

How to Thrive During These Times of Covid Limitations and Sheltering in Place.

By Hana Matt

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This Program to Flourish During These Challenging Times is also a wonderful program for those in retirement, to make full use of their time so they can use this window of opportunity to thrive. It is also very helpful for those who have lost their partner.

I would like to point to one of the primary images of transformation. The Butterfly. It has 3 stages:

1. The Worm or caterpillar which can only crawl on leaves.
2. The Cocoon- during this enclosed period, acids are poured out upon the caterpillar, and it becomes broken down, liquified, and then transformed into a new, different beautiful form.
3. The magnificent colorful butterfly, freely flying all around to each flower. Cross-pollinating other flowers with new growth.

Scientists tell us that the real growth happens in the cocoon. This period of Covid restrictions is like a cocoon period. I would like to look at the many things proven in research studies, that you can do during this period so that you can thrive, and

come out wiser, healthier, and happier, and more connected to Spirit, because you did these things during the cocoon phase.

It is so important to manage your mind and thoughts in times of difficulty—this can lead to higher functioning. They can so easily tend toward complaining, or worried, or negative thoughts, which just make the situation worse, and make you feel bad.

Difficult times can diminish us or define us depending on our choice as to where we put our focus and on doing certain activities. This develops us into our fullness of life rather than just limping along barely getting by. Rather than cling to the way things were before Covid times, it is adapting to these new circumstances of sheltering in place, and using them to our benefit, to grow.

During these Covid times, we are alone with our thoughts and fears so much of the time. It is learning how to redirect your mind to solutions and making a plan to carry them out. It is making 3 action steps to do daily, to work toward solutions.

It is also re-focusing on uplifting things, for example, an interest you have, a project, hobby, a new endeavor, or a chance to connect with a friend or distant family member. Do things that light you up. Refocus on what brings you joy, love, contribution, increasing your wisdom, and peace.

Solitude is a wonderful time for self-reflection. Ask yourself; “What is really important to me?” “And are my actions heading me toward that goal?”

Focus on self-care. For example,

1. Mental hygiene. Piloting what is going on inside your mind. Limiting your watching of the news. It is so full of constant doom and gloom reports which cause fear and anxiety in you continually. This stress response → produces cortisol which creates a negative mind and lowers your immunity. Chronic stress shrinks your brain and then it is hard to think, to study, to be happy and be at peace, hard to give a presentation at work or school, or be present for other people, and hard to connect with people.

Chronic fear lowers your immunity, says the medical field of Psycho-Neuro-immunology. You become more susceptible to viruses like Covid. So stand guard over your mind. Protect it from stress, worry, and fear. If you are watching the news

a lot, you are flooding yourself with too much gloom and doom. The rule in the newsroom is “If it bleeds, it leads.” Our nervous system was never intended to take in that much seriously negative news so much of the time from everywhere in the world. We have a limited bandwidth in our conscious mind. If we focus so much on the news, we are not shining a light on **possibility**, on **what we are grateful for**, and thinking about **opportunity**. Ask yourself. “What am I feeding my mind?”

Limit yourself to one hour daily of watching the news, in order to keep informed. Then switch to something more uplifting.

For example, you can watch almost any great wisdom or spiritual teacher give talks on You Tube, for free. You can get the You Tube channel on your TV or computer for free. You can also watch uplifting talks on any subject, like social issues, environmental issues, literature, etc. on You Tube. Just type any great thinker or topic in the search bar on You Tube.

For example, every night I listen to a talk by spiritual teachers, Pema Chodrun, or Tara Brach, or the Dali Lama, or Thich Nhat Han, or so many of the great sages and thinkers of our day.

Another wonderful resource is a free app called **Insight Timer.com**. You just press the button and any time day or night you can listen to a new wonderful talk by great thinkers of our day. Just put it on your I phone or computer and it is so easy to be uplifted and informed.

Since this pandemic started, there are also daily free conferences and summits online on so many different topics, which you can easily access on your smart phone or computer. Just do a Google search. I listen to them daily when I am walking or cleaning the house or cooking.

Also, now because of Covid times, almost every teacher all over the world, is offering classes online which you can take. Just go to the teacher’s Facebook page by typing in the teacher’s name in the search bar on Facebook, and look for their course offerings or groups that they have going on now. So much more learning is available now during these times, for free or very little money. It will probably continue after the Pandemic because it is so convenient and makes learning accessible to the whole world.

2. Learn something new every day. Try new and different experiences and fields.

Exploring new things and having new experiences creates a surge of the joy biochemical **dopamine**. To keep surging dopamine: learn more new things, expand your mind-- This tells your brain that living is an exciting discovery, so you want to live fully to awaken to all there is. Get out of your own small, limited world and thoughts, and cultivate the adventure of learning, even if it is just a little every day. Try to schedule in **15 minutes each day of new learning—that is all it takes to create surges of dopamine which lead to joy.**

Exploring new learning and experiences also creates **Neurogenesis: which means creating new neurons.** We can do this throughout life, even in the very elder years. Hone your mind in on whatever work or interests you have, and add new ones. By focusing intently and often, it will strengthen your existing connections between neurons and create new ones. **What is one area you would like to learn about?**

3. Make a plan for yourself daily—structure your time. This is a schedule of your daily activities in order to thrive during this Covid period.

These activities give you something to look forward to. The schedule points you in the direction of constructive activities which are in alignment with fulfilling your goals. I write it out each evening what my plan is for incorporating all these activities into the following day. Then the next day you are not faced with huge swaths of empty time all day and the tendency to watch TV or let your mind start thinking about how unfulfilling or empty, your life is, or negative ruminations. But if some activities are already planned then, it is uplifting and you put your energy into activities that cause you to flourish.

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4. Bring 30 minutes of Movement and Exercise into each day.

Make a list of 10 friends, acquaintances, and family members. Contact each one and arrange to take a walk separately with each of them once a month each on a certain day, like the first day of each month, the 15th of the month, or the last Friday of each month, etc. This way it is automatically set up to be recurring each month and you won't have to initiate the invitation anew every month. If it is raining or too cold out, you can meet on Zoom and talk about a topic. The friends you have invited will be happy that you reached out because they need and want contact and connection and exercise too, during this long year of isolation. It is a human need and you are helping someone else by initiating the invitation for contact and a walk. You don't realize how lonely, people really are during this unnatural time. And so many people are hesitant to reach out and call someone and invite them for a regular walk. So you are doing them a favor.

After exercise, the body's own "joy biochemicals," and they are all greatly elevated. These are: dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, encephalins, endocannabinoids, and norepinephrine. A 90 minute walk raises your serotonin level by 100%. Dopamine also surges. There have been 1000 scientific research studies proving the benefits of exercise in creating happiness.

5. Get Outside Daily for 15-30 Minutes in the Light, and Have Contact With Nature.

If you can walk outside in nature that gives you even more joy. Studies also show that being outside in nature elevates the joy biochemicals. Also, being outside in the light, brings bright light into your eyes, and it travels to the pineal gland, and alters brain chemistry, creating a more uplifted state of positive well-being, by greatly elevating levels of **serotonin** and **dopamine** which are energizing and happiness inducing.

6. Cultivate and Nurture Relationships. Social Relationships are Key to Joy.

Studies show that having good social relationships is one of the biggest predictors of joy. Human contact is a powerful joy creator and healer. **Don't isolate yourself. The World Health Organization states that, "Social connections are more healing than the most advanced pharmaceuticals. The key to happiness is to slow down**

and connect.” This releases a flood of oxytocin, the bonding hormone, which creates joy. Oxytocin is released during connection: between people, friends, parents and children. Studies show that people who are socially isolated have an excess of stress hormones such as cortisol in their blood, making them feel bad, and predisposing them to depression, and anxiety. Those with strong social ties have lower levels of stress hormones like cortisol, and higher levels of oxytocin, which is associated with good physical and emotional health and the ability to cope well with stress.

Another way to cultivate connection is to arrange a Zoom call regularly with a distant friend or relative, to happen every month, so it is already set up in your calendars.

7. Practicing Acts of Kindness and Compassion.

Research studies show that this gives you a “Helpers High.” This is the term which researchers gave to the fact that a person’s joy-centers in the brain lights up when she does kind things for another person. **Your** joy center lights up **just as much** as the person you give to. This is because since caveman days, we have a wired-in need for connectedness, interdependence, and cooperation. **It releases oxytocin** which creates happiness. During these pandemic times, people have been offering to do shopping for one another. Or call and ask how someone is doing and if they need anything. Everyone is so stressed out, they really appreciate an act of kindness.

8. Find Your Purpose, Meaning, Passion, Aspiration, or Goal. And give yourself at least 15 minutes daily to work on it.

Studies found that: “When you make efforts toward a goal, it releases surges of dopamine. You get joy from dopamine when you do anything to move forward toward your goal. The great dopamine feeling you receive, will entice you into doing what needs to be done. Happiness comes from the engaged process and meaningful activity in pursuing goals, not necessarily achieving them, so enjoy the **process** of it.

Change your problems into aspirations or goals. Problems cause anxiety, stress, and tension. They are debilitating as they deplete your energy. Aspirations or goals on the other hand, are energizing and motivating. A goal creates enthusiasm. When you are working on a project, you become a different person: you are engaged, and energy is aroused.

To find your goal, ask yourself: What do you love to do, what matters to you, makes you interested, drawn, or intrigued? What makes you come alive? Commit to your goals: In studies, happy people have been found to be involved in a project, a passion, or pursuing a goal: This may be building something, or writing music or a book, or educating their children, gardening, or doing something personally significant. For this project or endeavor: you have passion, impetus, and motivation. Pursuing goals adds meaning and structure to your daily life. It helps you master your time, grants responsibilities, opportunities for learning new skills, and for social interactions with others.

For example, I turned my worry about getting Covid into a research project of writing a book on: *How to Increase our Immunity*, so we will resist diseases like this, plus cancer. I loved the discoveries and I turned it into a book which I can share with others.

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9. It is so easy during these pandemic times to drift into negative thoughts and be really worried. Work on Transforming your negative thoughts into more constructive, solution-focused, positive thoughts that work for change. Each positive thought you think-- produces biochemicals which produce your uplifted mood and feeling, and more energy to change your situation.

Negative thoughts release stress biochemicals, such as cortisol, which makes you feel bad. **This also leads to increased inflammation**, which scientists now say is the basis of all disease and depression. Positive or constructive thoughts or solution-focused thoughts-- release the joy biochemicals. **Consciously changing your thoughts alters your brain biochemistry, releasing the joy biochemicals to produce happiness.** Actively dispute and challenge your negative thoughts and pivot them, re-frame and re-craft them. Re-phrase them more constructively, focusing on ways to change the situation or find a solution. Negative thoughts tend to be self-fulfilling. Instead, see the full range of possibilities and pick your

best possible choice. **When you experience a negative situation, find an equally true thought about the situation that makes you feel better, and lean into that. It is the equally-true, but happier thought-- Leaning into that, will lead to joy. This is not the same as wishful thinking, or simply deciding to be happier, or being a Pollyanna. Instead you are shifting your focus from one part of your situation to another truthful part of your situation, that creates a better feeling.**

We create a negative story based on our limited view of “the facts” as we see it. But those facts can change and there is also so much that we are not aware of. We can develop other aspects, skills, and qualities. We are not victims or helpless, unable to shape our life, or our society. Some form of change or improvement is always possible even if only internally. You always have choices, even if only inwardly. The ability to consciously choose and infuse your mind with positive constructive thought is essential to produce joy biochemicals. This is reversing our natural negativity bias, and overriding our primitive alarm system which produces stress. The left pre-frontal cortex area of your brain is where happiness lives in the brain, and it lights up when you think a positive constructive thought. The right pre-frontal cortex is where despair and anxiety live in the brain, and it lights up when you think negative thoughts.

Neuroscience Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Richard Davidson, found in studies that “Thinking new and different thoughts creates new neural pathways. Changing your thoughts produces changes in your brain, and perhaps in your DNA. When you change your thinking to support your happiness, the old negative neural pathways shrink and wither, and the positive neural pathways widen. That makes it easier and more automatic, to think positively, which releases joy biochemicals and creates joy. But it takes awareness, and positive intention to change thoughts.”

10. Avoiding Rumination and Also Comparing Yourself to Others.

They both light up the right prefrontal cortex area of the brain, which shows you are experiencing a depressing or anxious state. They both produce cortisol, making you feel bad, and lead to a downward spiral. When you become aware that you are ruminating, put your hand out with fingers extended and say “Stop.” Then imagine a “red stop sign, right in front of you” and then change your

direction and shift to some other activity. Get up, go into another room, and then do something physical or engaging. Re-direct your attention. Distract yourself. This will also create new neural pathways, and wither the old ones.

11. It is helpful to shift it to Cultivating Appreciation, Gratitude, and Thankfulness.

Each time you notice you are stuck in negative thinking try shifting it to what you appreciate. Make it a daily practice in the morning or evening to spend 15 minutes writing down what you are grateful for in a journal. Or share this over dinner with someone. Or write it down in a text or email and send it to someone.

Hundreds of scientific studies have proven that doing this Gratitude Practice of writing down every day at least 5 things you are grateful for, for 10 weeks: led to the research subjects having:

Far fewer symptoms of physical illness and complaints or discomfort.

They had more vitality and suffered less stress and depression

They rated far more favorably, their life as a whole, reported better well-being-appraisals, and more optimism concerning the upcoming week, and considerably more satisfaction with their lives. They had higher ratings of happiness.

They took better care of themselves-- with a better diet and a lot more exercise. Their sleep quality was better, deeper, and they slept more hours each night, awakening more refreshed in the morning.

They were more likely to help someone with a problem or give emotional support to another. They felt more connected with others, and less isolated. They were more likely to report that they felt loved, because they noticed what others did for them and gave to them.

They had more positive emotions: They had more energy, attentiveness, determination, enthusiasm, strength, excitement, alertness, and calm. And they were more forgiving, hopeful, active, and interested.

They had reductions in negative feelings: They had less irritability, distress, shame-guilt, and fear. They felt less upset or nervous.

They were more likely to make progress toward their important personal goals: academic, career, interpersonal and health-based.

This gratitude also includes **Appreciation of Yourself. Every day write down 3 additional things in your journal which you appreciate about your efforts, what you have done or qualities about yourself. This causes Dopamine and Serotonin to surge and Builds New Dopamine and Serotonin Neural Circuits which then also produce joy again and again in the future:** Self-esteem and self-honoring are crucial in order for the joy biochemicals to be released. Don't waste the potential serotonin and dopamine booster by not applauding yourself, or feeling pride in what effort you put out, or in your qualities. Honor and respect yourself for something you've done, once a day. Look for reasons to acknowledge yourself and pat yourself on the back. It is just a spark, but if you do it every day for 45 days, you will be your own best spark plug. Score at least one small effort toward a goal or a little victory each day, commit to finding it and enjoying it for a few minutes, rather than just moving on. Celebrating small steps, triggers more dopamine than saving it all up for one big achievement. Invite your self-talk to be encouraging rather than criticizing or judgmental.

12. Learn to Savor, and Find An Engaged, Absorbed, Immersed Experience in Your Activities During Your Day:

Studies have shown that the greater a person's skill is at savoring, then the greater the joy the person will have in life. The ability to savor, highly predicts how happy people are. How do you savor?

- 1) **Attend** to the good things that happen to you or are in your environment, then
- 2) **Appreciate** them, and then
- 3) **Enhance** them. Intensify them. Absorb them. Imprint them.

With savoring: your thoughts generate, intensify and prolong positive feelings in response to positive experiences. **Take in the experience, while breathing slowly 5 long deep breaths. This is how long it takes to imprint the positive feeling into your neural network.** And this sets you up for the automatic neural tendency to experience joy again and again in the future. You are then re-wiring yourself for more joy in your life. You can do this practice when you are out for your walk, and you notice something wonderful. Take 5 long breaths and really absorb it.

There is also another wonderful very effective joy practice proven by neuroscientist researchers: When you notice something you really like and are savoring it, after your 5 breaths, pull out your phone and take a picture of it, and then send it to someone. That really imprints it in you, plus enables someone else to receive a joy boost. It lifts them and it lifts you. You can do this on your walk.
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Too often savoring gets lost in the rush or stress of everyday living, or your habituation, taking things for granted, preoccupation, and not taking the time to really enjoy what you are experiencing. Become totally absorbed in what you are doing in the moment.

Studies found that: **The Way to Joy is to Live in the Present, being Mindful of it Completely and Enjoying it.** Notice, pay close attention and take delight in life's momentary pleasures and wonders. The ability to relish the ordinary experiences of your life is one of the most important creators of happiness. Immerse yourself in whatever you are doing. Get lost into it. Become engrossed, as it is happening. Resolve to seize those pleasures when they happen and take full advantage of them. Linger over your food and really taste it. Chew slowly and experience it fully, rather than mindlessly consuming. Concentrate on it, to intensify it. Do one activity a day that truly engages you naturally. The secret to come to this fulfilling experience is **Attention**. You enable the fulfilling experience by piloting or directing what your attention is focusing upon. The way to a happy life is by creating lots of these experiences, because they greatly elevate the joy biochemicals, and light up the left prefrontal cortex, entraining your brain to repeat this. In studies, happy lives were characterized by lots of these completely engaged experiences.

13. Bring More Humor into Your Life and Thoughts:

It is so easy to forget humor during these pandemic times. Yet Laughing Builds New Endorphin Circuits and Stimulates the Release of Endorphins. Find what makes you laugh and make time for it. Cultivate the ability to see the humorous way of looking at situations. Laughing releases fear and stress. Humor is always a "rising-above," a "stepping-beyond," a "not-being-captive of" your momentary condition. Without that humor which requires a bigger perspective, we could fall victim to despair. Try sampling comedy shows, and standup comedy on TV until

you get your daily laugh. One way I bring more humor into my life is by daily watching Trevor Noah on The Comedy Central Channel on TV. Also, on Netflix or Amazon Prime or You Tube you can choose from so many stand-up comedians or excellent films which are comedies. Just type that into the search bar.

14. Daily Music and Singing:

There have been so many recent scientific studies showing the positive, uplifting and healing effects of music. **“Music has been found in studies to release endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers and mood elevators.”** It also surges dopamine, which produces happiness.

Put on the app Apple Music which has almost every song in the world, or your Ipod, Iphone, You Tube, or CD and sing along. Just one tap of the button of Apple Music on your cell phone, and it floods you with your favorite music and uplifts you. I do this when I am home and preparing meals or cleaning up.

A wonderful resource for coping during COVID is singing with an online class or group by Michele Voillequé, a singer and music teacher and a member of this Unitarian Church of Berkeley. Anyone can join the group. It happens every Saturday at 9 am. She says that: **Absolutely Everybody Can Sing**. It is on the internet for 30 minutes as they sing some simple songs that warm your heart, and remind you of how much power you have right now, right in your own body. Kids of all ages are welcome also! Singing at home is beautiful thing – and it’s good for your mental health! This is a great chance to learn some new songs. A link to the lyrics will be sent out about an hour before, so that you can print them out or have them open in another window. Go to. mvmusik.com

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Another resource is the San Francisco Symphony Chorus is offering group singing with you included and instruction online regularly.

15. Creative Expression:

Regularly engage in some kind of creative expression like writing, art, dance, movement, drama, or making something, playing an instrument, or studying,

learning and developing new interpretations or insights. Any form of creative expression will be therapeutic, uplift your state of mind and keep all your 7 joy biochemicals elevated and surging. Do things daily which use your creativity

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It was during the other Great Plague that many writers and artists and scientists created some of their best works.

For example, Shakespeare created his best works of literature during this time: *Macbeth*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, etc. Also, the great scientist, Sir Issac Newton. When they shut down his university due to the pandemic, he had to get away from groups of people and the city, so he went out to live in a cottage in the countryside. He would often sit out in the garden, under the apple tree, and watched the apples fall. He wondered, reasoned, and he created the Theory of Gravity and Motion.

What is some music you have always wanted to listen to, or play, or create? What is that blog, article, or book, you have always wanted to write? What is that business or product you can create? You can use this window of opportunity of the Pandemic times to let your creativity open up and try new things.

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16. Deep Breathing

To counteract all the stress and worry during this time, do this practice of Deep, Elongated, Slow Breathing throughout your day. Breathe in 4 slow counts, and breathe out 4 slow counts, doing abdominal breathing for 10-15 minutes. This re-vitalizes and reduces anxiety and stress, plus releases endorphins and serotonin, thereby causing joy.

By doing deep, abdominal breathing you activate the Vagus nerve and trigger more joy chemicals and the relaxation response, which is necessary for your body to heal, repair, and renew. The increased oxygen supply to your body's cells, produces endorphins and serotonin, the body's feel-good hormones.

Fill your lungs up on each breath so that the lungs press against the inside of your chest cavity which then stimulates the Vagus nerve at the back of your lungs which will tell your body to send happiness biochemicals through your hormonal pathways. This also improves memory, lowers blood pressure and

heart rate, and boosts immunity. Do it for 10-20 minutes upon waking and also before sleep, and during the day, such as waiting at a traffic light, in line at the store, driving, walking. Retrain your usual mode of shallow, rapid breathing—to this new form of deep breathing, which produces happiness.

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Try this practice now: Take a long, slow, deep inhale while slowly counting to 4, pushing your stomach out, filling yourself up with oxygen. Then take a long, slow, deep exhale while counting to 4, pulling your stomach in. Do this 20 times and notice what you experience

17. Spirituality: Connect with Spirit and Soul in whatever way is meaningful for you.

Research studies found that people who engaged in spirituality or meaningful religious practice, had higher levels of brain activity in their left prefrontal cortex--the area of happiness. They were better able to cope with whatever happens to them, and they had more resiliency. It improved blood pressure, strengthened the immune system, reduced the rate of cancer, stroke and heart disease.

Awaken awe, wonder, amazement, for what you encounter in life. The gift of just being alive. Experiencing Spirit in nature, silence, connecting with your deeper soul, inspirational texts, meditation, prayer, or worship. Seeing the spark in each being. Give yourself the gift of engaging in some type of spirituality like reading a spiritual book, being mindful, meditating, praying, etc. each day for 15 minutes or more.

I recommend using the “Calm App” or the App called “Headspace.com” which have so many different guided meditations to choose from. The Calm app is free to Kaiser members. It makes meditation easy. And it is only for 10-15 minutes a day.

So in conclusion, science has proven that if you include these 17 activities or ways into your days they will be like 17 strands which are woven together into a strong rope which can lift you up and transform these challenging times into a window of opportunity to thrive and create a life of joy.

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