

We're all astronauts on a public health mission: Ten tips for completing the quarantine successfully

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How can you live and work in a confined space for a certain period of time, without “going crazy”?

Some people do, astronauts for example, so I did some research on space missions. Astronauts travel alone, or in pairs, but there are also larger crews, sharing a relatively small space 24 hours 7/7 (exactly like our quarantine). I believe that the rules that astronauts follow can also apply to the mission that we are facing these days with the corona virus lockdown.

Long-term space missions are designed so that the negative effects of stress factors to which each crew member is exposed over the period of weeks or months can be mitigated or even prevented with appropriate psychological countermeasures. Therefore, here are the psychological countermeasures and some suggestions for how to follow them to complete our mission at home!

1. A **Commander** of the mission is needed to support the crew. For us, the mother, father, mature son, uncle, grandmother, or in turn, anyone can be the commander of the mission, as long as he/she shows a positive and confident attitude!
2. An important part of the space mission is to **keep the astronauts performing efficiently** during their stay in space. In long-term missions, keeping busy, according to a precise daily routine (including physical exercise), can be an excellent deterrent to the syndrome that Russian psychologists have called “spaceflight asthenia.” The symptoms include fatigue, weakness, irritability, insomnia, withdrawal from others, and territorial behaviour (e.g. aggressive actions taken to defend one’s territory or resources). For us during the lockdown, avoiding asthenia that reduces the quality of our lives, means keeping active and mentally engaged and not giving in to a sedentary life. And this applies to both adults and young people. If you do not have work or school to do, a suggestion is to do activities with tangible results such as cooking, gardening at home, drawing, also reading or watching a movie can be an excellent hobby. But the Commander who “assigns” these tasks must also provide the maximum possible discretion in the allocation of time to accomplish them. Attention should be paid to the balance of work and rest over the whole day and one should not prevail over the other.
3. To **avoid social withdrawal** (what Russian psychologists have called “withdrawal from others”) it is necessary to communicate and share with other people, and this applies to everyone including adults and children. We should involve all of the family crew in discussions on all issues that could affect them, even relatively minor issues. Some members may choose not to share, but it is essential to give them the opportunity to participate (which will sometimes be taken later).

4. Another aspect that applies both for space missions and for us, is the **relationship between crewmembers and those on earth**; this is very important for the morale of all the crew. Human beings are social animals, and communication is an essential part of our nature. To avoid the negative effects of isolation, we must take care of our relationships with those outside. Now is the time to call or video-call family, friends and colleagues, to feed our social needs.

5. Fridtjof Nansen (scientist and Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1922), in his book entitled *Farthest North* about his extreme explorations, wrote: “Truly, the whole secret lies in arranging things sensibly, and especially in being **careful about the food**.” Without doubt, the quote applies to our mission, too. Experts in space missions also suggest including surprises in some meals; small unexpected pleasures help to keep the morale high!

6. We **celebrate small successes** and avoid cynical and defeatist attitudes. The attitudes of every crewmember are “contagious”, whether we are sad and worried or confident and serene. What can we do at home? The duty of the commander is to remind everyone to adopt a positive and productive attitude. We participate as a family in the flash mob, we sing together from the balcony, we clap our hands at noon. Every activity that celebrates a small success feeds the deep need of humans to hope for a better tomorrow.

7. Attention to hygiene is important in space and at home: refresh the air, clean, put things in order; perhaps quarantine can be the occasion to do what Feng Shui experts or Marie Kondo suggest to “tidy your space” and to get rid of superfluous things. Space mission scholars also suggest distributing the most tedious tasks among all crewmembers on rotation, according to their specific skills (for example, children can easily understand how to vacuum the floor!)

8. The *Third Quarter* phenomenon is a term coined in some studies to describe the challenge of living in cold regions and has been used to describe life on-board submarines and spaceships. This term describes the period during which the most significant personal crisis will most likely occur (due to the accumulation of stress and monotony). Usually the **breaking point** does not come in the middle of the period, as one might expect, but it comes toward the end of the mission. But what are the three stages of life in long-term isolation? Rohrer in 1961 described the steps and confirmed that their sequence remained the same regardless of the duration of the mission:

- the initial phase is marked by increased anxiety;
- the second phase is characterized by adjustment to a routine (accompanied by depression and/or boredom);
- the **third phase is triggered by anticipation**. The time close to leaving isolation is a period characterised by emotional explosions and aggression. Often the dynamics of “displacement” are experienced which means that we turn our aggression towards those close to us even though they are not the root cause of our emotion (an example is: “I am frustrated because I want to go out, I shout at my wife. She scolds our son. If there is no one left, the child kicks the dog.”)

What is clearly different from space missions, is that we still do not know how long our mission will last (and this is part of the problem), so more attention and creativity is needed! Therefore we should remain flexible and plan new activities when dysfunctional behaviours occur.

9. And what about **fear**? Are astronauts ever afraid? Yes, they are. But they learn to handle their fear. They learn how to override the instinctive fight or flight responses, focusing on analytical thought, or in simple words, they do not get overwhelmed by emotion, and instead keep calm and rational (but without denying their feelings!). A valid and easy suggestion comes directly from the astronauts who write a daily journal. Writing can be a great help, especially in the final stages of the mission to manage their most negative emotions.

10. Anticipating and organising **psychological support**, even for astronauts, is expected; we are no different. Right now, many professionals offer their support as part of digital solidarity.

Of course, some of you might argue that astronauts choose to go on a mission, participate in the design of it, they know how long it will last and they are selected and trained to face it; after all it is their job! We have not had these opportunities because we are in an emergency. Still, during the corona virus crisis we can undoubtedly take on the challenges we face and **learn a lot from these professionals** to complete the mission!

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