

Excerpt originally [published](#) in Jessica Abel | by [Jennie Spotila](#)

COPING WITH STAYING AT HOME:

6 Ways to Survive—And Thrive—While Under Quarantine

Stay-at-home orders and social distancing have confined many of us to our homes for weeks. You've gotten through the initial shock of it, and you may have even tried to amuse yourself by trying a new domestic skill or by finally cleaning the attic/garage/pantry/basement/junk drawer/closet. The novelty has definitely worn off by now, though. You miss your family and friends...

...you might even miss running errands.

If you're working from home, then you're sick of living in your office.

If you have lost your job, you have much bigger worries.

(If you are an essential worker, thank you.)

If you have kids, you are now expected to be their teacher and their principal.

If you live alone, you are yearning for company and connection.

This is the new world we live in for the foreseeable future. Until there is a treatment or vaccine for COVID-19, some version of social distancing will be necessary.

No matter who you are and who is on your quaranteam, coping with staying at home is HARD.

I get it. I've been living like this for more than 25 years.



I have myalgic encephalomyelitis and have been largely housebound since 1995. I went from working at a big law firm to being mostly shut-in, and I have been here ever since. It took me a long time to adjust to my limitations and solitude, but I created a good life for myself.

Then in 2015, my husband suffered a stroke after a neck injury, and he became largely housebound as well. He had to adjust to *his* new life, and I had to adjust to having him in my space 24/7.

Stay-at-home and social distancing may feel abnormal and restrictive to you, but in many ways, it is normal for us. We've already been through the struggle of adjusting to a shut-in life.



What we learned may help with coping with staying at home all the time, especially if you share your space with other humans.

I hope what works for us will work for you, but your mileage may vary. These are suggestions, not a prescription.

Also, I think it's important to acknowledge that depression and anxiety are real, and undoubtedly exacerbated by our collective and individual situations. If you are in distress, reach out to your mental

healthcare provider (if you have one). You can also get support from the [Crisis Text Line](#) by texting HOME to 74174 or calling the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 800-273-8255.

So, with that preamble, here is what has been helpful to us in coping with staying at home:

Make a schedule

Having loads of unstructured time doesn't feel good after a day or two. You wake up with great intentions, and then suddenly it's 10:27 pm and you are still in your pjs eating cereal on the couch.

Having loads of unstructured time in which you still need to do your day job, home school the kids, and run your life might be worse. We all depend on external cues to help us decide what to do, but the cues you normally rely on are gone. Routines feel comfortable, and now you need to create a new one.

The key is to give your time a purpose or goal. Decide in advance what activities will be done and when. This doesn't have to be detailed time blocks. Establishing a rhythm to the day or week is just as helpful for getting a handle on and coping with staying at home all the time.

Some examples of what to schedule: work and school hours; chore time; play time; exercise and/or outside time; movie night; self-care time; essential errands. I always practice the cello in the morning. My husband always watches 1950s sci fi movies on Saturdays.

This can feel artificial, especially if you haven't done it before. Yet laying this out in advance has two benefits.

First, it removes the stress of constantly making decisions. *What time is dinner? Dad, can you help me with my spelling?*

Just look at the schedule.

Second, deciding in advance will help you make those choices with intention and balance.

Automate as much as possible

Most of us figure things out on the fly. What's for dinner? Where are my clean socks? Do we have more printer ink? That was fine when you could just run to the store for printer ink or potatoes. Yet winging it can be stressful, especially when you are limited to whatever and whoever is in your house. Something as small as running out of milk can be the thing that breaks you.

Identify the recurring task that creates the most stress for you and think about how you can make that task automatic.

For me, it is food. Deciding what to cook, when, with what supplies on a daily basis was really stressful for me. Now I make a menu for the week, so I know exactly what to do each day. I have the supplies, and basically, I just follow my instructions. I don't need to think about it, and this lowered my stress significantly.

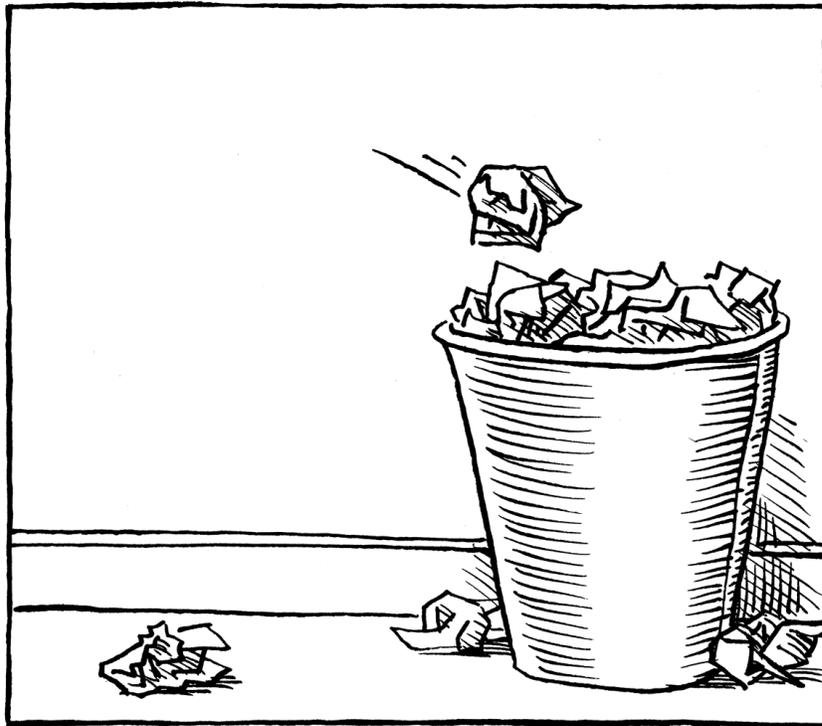
Reallocate tasks

I got sick just two months after meeting my husband, so I've been disabled for our entire marriage. We divided household chores based on our abilities, and that worked fine until he had his stroke.

I was surprised how much more work it was to have him home all day. Having more people in the house means more food prep, more dirty dishes, and more clutter spread around. I fell into a trap of taking on the extra work simply because it was there, without thinking through if the distribution was fair or made sense under the new circumstances.

My husband and I eventually sat down with a master list to figure out how to divide the work, taking into account our unique limitations.

Take a fresh look at what household tasks need to be done, and the resources you have to complete them. Chances are, the stay-at-home orders have changed things to some degree. Maybe there are more people home to help with cleaning tasks, or grocery shopping can be done online.



What division of labor among household members makes sense now? This is a great opportunity to think about teaching kids to take on more responsibility.

Make conscious choices about who is responsible for what chores, and when.

Everyone will be happier if the work is spread as fairly as possible.

Managing space and quiet

As an introvert who was used to solitude all day, having my husband home was a huge change, and a challenge for both of us, in different ways.

My husband is an extrovert. Being stuck at home with only me for company was a big adjustment for him. He needs noise and distraction from TV or music. I need large parts of the day in quiet mode. We had to work out the right balance for both of us through trial and error.

He watches a lot less television now and uses his headphones more often. I close the door to my office or wear headphones when I need introvert time.

If you are an introvert and/or were previously working from home, having your partner/roommates/kids home might be driving you up a wall. Retreat to an office or studio space if you can. If your home can't accommodate that, look for a corner you can claim or a space to take in turns with other family members. Maybe your family can negotiate "quiet hours" without TV, music, etc. to give everyone a break.

The most important thing is to recognize and honor everyone's needs for quiet or noise and work out ways to share the space.

If you are an extrovert, or if you live alone, you are probably craving more human interaction. Video calls with family and friends are essential.

You can also find other ways to connect with people while observing social distancing. I have a friend who takes a nightly walk with her neighbor, staying at least six feet apart. Another friend brings her coffee to my house and we visit through my glass door.

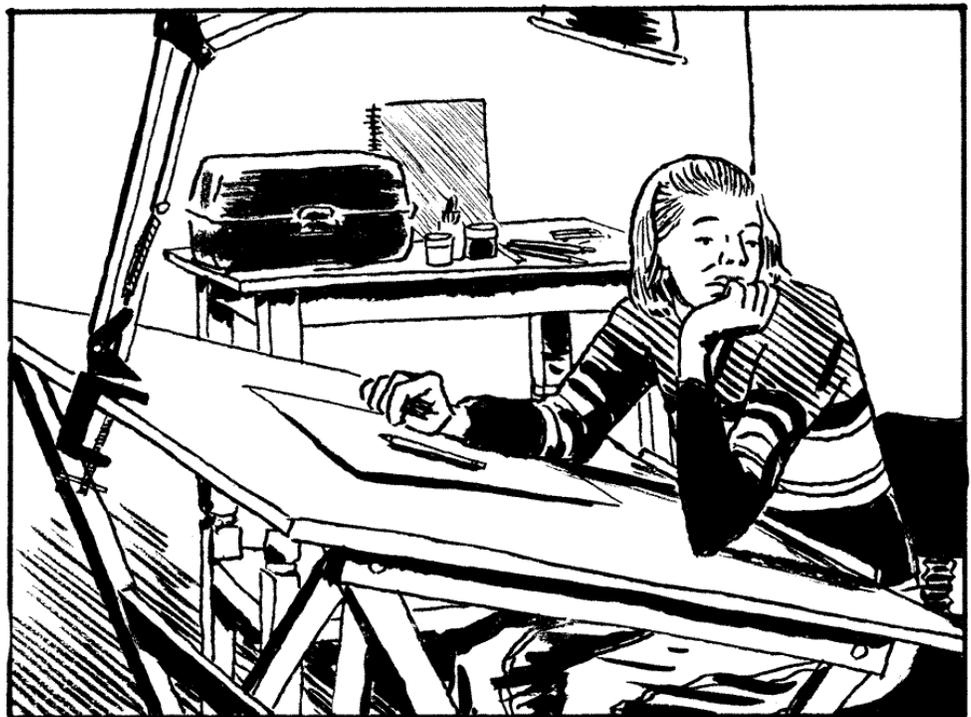
Change something

This may not have happened to you yet, but staring at the same stuff and same four walls for weeks or months can feel maddening. I know every scuff on the walls, every ding in the tile, every flake of paint. It's boring, and it can exacerbate feeling stuck in a rut.

You will be amazed how much difference a small change can make.

Try changing one small thing about your space or how you use it.

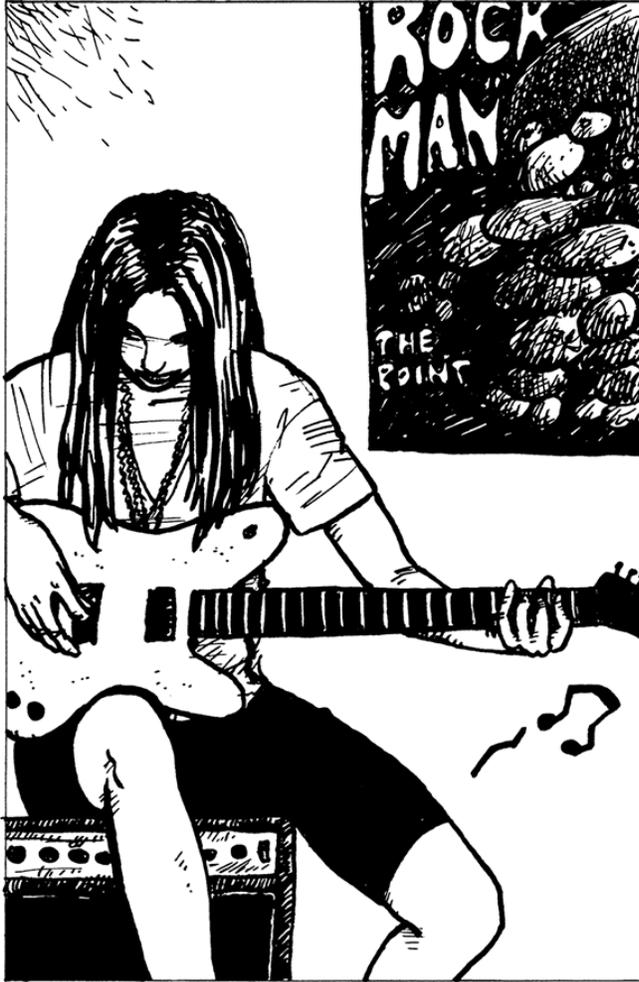
Rearrange photos or books on a shelf. Switch out a few items on display. Drink your coffee out of a different mug. Set up your laptop in a different room for a couple hours. Sit in a different chair to read.



It may sound silly or artificial but try it. Your brain will welcome new stimuli.

Have fun

Whether you are isolating alone or in a shared space, make sure you do something fun every day. Make it a routine time or routine activity. My husband and I have a cup of tea together at 3pm. It's a chance to just check in, see how we're feeling, and catch up.



In the evenings, we listen to a podcast or watch TV together. We select long series or themes for our own TV marathons (which gives us a goal and eliminates the question of what to watch).

And of course, you aren't limited to people in your house. Have a virtual happy hour with co-workers or synchronize movie night with a friend.

Doing something fun every single day is key.

It's something to look forward to, a time to connect with the people you care about, and an important strategy when it comes to coping with staying at home all day.

Experiment

Look at what is working and what isn't, and then try out changes as if they are scientific experiments. We've tried all kinds of things, like when certain chores are done or how we track our schedules.

We experiment with how we structure our days, separately and together. We tried using one room for reading and another for TV, and it worked so well that we've kept it. Everything is on the table to discuss and test.

This collaborative process of refinement, along with the flexibility to change things, has made it possible for us to be happy despite being shut in.

We are all part of a vast social experiment right now. We've been asked to make sacrifices and stay at home with the goal of helping more people survive COVID-19. We're all chafing at the restrictions or wishing things were different, which is why this feels like swimming against a strong current— coping with staying at home, rather than adapting to it. Yet you do have the skills to make it easier to live this way for however long it lasts.

The challenges are puzzles to be solved.

Try different things, keep what works, and discard what doesn't. We're not in control of COVID-19, but we can make the best of where we are.