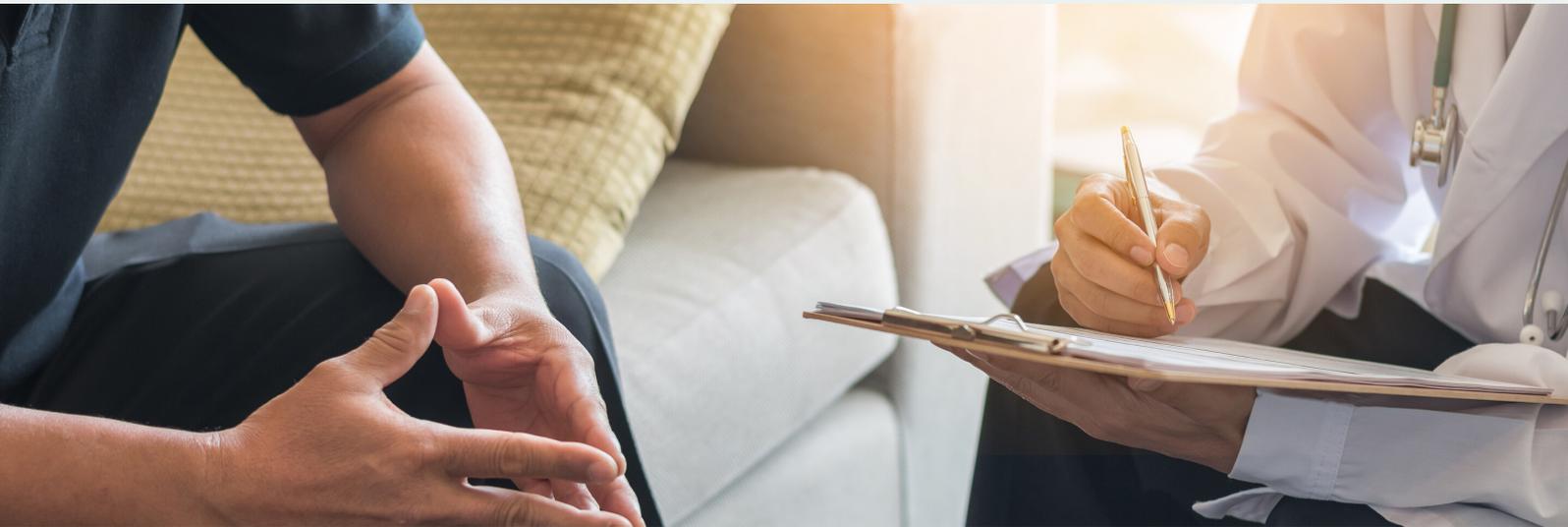


MEANINGFUL MINDS MENTAL HEALTH GUIDE



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Welcome to our Mental Health Guide

Every person wants to live a life filled with meaning and purpose. We want to feel happy and satisfied with our circumstances. Empowered and in control of our futures.

However, many people don't feel this way. Due to life experiences or unforeseen circumstances, we may end up feeling hopeless or directionless.

Life may feel overwhelming, and you may at times feel confused as to how to improve your situation. This is where psychologists come in. We act as guides to help people improve their mental health and resilience.



Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.

Positive mental health allows people to realize their full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively and make meaningful contributions in their systems.

As a psychological team, we created this guide as a starting point to help people increase their self awareness and develop coping skills in difficult times.

We hope you find this guide useful. If you have any questions or require further assistance please visit our website, www.meaningfulminds.co.za or contact us on 081 759 4849 or email us at info@meaningfulminds.co.za.

EMOTIONS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

We are born with emotions. There are 8 main categories of emotion- anger, sadness, joy, surprise, fear, disgust, guilt/shame and interest. Other emotions are learnt or are a combination of our basic emotions.

Emotions are messages from our bodies, they are neither good nor bad. They are sending signals to notify us that something is off balance, or that something needs to change. If we do not listen, the emotions will become louder or start coming through in other ways like physical symptoms. Emotions should never be ignored.

Emotions on their own come and go, they are like waves of the sea. However, emotions can get stuck and keep restarting in a never ending cycle that causes a change of mood. Emotions do not act on their own, they are always associated with thoughts and behaviours. A lot of the time, the thoughts associated with the emotions are irrational and actually help fuel the emotions into a stuck cycle. This is important to keep in mind, as it means that if we want to change an emotion, we need to change the thought that is driving the emotion.

Emotions are not facts, they are only signals. We can learn how to understand their meaning through awareness.

By taking the time to pause and reflect on your emotion, and the thought and behaviour attached to it, you are creating understanding and transforming the emotion into something you can use for growth.

Below is an example of how our emotions connect to behaviours and thoughts.

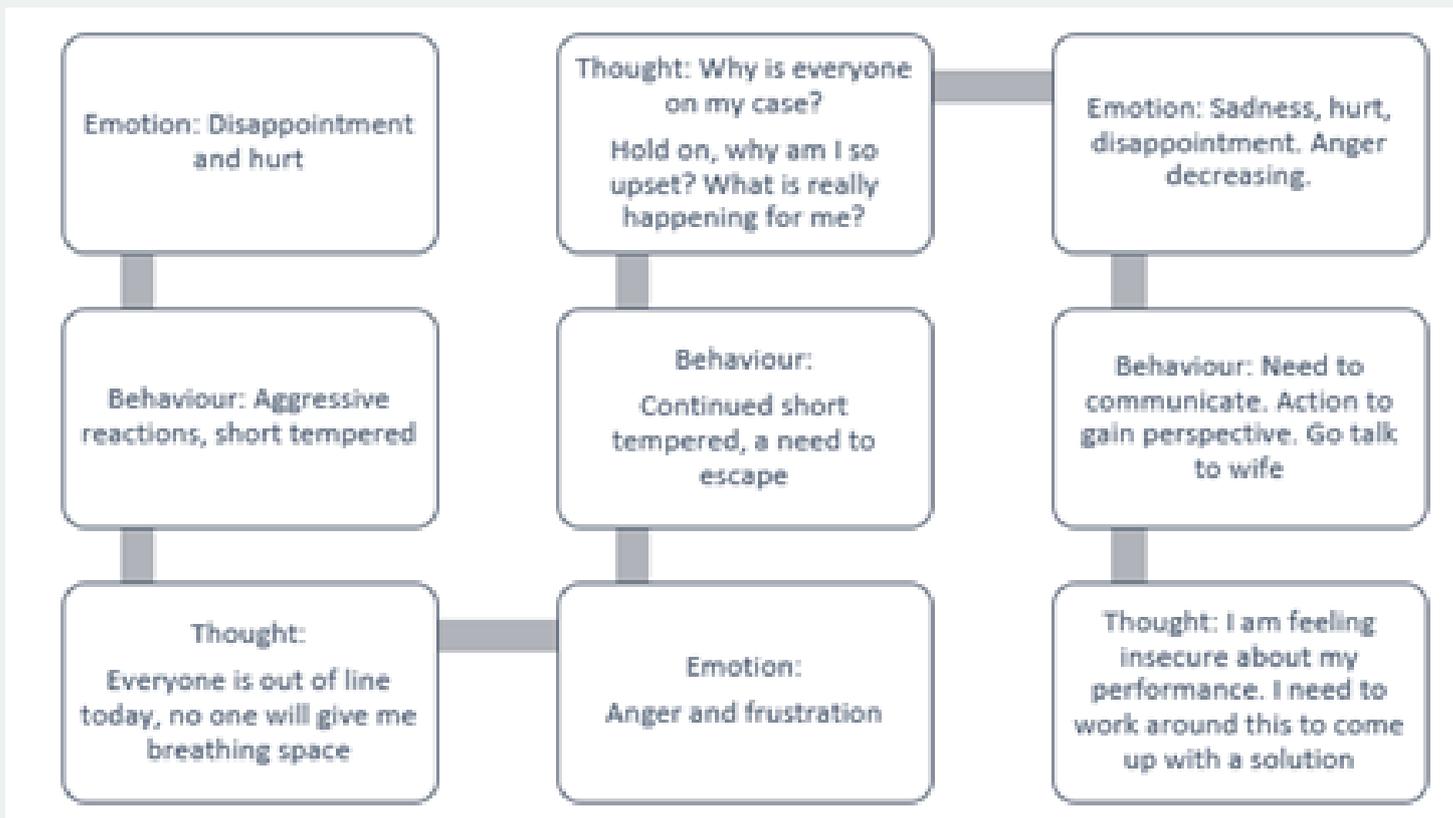
Take a moment and consider an emotion you have felt recently. Write down the emotion.

Now reflect on what thought was going through your mind at the time of the emotion.

Think back to the situation, and what might have triggered the emotion.

Now write down your response to the emotion and thought.

This can be difficult to do. Keep practicing this skill by trying be aware of your emotion and thought within the moment.



Emotions play a role in who we are and are vital to live a balanced life. Even if emotions feel very overwhelming, we can focus our attention on our thoughts, understanding and coping skills. When dealing with an emotion we should:

1. Pause, observe and identify the emotion
2. Describe the emotion without judgement
3. Accept the emotion and attempt to understand its purpose
4. Express the emotion effectively
5. Communicate the emotion to self and/or other

This is a very brief overview of emotions and how to handle them. If you would like to know more consider joining our self help program which provides a wealth of information on emotion and how to master the skill of emotional regulation.

BUILDING RESILENCY

The pandemic and lockdown period have created much anxiety and panic in many of us. There are multiple worries, losses, changes and uncertainties about illness, the economy, finances, childcare and loneliness to name a few.

These thoughts and feelings can take on a life of their own. They can become overwhelming and can lead to aggravated experiences of anxiety and depression.

It can be easy to get stuck focusing in on the problems and ambiguities all around us. It is important to validate, label and acknowledge these difficult and painful emotions and experiences. However, with a shift in attention, this crisis can also be used as a space of opportunity to build resilience, recovery and coping.

Solution Focused Therapy (SFT) is an approach to psychotherapy that focuses on ways to use our existing strengths and resources to take back control in a trauma situation. If we are able to make meaning out of the difficult experiences we encounter, then we can ultimately help ourselves to create 'post-traumatic growth' or success, instead of trauma. This approach highlights that we all already have inherent capabilities that help us to cope in stressful situations.



When we are bogged down with negative thoughts however, it can become difficult to remember to use these strengths. In Solution Focused Therapy, instead of focusing on a problem-filled past, the psychologist can help guide you to consider the possibilities of building a more hopeful future.

Here are a few solution-focused questions to ask yourself to help you think more broadly about the current stressors and manage your anxieties in more helpful ways.

Allow yourself a few minutes to reflect on each question. Perhaps write down a few notes so that you can refer back to them when you may be having a day filled with more worries.

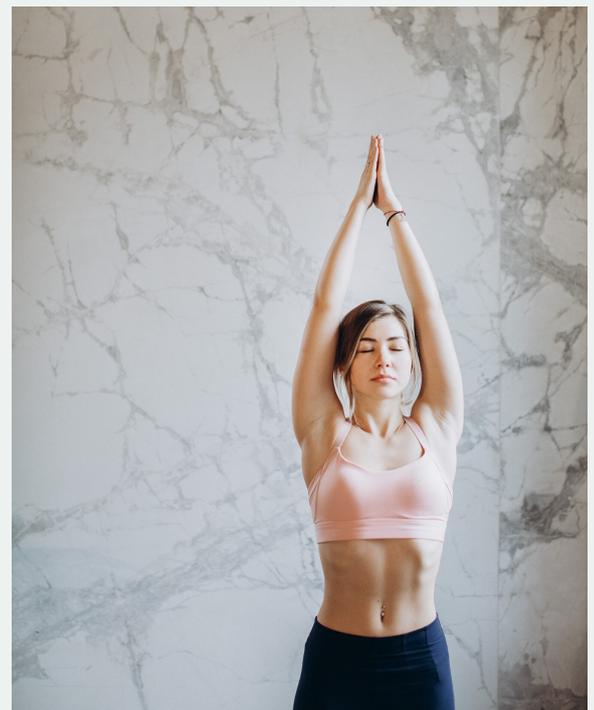
- What small things have you been trying to do each day that have helped you or a family member to adjust to the lockdown?
- We have all been through struggles in our past – how were you able to cope with these difficulties before?
- During this time of crisis, what personal qualities or strengths have you become aware of that you had forgotten about?
- What behaviours are you hoping your children, partner or friends will notice about the way you have coped with this situation?
- Which three things are you grateful for during this time of crisis?
- Which small things that you are doing now that are making it easier to cope, will you want to continue doing post lock-down?
- What parts of yourself are you most proud of at this time? If you need a little more support in finding out what your strengths are that you can draw and build on, try this helpful link: <https://www.viacharacter.org/>.
- What signs are there that you are already coping? Describe these in detail.
- What would you need to do differently to feel that you are coping a little bit more?
- Looking back at the past few weeks of lockdown, what were you able to accomplish that you never imagined you would be able to do?



You may have found some of these questions quite difficult to answer. Shifting one's attention and way of thinking from describing a problem to building a solution is certainly not simple. It is hoped that some of these questions can prompt just a small change in your perspective, to start the journey to building up resiliency.

Reference:

Creative Solution Building: Solution focused brief therapy across southern Africa. Editor: Dr Jacqui von Cziffra-Bergst



MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the ability to consciously pay attention to yourself, others and the world around you in the present moment with intention but without judgement. These are important terms:

Present - the here and now (not yesterday or tomorrow)

With intention- purpose and awareness

Without judgement- neither good nor bad

WHY BE MINDFUL?

Mindfulness teaches us how to be aware of our actions, and thus in control of them. Neuroscientists have found that nearly 95% of our actions are unconscious. This means we are unaware of why we are doing something. This can leave us feeling helpless and stuck. By practicing mindfulness, you can learn how to consciously take a pause and choose the way you would like to react.

Teaching yourself how to calm down and be more receptive is the first step to not being reactive but in control.

Whether by learning to meditate or merely tuning in to ourselves at various times throughout the day, we are enhancing our ability to act consciously.

When learning mindfulness we need to begin with 3 main qualities:

1. Paying attention to things around us on purpose. This means choosing where our attention goes instead of allowing it to wander.
2. Paying attention in the present moment. This means not focusing on past or future but in the moment where we find ourselves.
3. Being non-judgemental. Accepting things as they are and allowing things to be. This does not mean condoning it or needing to be happy about it. But realizing that some things we cannot change and fighting against it hurts us more in the long run. This also means having compassion and kindness.

Acceptance does not mean becoming passive. Mindfulness training teaches you how to look at the world in a way that you can accept it and thus choose how to react to it.

To start off on your mindfulness journey try these 7 exercises

Use your senses. Pause frequently throughout the day and be aware of everything you can hear, see, smell, touch and taste. Be present.

Mindfully eat. Eat without distractions, focusing on how the food tastes, smells and feels. Chew slowly.

Take a walk. Focus on each step, how your muscles move, how you breathe and how your body works. Take note of the environment and the colour around you.

Have a conversation in the present. Focus on what is happening in the here and now. Listen to understand and not to respond.

Download a meditation clip and take time to sit and clear your thoughts.

Choose one thing you love to do and practice being present while doing it. Don't allow thoughts of past or future to interfere.

USING MINDFULNESS TO HELP WITH ANXIETY

Grounding techniques are mindfulness skills that focus on the present moment through our bodies. When we are anxious, our focus is on the future - uncertainties, unknowns, numerous possibilities. This can make us feel out of control. Hearts racing, thoughts spiralling, feeling faint - to name a few.

When using grounding techniques we bring awareness to our bodies and our senses which connect us to our environments. At the same time we are also connecting to our bodies - allowing us to take control of our breathing, our racing hearts and spiralling thoughts.

You can use grounding techniques when you are feeling overwhelmed or are dealing with difficult situations. Some of these techniques might sound strange, but give them a try before making a decision!

1. FOCUS ON AN OBJECT

If you are feeling overwhelmed, find one object near you to focus on. This might be a clock on the wall, or a carpet on the floor. Focus on the object, examine the object, look at the details, feel the object, use all 5 of your senses to understand the object.

2. FOLLOW YOUR BREATH

Close your eyes and as you inhale, trace the air as it enters your nose and goes into your lungs. On the exhale, follow the air leaving your lungs and exiting your nose or mouth.

This grounding technique gets more effective with practice. The key is to observe the breath instead of forcing it with your mind. Let your body lead and your mind will follow.

3. TAKE A COLD SHOWER

Cold exposure has shown to increase immunity and elevate your mood (by triggering dopamine). If you're not used to cold showers, at the end of your hot shower, make the water cool for 30 seconds.

During the next three weeks, make the water slightly cooler and stay under it for longer. By the end of the three weeks, your body will get used to the cold temperature. However, do not use this if you have high blood pressure.

4. FEEL THE GROUND

Take off your shoes and go outside. Feel the ground under your feet, the different temperatures and textures. Close your eyes and focus on the feelings going through your body. By shutting off one sense, you intensify the other senses.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF



To cope with the general stressors of life there are things that are in your control that can help you to feel stronger and more confident.

By taking care of your physical and psychological needs you are 'filling your cup' and, strengthening your resources.

SLEEP WELL

Sleep plays a vital role in mental health and motivation. Too much or too little sleep can lead to feeling unmotivated, depressed, anxious or stressed. On average each person should get between 7-9 hours of sleep a night. Here are some tips to improve your sleeping habits:

- *Your bed is only for sleeping. Refrain from working, eating or watching tv in bed
- *Switch your phone off. No screen time 30 minutes before bed
- *Consider your intake - caffeine, nicotine and sugar all affect peaceful sleep
- *Relax before bed
- *Create a sleep routine
- *Meditate
- *Exercise - but at least 3 hours before bed

EAT WELL

Certain foods actually trigger feelings of anxiety and depression. Alcohol is a depressant which impacts our feelings of sadness, whereas caffeine can create feelings of anxiety. Fast foods, foods that are high in salt, and foods that are high in sugar affect our hormones, which can make you feel exhausted, tired, irritable, and anxious.

To feel healthy make sure you include fruit and vegetables in your diet. Eating regularly and keep hydrated - this will keep your body functioning well.

EXERCISE

Keep your body moving! Regular exercise positively impacts depression, anxiety, ADHD, stress and sleep problems. Attempt to exercise for 30 minutes 5 times a week. However, even two 15 minute or three 10 minute sessions can also work. Moderate exercise means that you breathe a little heavier than normal, but you are not out of breath. Your body will also feel a little warmer but you are not overheated. Exercise does not mean just going to gym. Any activity that increases your heart rate can work.

CREATE A ROUTINE

Creating a routine helps us to begin and maintain healthy habits. When we set specific milestones in the day it is much easier to organise ourselves around it and make it a part of who we are. It is also easier for others to support us when we have a routine they are aware of. When setting your routine consider things like bed and wake up times, exercise time, relaxing time, family time and reflecting time.

REFLECT

Spending time on self reflection is vital to growth and maintaining mental well being. Reflecting is like gym from the brain. Through reflection we can practice self awareness, consider our goals, take pause and gratitude of our circumstance, spend time problem solving and take heed of things that may be causing concern or limiting our self care.

Reflection can be in the form of meditation, journaling, creating art, creating music or even spending time in the bath. The process of reflection is our ability to clear our minds of distractions and focus on ourselves and think about thoughts, emotions and experiences.

ASK FOR HELP

Humans are social beings. We do best when we are surrounded by a structure of support. Often we isolate ourselves through negative thoughts spirals. Thinking we are not deserving, or that we are a burden can actually cause us to withdraw from others even when they are trying to reach out.

The busyness of life can also be a factor in withdrawal from our relationships. Feeling tired and overwhelmed, we might get stuck in the monotony of work and survival. Taking time to put energy into our relationships is important for our health. Lastly, feelings of betrayal and mistrust may still be lingering from past relational wrongs. This may be a reason for withdrawal or isolation. As hard as it may be, we need to remember that not everyone has bad intentions. Putting ourselves out there to forgive and renew is a positive journey.

At the end of the day we need other people, asking for help, reaching out and sharing with others is a part of being human and is necessary for well-being on all fronts.

CREATE A PLEASANT EVENTS SCHEDULE

Self-care includes doing things we enjoy. This is not selfishness or self indulgence. To build our resources we need to do things just for the fun of it. These can be small things we do every day or big things we plan for every now and again. A combination of both helps to fill life up with enjoyable moments. Pleasant activities can actually help us recover from stress and may help with motivation and feelings of depression.

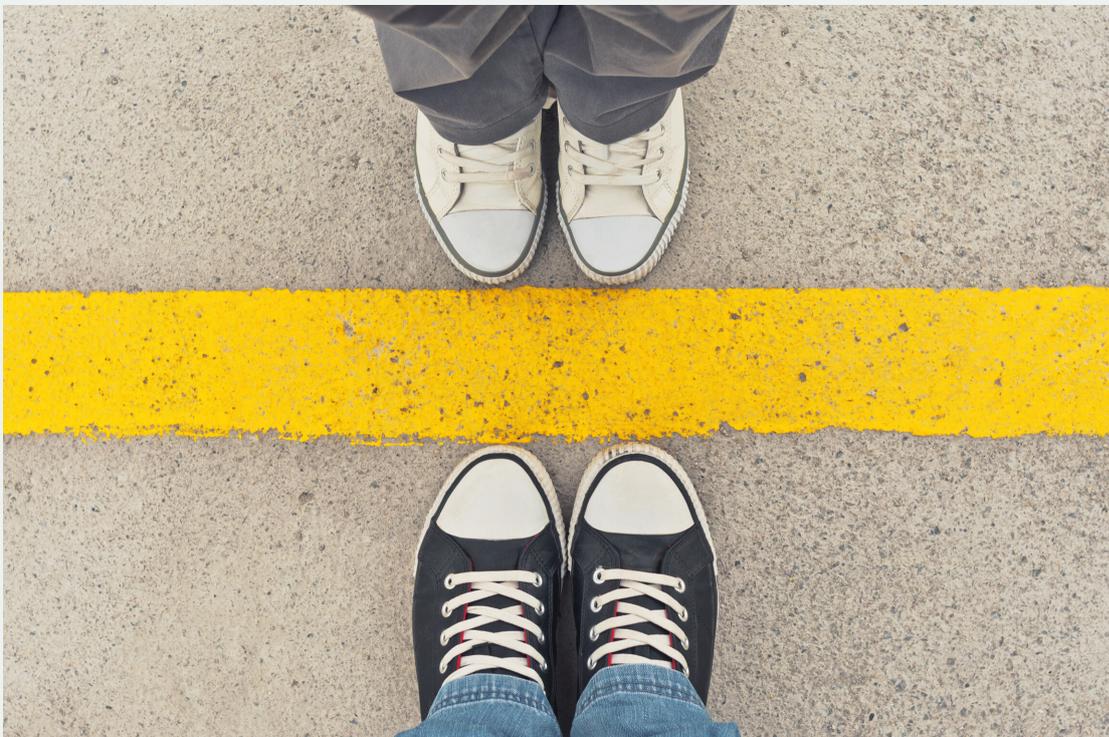
Spend some time thinking about the activities you really enjoy. These may be things you have enjoyed in the past or things you would like to try in the future. Write down a list of activities, and aim to do at least one everyday. Here is an example of activities that might be on your schedule.

- Lying in the sun
- Talking to a friend on the phone
- Listening to music
- Visiting family
- Wearing clothes that make you feel good
- Going for a picnic

In summary, if you are feeling low or drained, take time to ask yourself, " How can I best take care of myself right now?"

- 1.Do something pleasurable
- 2.Do something that gives you a sense of mastery
- 3.Act mindfully





BOUNDARIES

When we speak of boundaries, we are referring to interpersonal limits. Boundaries may refer to physical constraints in relation to other people; they may refer to the censoring of one's words or expression of feelings; and they may relate to the maintenance of social rules of interaction.

A physical boundary violation might be an act of assault, whether of violence, sexual approach, or simply physical inappropriateness. It encompasses all actions which convey a lack of respect for the integrity and autonomy of another person's body.

A verbal boundary may be violated by someone saying something that is disrespectful, narrow minded or unjust.

Then there is social boundary violations, the violation of social roles. These violations may be obvious, but they may also be more subtle, progressive, and difficult to identify until a great deal of unhappiness has been evoked.

Think of the colleague who acts as if he or she is the boss, the friend who tries to show you up in front of your husband by cooking delicious meals for him, the mother-in-law who behaves as if she is married to her son. In all cases, you are likely to feel one-upped by the person who is not observing boundaries. Be careful to watch out for people who need to prove their superiority in some way. Before long they may be stepping on your toes in a hurtful and infuriating way.

Of course culture may play a role in social role violations. This is very much the case when considering the extent of responsibility that is expected from a man's mother. In most modern societies, young people want to leave their parental residences and work together at establishing their new home with parental help available only if they require it. An older woman who tells her daughter-in-law how she should take care of her son and who dives in regularly to do things for her son is likely to be experienced as undermining. In the past and even in certain traditional societies today, a recently married woman might accept this interference as the norm.

Just as boundaries may vary with social norms, they may also be interpreted differently in different family organizations. One might have a certain family in which every everybody knows and engages with everyone else's business and this is considered normal. Another family's members might expect greater privacy and be more likely to keep certain matters to themselves.

At the same time, the family therapy movement has identified that families which sacrifice individual growth for family cohesion engender emotional distress and difficulty. An example of such sacrifice might be the following: in order to belong to a family, everyone must work in the family business; in order to feel that one belongs, one has to act in a certain way in response to a powerful family member – irrespective of one's own opinions, desires or feelings. In other words, there is no boundary between one individual and the next in terms of needs for growth and life hopes and expectations. Boundaries between individual's needs and desires are erased in armies and such families function like armies and make their members susceptible to mental illness.

More universally, there is the matter of what might be considered healthy emotional boundaries. Essentially a healthy boundary is reflected in a person's awareness of which emotions he or she is responsible for and which emotions he or she is not responsible for. Indications of poor emotional boundaries would be: one person blames another for all their mistakes; one person attributes emotions falsely to another person or projects his or her own emotions onto another. Such a lack of consciousness of one's underlying emotions and what one does with them will result in significant interpersonal difficulties.

In this lockdown period where we are forced into proximity with others and held captive in our relationships with them, it is particularly important that personal boundaries of all kinds be acknowledged and respected. Healthy boundaries serve a protective function. On a physical level, they protect the integrity of the body. On a social level, they protect the integrity of a person's sense of worth and identity; and on an emotional level, they protect the integrity of the self.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOUR BOUNDARIES ARE BEING CROSSED?



When someone crosses your physical boundary it is easy to see. However if someone is crossing your emotional boundary it may be harder to identify.

Here are a few signs someone might have crossed your boundaries:

1. You feel uncomfortable with what they do or say
2. You constantly justify their actions
3. You find yourself feeling blamed
4. You feel shame
5. You start doubting yourself and your decisions
6. What you say is seen as insignificant by the other person
7. You are forced to take responsibility for the other person's actions or emotions
8. You feel used
9. You are constantly making sacrifices and feel that it is not enough

HOW TO ASSERT YOUR BOUNDARY

If you feel that someone is crossing your boundary it is up to you to put a stop to it. We cannot hope or wait for someone else to change their behaviour. If we keep accepting being disrespected, it will only continue.

Here are a few techniques to try to assert your boundaries in a relationship.

1. Know what your limit is. Practice self awareness to build confidence in yourself
2. Say 'No'. This is not selfish or harsh, it means establishing a healthy limit.
3. Identify and communicate your limit.
4. Be clear and direct
5. Give yourself permission to stand up for yourself
6. If you are afraid about asserting a boundary get support. Turn to someone you can trust and ask for advice, or even ask them to act as backup.

Complete the sentence:

People may not ...

I feel comfortable with ...

I have the right to ask ...

To protect myself it is ok to ...

CALMING RELATIONSHIPS



We live in a fast-paced world. It is a world in which, if we are one of the privileged few, we are used to travelling to work each day, going out for meals, spending time with friends, enjoying leisurely shopping trips and much more. Those of us who are less-privileged also live within communities which may offer support and social activities. It has always been this way. We are social animals and we search out for the support of others.

Having to stay at home all day, except for a trip to the shops for provisions is extremely hard for most of us. A small percentage of those who live alone may enjoy being isolated during this lockdown. Most people, however, are likely to feel lonely and even abandoned.

Then there is a different set of problems for those of us who share our homes with family members or other people. We may love these others and get on well with them, in which case this ordeal is perhaps made more bearable. However continuous forced proximity may also heighten existing tensions and frustrations. Let us look, therefore, at what can be done to lessen the potential for conflict in such situations.

- Be positive about the respective characters of those you live with. Emphasize your shared values. These may be either positive or negative personality traits. In fact, sharing similar negative traits often leads to greater closeness.
- See the other person the way they want to be seen and communicate this in the way you relate to them. Show that you like them in your actions. Hopefully you really are fond of them. Whatever the case may be, this is not the time to exhibit dislike.
- Try to express positive emotions. Feelings are contagious and if you show positivity, you are likely to make others happy. Similarly, negativity can lead to sadness and even depression.
- Where disagreements or conflicts arise, try to keep calm and not to communicate in the form of an attack. Listen to what the other person is saying and reflect your understanding to them as in the following example:

Marie: I seem to be always washing dishes, can we agree that we will both wash our own dishes or cups immediately after they are used. This will make things easy for me.

John [reflecting back]: I get that you are feeling overwhelmed by having to wash the dishes all the time.

Marie: Yes darling. It would be helpful if we could all just wash our dishes or cups after we use them.

John: No problem, good plan.

- Create 'social' events which you can enjoy together. Take turns in preparing a special meal, have dancing sessions to your favourite music, organise a fun movie night with popcorn and other snacks, play games, have zoom or skype get-togethers with family and friends.



SEEKING HELP

If you or someone you love is struggling with their mental health it is vital that you get help.

Mental well-being is of utmost importance to our health and should not be placed on the back burner.

If you are interested in seeing a psychologist please give us a call. Our professional team at Meaningful Minds Psychologists are here to assist you.

If you have enjoyed reading this guide and would like to learn more join our 8 week self development program. This program goes into detail to teach mindfulness, emotional regulation and increase your self awareness.

If you are in crisis please contact a free counselling center for immediate assistance or go to your closest emergency room.

CONTACT NUMBERS

Meaningful Minds Psychologists : 081 759 4849
or email on info@meaningfulminds.co.za

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group -011 234 4837 or 0800 567 567

LifeLine - 0861 322 322