friends' catchups, etc.)
- Plan each day (perhaps the night before) with your self, family, flatmates or work team by writing up that day on a poster, whiteboard or fridge magnet. Get your nerd on: A gold standard "plan" should break down each day into 60 minute chunks, ideally putting the chores and 'work/school' stuff earlier in the day; and the rewards, treats and relaxing toward the afternoon or end of the day.
- As each task is completed, tick the item off your checklist (celebrate a little and enjoy a reward).
- If you learned something useful about improving your isolation system, or something needs to shift or change for tomorrow, adjust the next day's check-list.

## 2. Your Timing Counts.

Your daily task list will ideally break up your time into 60—90 minute chunks (maximum). The '90-minute rule' research suggests that most of us can't concentrate effectively longer (and a short break or change of task or activity increases creative thinking, too).

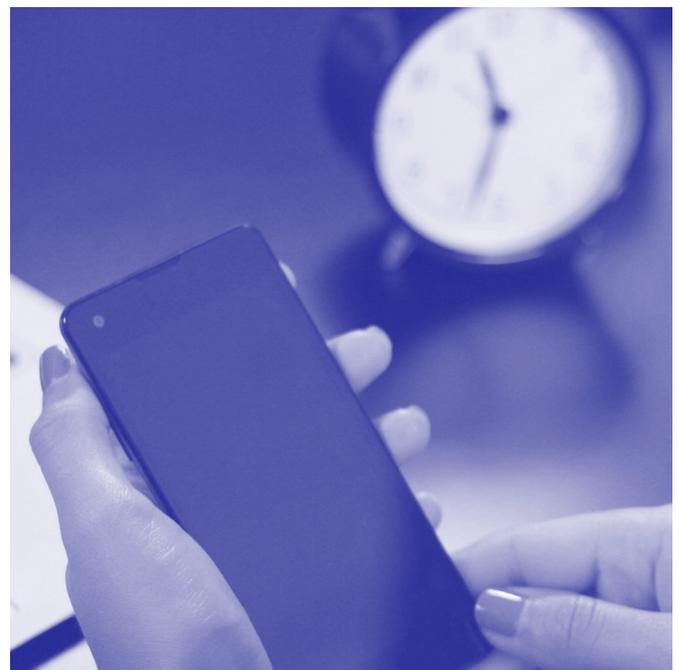
If you're sharing your child-care or parts of the house, have an expectations discussion about what will work best for who, and when. Prepare to shift/change what doesn't click. One of my friends has started running a 90 minute interval day (split at 45 minutes with a water/snack break). When the 90 is up, she swaps the roles of child-care/working from home with her partner. This won't work or be possible for everyone, but try experimenting with what timing works best for you.

Most school's now have their own remote learning plans, breaking down a typical day for you. Other educational resources can be found at: [learningfromhome.govt.nz](https://learningfromhome.govt.nz)

Given the physical, digital working and child-care restrictions now present, consider smaller chunks of time across all activities.

Either you run the day,  
or the day runs you.

JIM ROHN



### 3. Break up the House.

A few days in, the kids or flatmates may have already broken most of your house. But a brain in crisis requires you to attempt to break down your home into dedicated task-specific areas. Pre-crisis your brain will have anchored particular parts of the house to certain habits and behaviours: Couch is for TV and chilling, bed is for sleeping and intimacy, kitchen table is for eating, desk in the corner is for working, backyard is for basketball. Although this won't be possible for all of us, try and keep it this way, or create new improved task-specific location anchors.

What not to do? Avoid the temptation to stay in your PJs and sleep, nap, eat, drink, parent, Netflix, plan, worry and work from your bed! All activities are now to be completed in your home and garden, so attempt to find different parts of the house for each.

This anchoring could include choosing a local park or beach as the place you go on your daily walk to give your body exercise and your brain a rest. Virginia Woolf's notion of A Room of One's Own may well be a stretch for some of us, but at least attempt to keep the sleeping, eating, working and fun as separate as you can. Your brain won't care much for your compartmentalising in days 1–5, but will thank you for it on day 30. **If you do have to work in your bedroom, at least attempt not working in there in the last few hours of the day.**

Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they are never weakness.

BRENE BROWN

### 4. A Beautiful Restriction.

This unprecedented experience (and all the nuanced sweetness and sh\*ttyness associated with it) will be one you will (eventually) tell your grandkids (or anyone else who is required to listen to you) in the future. **So get creative about recording your experience. Find joy where you can. Let go of any guilt for simple indulgence and pleasure.** The best creativity comes from restriction, not endless resources. Like the Japanese art of Haiku, self-isolation will force you to be more creative than normal. Take a few notes each day, journal what you feel. Speak (or sing) to friends about what this is like; what it was like before it happened; and what you're going to do and be once it's all done (as hard as that may be to contemplate right now). Just sit and listen to your local birdlife or try:

- Signing up for that online course; making an iPhone feature film (Self-Witch Project?); dusting off that unused guitar or (most obviously) dressing up as your favourite Superhero and performing an 80s karaoke and dance recital online.
- Journal, draw, moodboard or playdough up your observations, feelings, thoughts or ideas on what's happening for you now or what you want in your future.
- Write a poem, short story or song, bake a new style of cake, build a couch fort, put on a talent show, and dress up differently each day. Your unused ball dress is now totally approps for a Tuesday Skype.

Have no fear of perfection,  
you'll never reach it.

SALVADOR DALI



## 5. Empathy Not Selfishy.

Some of us might be already basking in the prospect of 30 days introversion at home. We may have a happy house, minimal bills, a salary continued, our loving partner baking cakes, and a bunch of books, films and yoga videos. But, I bet most of us are not in this fortuitous position (nor ever will be, much evidence suggests).

Rather, many of us are beginning to wake up to the enormity of what's going on: Managing a new and changing workload from home; being with our partners, parents, flatmates or kids 24/7; as well as dealing with the ever-changing cloudy gloom of a global pandemic and an economic crisis to boot. **Yes, it's unprecedented and may well be frightfully difficult. But we will get through it. Us humans always do.**

And, it's useful to know that one of the greatest aspects of a crisis is that we tend to let go of our own selfish priorities, and focus on the health and wellbeing of the collective. Yay. This is good.

And the science agrees: fMRI brain scanning evidence proves that the part of our brain that lights up when we have sex, drink alcohol and eat great food is the same part that lights up **when we give to others**, especially when we contribute un-asked. Contributing to others feels great (and it may well be because it is a great thing to do).

So, take some time to build your empathy for both your own situation, and the situation of others by looking locally for how others are coping, or not, and, if you're up for some leadership, turning that empathy into pragmatic actions by:

- Considering a donation of time, money, resources or skilled support to essential services. These folks and their families are in for a long and hard few months. See the article by **Alex Brae at The Spinoff** for more donation or volunteering tips. Watch the Italian medical staff online if you're doubtful about the essential services' pressure that may be coming down the pike.
- Offering to drop off groceries, medicines or other supplies to community members in need. Please follow the guidelines on this.
- Reaching out and offering distanced support to those who might need a hand with their business, kids, workload or simply their isolation (friends of course and, if you're enlightened, your enemies too).
- Posting something positive and upbeat online in support of a friend, colleague, essential services' leader who's done something good, as small as it may seem.

Although there will always be a sad percentage of the population keen to critique the efforts of those attempting good, and the powers that be; you don't need to join that force right now, period. **Sometimes the greatest leadership of others is demonstrated by being a good follower or cheerleader of those doing the leading.**

For it is in giving that we receive.

ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

## 6. Big Sleep & Little Sugar.

Maintaining your blood sugar level, and finding a sleep rhythm and routine that suits you should be a priority. Plenty on this but I recommend **Dr Matthew Walker's brilliant book: Why We Sleep** for some solid evidence. But, in simple terms, prioritise good sleep by ensuring that what you do in the last hour of your consciousness is proactive and calming. Like the age-old parenting trick of a toddler's warm bath triggering sleepy-time, find your own method of triggering your system to 'prepare to shutdown'.

First, structure in vegetables, good hydration and some exercise earlier in the day (the online **Joe Wicks** and **Les Mills** fitness/dance classes are viral and there's a reason — they're fun and we feel good afterwards). Our global population may come out of self-isolation fitter than they went in.

Secondly, the key to a good sleep may rest in: **1. Sleep when it suits you** (now that you may have more flexi-time — are you a morning, evening or bit-of-both type person?) and; **2. Calming the last 60–90 minutes of your day:** Minimal caffeine and alcohol, large meals, anxiety-provoking breaking news or blue-light screens. **Use offline and analogue activities that reduce cognitive whirr:** Relaxing music; cuddles and hanging out; a warm shower or bath, meditation or deep breathing/stretching; massage; herbal tea; fictional reading (perhaps refrain from apocalyptic horror); or a reflection with your partner, kids, family or friends (even by low-light text) about what went well during the day for you: **Roster in a daily gratitude reflection/savouring specifics for something that went during your day.** You will reap a golden glow of short-term goodness and build remarkable long term resilience.



## 7. Chores Before Treats.

Would you rather have one marshmallow now, or two in fifteen minutes? Your answer to this question may define how high your wellbeing score is on day 30 of your self-isolation. Let's get real, if you stay at home (the world's most important chore right now), you will deserve a wine; a dozen double chocolate hot cross buns; binging Sopranos, After Life or Fleabag (twice in a row); or that entire box of Cadbury Favourites. However, any high performing self-isolator will have **developed the perseverance to do their 'work n chores' before the treats**. As hard as this is to develop, 'willpower' or 'grit' (the ability to push or through the early and difficult aspects of a task, learning or challenge), is the most important factor in determining long term success in life, as it is in a crisis.

**Please delay your gratification** and your addictions as much and as early as possible. How to do this best? By breaking down your work/chores and childcare or education into chewable chunks, and offering yourself (or your children, flatmates etc.) little rewards for the hard work and task completion (once they're completed)!

As one client of mine (a full-time working solo-mum of two under six), said yesterday from her remote couch-office: *Opening the Chardonnay at afternoon tea may well become an essential service to one's self!* True story.

But in all seriousness, it's not so much in week one of self-isolation that we need to be concerned about our willpower, rather in week four, that **your brain will thank you for your efforts in delaying gratification**.

**Ideally, you should prioritise those chores that will reduce anxiety:** Organising your income and doing a budget; paying some bills; checking healthcare and contact numbers of friends and family; and sorting out practicals involving work, food and house maintenance. Get these completed so you reduce 'busy brain' rumination and have space for being present.

**Note: If you're struggling with too many treats or an addiction:** Attempt to delay the triggers by creating what the academics label an implementation intention (a fancy phrase for managing triggers and their responses): Have a way of saying to yourself "**When [x] happens, I will do [y]**". For example, "**When my kids/partner are driving me completely bananas, and I want to reach for the wine, I will take 15 minutes to sit on the chair on the deck with my book**". Okay, so you may be out on that deck a lot, but that subtle delay and distraction from reaching for the treat immediately, will carry you through the tough stuff long-term.

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

VIKTOR FRANKL

## 8. Get Offline.

Staying informed and in touch with what is required or needed of you by the Government, work and family is critical **but once or twice a day is enough**. The global situation and online reporting can be overwhelming and often melodramatic (let alone fake) about items that one can do absolutely nothing about. We can easily have much to do by focusing locally now. Be sure to take time to get offline - this might include having **internet/phone-off stints** scheduled each day.

One of my clients listens to the National Programme at 8—9am, and then again at 5—6pm; tuning in to downloaded/offline Spotify playlists or meditation/relaxing Apps for other chunks of the day between work and childcare stints. **Your mind and its sanity may well be defined by what you pour into it, so take some time to ensure you're only using the ingredients you really need.**

## 9. Hey Stoic! Ask for Help.

We may all have to weather the storm at some point. But stoic beyond reproach isn't called for. Kiwis can overdo the pride at times, and pride may cometh before the fall (read: hospital and pressure on staff who don't need it). Act intelligently, not stoically, please. If you're struggling, in any way, and in need of medical, physical, mental or emotional support: Ask for help! Please do not hesitate to ask your family or community, friends or workmates, or professionals at the Ministry of Health or your employer for assistance. Of course our professional health and essential services are under the pump, but this isn't a reason for ignoring your own needs. Get them met early, before it's a big problem. Check in directly with your dedicated GP's preferences by phone or email. And a list of other specialist professional medical and mental health providers can be found at the Ministry of Health's websites: [health.govt.nz](https://www.health.govt.nz) or [covid19.govt.nz](https://www.covid19.govt.nz).

The strongest amongst us are those who can reach for others.

SUE JOHNSON

## 10. Good Enough Will Do.

This crisis road may be a little longer than we anticipate and if it's not, well, great. So, if you find you're beginning to lose it on the inside, and the cracks are showing on the outside, simply **lower your expectations of yourself, and others**. It's that simple. Some days you will nail it 100%. Most days may be barely a C, but Cs do get Degrees. There may well be an F for failure. Perhaps many. But what is life, if not one big experiment in the vastness of the Universe? Your parenting, working, weight, finances, eating, sleeping, relationship, fancy career, blah blah is all under actual change or the threat of change right now. **Just. Let. Go** (a friend of mine adds **it's a shit-show**).

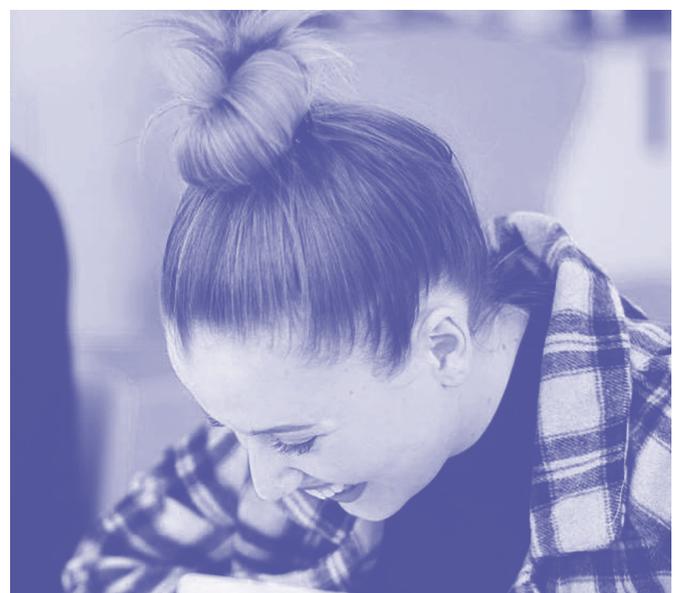
Whether meditation, prayer, singing in the shower, black-humoured memes, sitting quietly and watching the rain, or finding a new position for that Teddy Bear in the window - take time to figure out your own way to loosen the reign on your 'oh so perfect life and leadership in a crisis' mentality. **This is particularly important if you are leading a team:** New tasks and deadlines will come up daily, but the idea of work-life balance no longer exists, so let your staff **'complete when they can, and complain now and then'**.

Crisis has Greek roots in 'f\*cking nightmare'. Just jokes, it has Greek roots in **'decisive'** — so prioritise with your staff only the most important items in these early 'set-up' weeks. If you accept this **'good enough/let go'** idea early-on, it will help you focus on what needs to be completed today (maybe just this morning). And, you may get the bonus of being on your way to some form of spiritual enlightenment — unlikely, now go and feed the flatmates, kids, dog, etc. Leading others, parenting, self-isolating, relationships, working from home, pandemics and recessions: They're all very messy. When there is pressure, we will stumble. Embrace your stumbling. The best art, films and novels are about overcoming adversity for a reason: **Our humanity is at its best when forced to ditch the fluff, prioritise, decide, take action, fail, adjust, and try again.**

Most importantly, hold close to heart and mind a **gentle self-narrative**. What do I mean? Take care to consider and adjust how you speak to yourself: **Turn down the angry, loud or parental volume in your head by using calming, coaching or caring tones and phrases**. Leave your inner critic outside for the next month - they won't be needed. You may be surprised how shaping your inner monologue in turn affects how you speak to others, too. If you're isolating with others, you'll no doubt be already getting feedback on your behaviour. Take it easy on each other! **One who is kind to oneself, tends to be kind to others:** Regularly use the Zen affirmation of 'this too will pass — one hour at a time, [Brian]'

However vast the darkness,  
we must supply our own light.

STANLEY KUBRICK



Let life happen to you. Believe me: life is in the right, always.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

## 11. Allow the Feels.

A crisis does bring (most) of us together. Be one of the most, by reaching out to others for a listen, a rant, a black-humour joke or a Skype, Zoom or Houseparty App gin (or ginger beer). In your reaching out to others, **be sure to share what's really going on for you, and listen in to what's going on for others, too** (reflect what you're seeing or hearing and refrain from judgement).

Although we have much to gain and be grateful for right now, New Zealand has acted quickly, **any major upheaval involves grief and loss**. Many are already experiencing this loss first hand (e.g. losing their job; not being able to attend funerals, births or weddings; and being separated from their families). We will see a deepening level of fear and grief for the change we are experiencing, and the uncertain future ahead. Fear and grief can bring denial such as intellectualising, humour and anger. Although denial can provide relief, these defences can keep us from sadness, and an inner quiet, presence or peace that sits below all feeling. **It is normal to feel conflicted**, like you are bargaining with yourself and others on a range of issues that were not there last week. **Focus on sitting with and accepting the current moment**, even though it may be changing daily, and be sometimes painful. Use presence and 'in the moment' activity to allow and accept your anxiety and emotion. A brief 10-20 minutes' quiet time in the morning/evening may make a big difference over time: Sit quietly outside or use deep breathing or stretching to ground yourself in a way that suits you (permission also granted to lie on the floor and bawl your eyes out). It'll be okay.

You may need to be prepared for some emotions in your family, friends, workmates and leaders that you haven't seen before (anger, grief, guilt, shame and fear - the biggies). There is no perfect way of dealing with these - but some validation and acceptance ("**hey, it's okay to feel like that**"), helping them with their expression of things ("why don't you just say/scream what you really feel/think"), and some lightness and humour will go a long way. **Accept and respect that everyone will have their own way of coping, and they may get it wrong some of the time**. High brow shaming of others' beliefs, mistakes, approaches and techniques isn't necessary right now. Live and let live.

## 12. Meaning in Madness.

Where is all the meaning right now? Who knows, and you may not know until it is all over. Here is a tip though: **How you behave toward yourself and others in this crisis will speak about who you are more than any other experience of your life**. Some psychologists refer to the meaning we gain from crisis and trauma as Post Traumatic Growth - easy to mention this before the trauma occurs, by the way. Find some inspiration and meaning within yourself right now, by **projecting ahead to your Christmas dinner table this December**:

- How do you want to remember yourself as having acted throughout this crisis?
- Who do you most want to keep in touch with, support and reach out to, and how exactly?
- What does 'holding this whole thing gently' or, maintaining some perspective and gratitude look like or involve for you?
- What does 'self care' of you and yours really look like or involve? Think simple things - baths, books, meditation, chocolate, reading, online courses.
- If you have now have extra time with friends and family, albeit distanced, how do you really want to spend it?
- What does the greatest love you can muster really look like, for both yourself and others in your life? Be specific, and then act. **Remember, love is a verb (John Mayer said that)**.

## Lucky 13 - You Do You.

I wrote this list of tips as a reminder for me, first. I hope that some of them are helpful for you, but perhaps some are not your bag. We are more different than we are the same (and thank the Universe for that variety). **Take time to know what you want and need, and how you might get/ask for it from others**. As long as it doesn't hurt others or the system, what matters most is that you take some time to develop a self-care routine and isolating preferences that suit you and those you care about.

**You do you** (and stay home please, it saves lives).

**Be kind. Take care. Unite Against Covid-19.**



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# Isolate Like A Pro: 13 Tips for Resilience

## 1. Structure is Gold.

Take time to break up your day into a chewable chunks routine and do your best to stick to it.

## 2. Your Timing Counts.

Take time to ensure your daily time chunks are only 60-90 minutes and you break regularly for water and /nacks.

## 3. Break Up the House.

Take time to 'anchor' your daily tasks (work, play, food, sleep, exercise) to unique areas of your house.

## 4. A Beautiful Restriction.

Create! Take time to use the limitations to find joy, create, record and share your experiences.

## 5. Empathy not Selfishy.

Take time to actively help others: especially those under pressure or less able.  
Give and you will receive.

## 6. Big Sleep & Little Sugar.

Take time to structure in vegetables, hydration, nature and exercise: Ensure deep sleep by finding your own rhythm and 'winding down' in the final 60 minutes of each day.

## 7. Chores Before Treats.

Take time to complete difficult or boring tasks early in the day and follow with celebration and rewards.

## 8. Get Offline.

Take time to limit your online intake, by scheduling analogue activity and 'phone off' time each day.

## 9. Hey Stoic! Ask for Help.

Take time to be smart and seek needed assistance from friends, family and professionals early. Say what you need!

## 10. Good Enough Will Do.

Take time to learn to let go. Your 'good enough' will do. Release expectations and take it easy on yourself and others.

## 11. Allow the Feels.

Take time to be present, accept the new reality. Help yourself and others to feel, think and adjust to new realities and new feeling.

## 12. Meaning in Madness.

Take time to find meaning in the madness. Project forward and ask yourself who you want to be.

## 13. You Do You.

Take time to know what you want and need right now, and be sure to seek it out or ask for it from others.

In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.

DAVID HOLLIS

The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.

MICHAEL PORTER