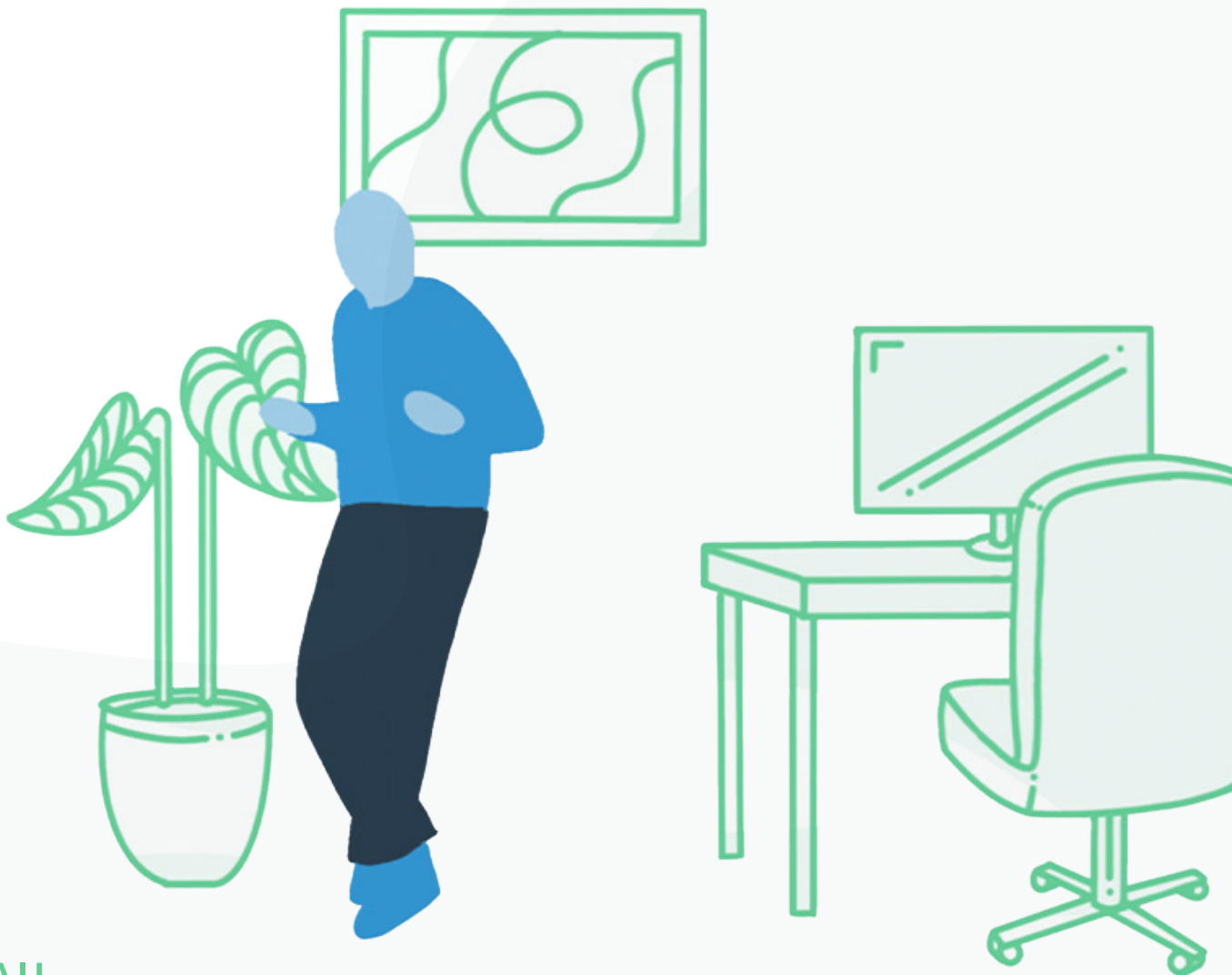FIVE STEPS TO MAINTAINING

Mental Health in Isolation

WISETAIL

As a country and global society, this novel coronavirus has us navigating uncharted territory in nearly every aspect of our waking lives. We have to adapt to a new way of being. One that will hopefully be short-lived, but present for the foreseeable future. Above all else, the effects of social distancing and isolation can profoundly impact our mental health and overall well-being.

On days when the silver linings are slow to reveal themselves, I've discovered a handful of techniques that have helped me maintain positive thought patterns and keep tabs on my overall mental health. I hope that one or more of these approaches will resonate with you and allow you to stay in check with yourself. Perhaps some of these tools can help to get you through these next few weeks and months with a bit more ease.

Move your body.

This is likely the most frequently suggested method for keeping up with good mental health. There are hundreds of online resources for all types of fitness for all levels. You can find a yoga class to do from your chair. Anything is better than nothing, so make time to take a walk around your neighborhood. Look at and point out gardens that you like, houses that catch your eye, and say hello to those you see out and about (from a safe distance, of course). I've been enjoying dancing in my living room because it is the definition of 'dance like no one is watching.' In particular, I tune into and rewatch the live streams from Block21 Fitness in Denver, CO. Exercise and movement are critical to overall wellness, so try to make this a priority.

Have a routine.

It is vital to the human psyche. We crave some sense of structure, and a lack of this can impact our understanding of mental wellness and balance. Give yourself the time to go about your morning as if you weren't staying in the house all day. Get up, drink some water, take a shower, put on some clothes — ones that are not pajamas. Even the simple step of putting on real clothes will help us be more productive with our time. If you're working from home, designate a separate workspace and an explicit schedule for hours to work, time to eat (preferably away from your desk/workspace), and a time to end the workday. Continue trying to go to bed at a reasonable hour and work to maintain a schedule similar to a day before social distancing and isolation.

Practice gratitude.

This one can be challenging, mainly because of how deeply this ongoing global health crisis has affected us already. However, there are always things to be grateful for. Sometimes finding gratitude through hardship is easier said than done. Still, this practice can be said to open the door to more relationships, improves physical and psychological health, enhances empathy, and can reduce aggression. Start with small things you're grateful for — a bed to sleep in, a pet, even a nice cup of coffee in the morning. Soon, the little things turn into the big things, and before you know it, gratitude is a regular part of your day today.

Reach out!

It's okay to feel weird through all of this. It's okay to feel angry, sad, confused, frustrated, hopeless. Like all feelings, these too shall pass. But in these darker moments, **please remember that other people are feeling this way too**. Use your extra time to call your friends, write letters, participate in virtual happy hours, and hangouts. Humans need connection; remember that we're here to connect, and we're not alone in this. Reach out — you matter, and you are loved.

Avoid rabbit holes on social media and get your news from reliable sources.

In the age of information, we are constantly inundated with news from a multitude of sources. With such a constant stream of stimulus, it's easy to get confused about what is and isn't valid information. I found that deleting the Facebook app on my phone not only saved me hours of screen time, but also required me to seek out reliable sources of information. I've been getting my news from what I believe to be thorough and neutral journalism outlets, such as NPR, Colorado Public Radio, and podcasts like the New York Times' "The Daily". I also reference the CDC and WHO websites for updates, instead of reading about what ol' Armchair Epidemiologist Karen has to say about the novel coronavirus.

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These murky and unknown waters are unlike anything any of us have ever seen. It's unlikely that we'll live to see something like this again, so, while we are living through it, remember to take care of yourself. Your mental health is essential and, although life has flipped on its head, you can still take care of your mind and body. Control your controllables.

The magnitude of what's unknown about our new situation can feel overwhelming. But with focus and intention, we can feel immense gratitude for the extra time we've been afforded, the time to slow down. Much has been taken from us, including our peace of mind, but we've also gained new gratitude for things previously taken for granted. We've made sacrifices, canceled plans, gotten angry, but we've also had a chance to reconnect with ourselves, our family, and friends. We will get through this together, one day at a time.