

- Mental health

From distress to de-stress

Tech tools are helping Malaysians cope better with the second movement control order though there is also a need to digital detox.

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The second movement control order (MCO), though a welcome move to contain the pandemic, is still tough on Malaysians cooped up at home. However, this time around there are many more apps and online services to help people unwind, exercise and learn new skills while staying safe.



Also, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, when announcing the second lockdown on Jan 11, allowed outdoor activities, including jogging. Avid jogger Yong Ai Wen appreciated the concession for outdoor activities, saying he had to resort to body weight exercises during the first MCO. A corporate communications officer in the higher education industry, he has been working from home since last March and following high-intensity interval training programmes by Freeletics, which provides fitness and nutrition coaching through an app, video streaming and social media. When possible, he still preferred jogging, targeting 21km per week over the course of three to four runs along a roadside trail that looped around his housing area. He uses a smartwatch and made it a point to choose a model that could track his exercises independently of his phone. “When running, I prefer not to take my phone with me, as I want to be as light as possible,” said Yong.

He said longer runs gave him a sense of Zen, letting him zone out from the events of the day. Speaking about the importance of exercise to cope with difficulties during the pandemic, Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) president Datuk Dr Andrew Mohanraj explained that physical activities release endorphins or “happy hormones” which make us feel more upbeat, helping us mitigate stress, anxiety and depression. “Physical and mental health are two sides of the same coin. For an individual to feel well and be productive, it’s important to understand the relationship between them,” he said.

Keep moving

Free lancer Yeoh Ling Mien agreed, saying she looks forward to jogs around the neighbourhood play grounds. As she has a heart condition, Yong was encouraged to stay fit but not to overdo any exercise. To maintain a balance, she uses a smart watch, which tracks her steps, workouts, sleep pattern and heart rate. The information is synced to health apps on her phone, as well as local services such as Bookdoc, which offers rewards, including discounts to users to stay fit, and also connects them to medical professionals.

A self-proclaimed data nerd, Yeoh said she was spurred to get back to exercising after discovering that she only walked an average of 2,000 steps a day last year. The app categorised her as sedentary, as she wasn’t exceeding 4,500 steps daily.

She now targets more than 5,000 steps a day, and is hoping to hit 10,000. “Working from home during MCO and being stuck in the house may make exercising feel like a pain. But try streaming a podcast or turning on the music and walking at home,” she suggested. Psychiatrist Dr Anasuya Jegathevi Jegathesan said while it may be hard to motivate one self to get moving at first, those who stick to a regime will eventually find it becoming second nature to them. “A body at rest tends to stay at rest, and a body in motion tends to stay in motion,” she said, warning that allowing oneself to become lethargic could lead to other kinds of depressive behaviour and further demotivation.

Virtual motivation

To keep himself motivated even though he can no longer run marathons with friends, Yong has turned to virtual runs. Virtual runs challenge participants to cover a certain distance within a time limit. Runners have to track themselves using a wearable or a mobile app and send the results to the organisers to qualify for rewards. This meant runners could complete the challenge by jogging on a treadmill at home or at a park while socially distancing.

Websites like Justrunlah and Jomrun organise a variety of virtual runs, including short jogs, marathons and ultra marathons, which require participants to cover 100km or more over a longer period. Race organisers typically offer a race pack, which includes an e-certificate and apparel, before the event kicks off. Those who complete the race may also be awarded with a medal and other items. Yong said he first heard of virtual runs in 2017, but he wasn't as interested then because he preferred the company of real friends. "Now virtual runs help me stay motivated because if you are unable to set goals, it's hard to be consistent," he said. Since the first lockdown last year, he has completed more than a dozen virtual marathons. "The longest was Death Race 2020, as the goal was to jog a distance of 300km in a month. To complete it, I jogged 5km to 7km on weekdays, and bumped it up to about 20km a day on the weekends by spreading it out over several sessions," he recalled. However, it is a far cry from running an actual marathon, he said, as running for him is a social event with friends that's enhanced by the buzz and tension of the crowd.

But offline or online, Yong is happy he is able to still run as it brings him joy, especially when he is able to beat his personal record.

A time for hobbies

Beyond exercising, Dr Anasuya encouraged people to pick up a new habit or hobby, and explore things that were harder to pursue before the lockdown due to time wasted commuting and being stuck in traffic. "Keeping the brain active is very necessary because the brain too is like a muscle. Just like how you need to keep your body moving, you also need to keep your brain 'moving' by learning new things," she said, suggesting users check out apps that teach new languages or skills. Yeoh, who has been freelancing since resigning from her full-time job at a financial services firm last November for health reasons, said she was unlikely to go back to an office job again. "I just meant to take a six-month break to rejuvenate myself but once the pandemic started I decided not to seek a full-time office job," she said.

Instead, she wants to use the extra time afforded by freelancing to explore art, and complete puzzles such as jig saws and nanoblocks that she purchased years ago but was always too busy for them. "I'm a total art noob so I've also been teaching myself by watching Youtube videos on oil painting and embroidery," she said, adding that she has grown from paint-by-number kits to mixing her own colours. It has been a fun journey, said Yong, as it's also exciting to hunt for the best deals at local online art stores. She has also taken up classes via online learning platform Coursera, as the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation offered free access to about 3,800 courses last April as part of an initiative to up skill unemployed workers.

Beyond technical classes like data analytics and coding, which she found rather dry, Yeoh also shook things up by learning Mandarin, and about health and weight management. Dr Anasuya explained that another benefit of taking up hobbies and classes is the routine they provide for people who no longer have the structure of a formal work environment. "There needs to be time for work, play and exercise, as well as for yourself and friends," she added. When asked about what's the best app for maintaining habits, she said there is no one app for everyone. "For instance, the usefulness of a journalling app would depend on the kind of person you are, not every one would stick to it," she said.

Logging off

Dr Andrew warned that turning to an app for everything isn't necessarily the answer, especially given the increase in time spent online now. "Over connectivity and the perceived need to remain connected to the 'outside world' has never been so clear than during this pandemic," he said.

Data from MMHA members also showed that a significant portion of patients who had switched to working from home are under severe stress, as they had to be reachable at all hours. "Contributing to this anxiety is also the non-demarcation of time for household chores and work related activities which results in mental fatigue," he said.

A study by French researchers Sylvie Droitvolet and Sandrine Gil, titled "Time And Covid-19 Stress In The Lock down Situation: Time Free, Dying Of Boredom And Sadness" found that people experienced a "slowing down of time" during a lockdown. Beyond stress and anxiety, the altered perception of time was also attributed to the increase in boredom and sadness felt during lock down, it stated. Asked if logging off to get away from this stress was realistically an option, Dr Anasuya said though it may be difficult, it is absolutely necessary to find time for your self. "Choose times to log off, not answer your phone or be a slave to social media," she said.

She advised against doom scrolling – a habit where users binged on online news, especially negative ones, by endlessly scrolling through their social media feeds. "Don't go to negative sites just when you're about to go to sleep or the moment you open your eyes. Instead choose things that make you feel good, look at puppies or kittens, or check what your family is up to," she said. Dr Andrew summed up that people have to learn to embrace changes during the pandemic and be ready to be part of the new normal.

"There is also a need to recognise the silver lining in this pandemic. People are reportedly getting closer to each other. "Some have reached out to old friends just to say a simple 'How are you?'. This too can reduce stress and give meaning to your life," he said.