

LIFE HAS CHANGED.

Most of us will not be able to access our usual coping strategies and activities that we employ to feel less stressed and feel good about ourselves. At the same time, we have new worries in our lives: concerns about our health and that of our loved ones; being confined by ourselves or with others that we normally have a break from; either not working and having money worries or working at home and navigating new territory. So, we all have to adapt and make changes to protect our mental and emotional well-being, not just our physical health.

Why is finding new alternative activities important?

Our bodies are like jugs being filled with water; some events will pour more water in than others, but it all adds up. We experience being stressed when the water in the jug overflows. This is why when we experience the 'last straw' moment of something, that we may consider to be not that stressful, that we question why we may not be coping. However, it is the accumulative effects of all the other events and experiences that have contributed to it that leads to stress and anxiety.

Certain activities pour water out of the jug to stop it from overflowing, preventing us from experiencing an overwhelming sense of stress. So, if you normally go to the gym, meet friends, plan holidays etc, that is, your usual means of pouring water out of your jug then you need to adapt and discover new activities.

Here is a general list of types of activities that are realistic and achievable in our present circumstances.

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Diversion and distraction activities.

Actively participating in a distracting activity means it's the process and not the end product that is important. They provide a means of diverting the mind and a way to focus on the present moment, which creates a meditative effect that is relaxing.

Any type of game, crossword, puzzle or jigsaw keeps the mind active while the logic and creative part of the brain is activated to solve problems, the anxious part of the mind diminishes.

The brain is still a muscle and needs to be exercised each day, so it is beneficial to keep the brain active. Consider whether you need a solitary game or want to interact with people. Lots of games and puzzles are free online and can be downloaded onto your mobile phone. If you want to interact with others, it is possible to play something like Chess with someone across the other side of the world or you could play board games with the family.

Escapism.

Storying telling is one of oldest activities in humankind, it has lasted for a reason. We all enjoy a form of escapism as we switch off from our own lives and our engaged in someone else's. Although you cannot go to the cinema, borrow books from the library and may miss some gossip via the office, magazines or social media, we are fortunate that we have film channels, Netflix, Amazon video and kindles, Now TV etc. Accessing films, dramas, and reading novels are achievable; give yourself permission to escape the news for a few hours, it's healthy.

Exercise.

Exercise releases endorphins, the body's natural soothing drug. You are allowed to go out to exercise responsibly once per day whilst maintaining a 2-metre distance from people not from your household. It is possible to walk, jog or cycle outside. You can listen to motivating music to help you or download an app like 'couch to 5k' if you are a beginner at jogging. Alternatively, indoors, you could do your own exercise regime, access you-tube or a social media if you need to access a class to support you or hook with a friend with a similar ability/interest to keep motivated.

Exercise makes you feel good and gives you a sense of normality through developing a routine.

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Relaxation and Meditation

It is only focussed relaxation exercises and meditation that conserves energy within the body. You may feel relaxed swimming or walking but you are still using up energy, whereas relaxation techniques and meditation releases tension from muscles and slows breathing, conserving your energy. Carried out in the morning, it can make you feel more energised and calmer for the rest of the day as you experience the benefits of it, not just during your meditation or relaxation but afterwards too. It can help you get to sleep but if you do this, make sure you practise in the morning as well, as it is important that you experience the mental benefits which you will miss out on, if you are asleep.

A vital source of healthiness with countless benefits that quietens the mind and heals the body; relaxation and meditation apps are now available to download on your mobile phone or you can access you-tube videos.

Creativity.

Using the creative part of your brain means that the part responsible for anxiety has to switch off. This is why creative activities are so relaxing. Art, cooking, gardening, making jewellery, arranging flowers and even rearranging furniture or a cupboard can become a creative task. Giving yourself permission to do one task at a time so you are unhurried, enables an enhanced mindful, creative experience. Although the process is important, the sense of achievement through a finished product or outcome has benefits to your self-esteem and self-worth.

You may have had creative hobbies in the past and not had time to do them, or been given a craft kit as a gift and not started it; you may even want to start something totally new and not had time to devote to it; at the end of the day you will probably have a pencil and paper and could learn to sketch.



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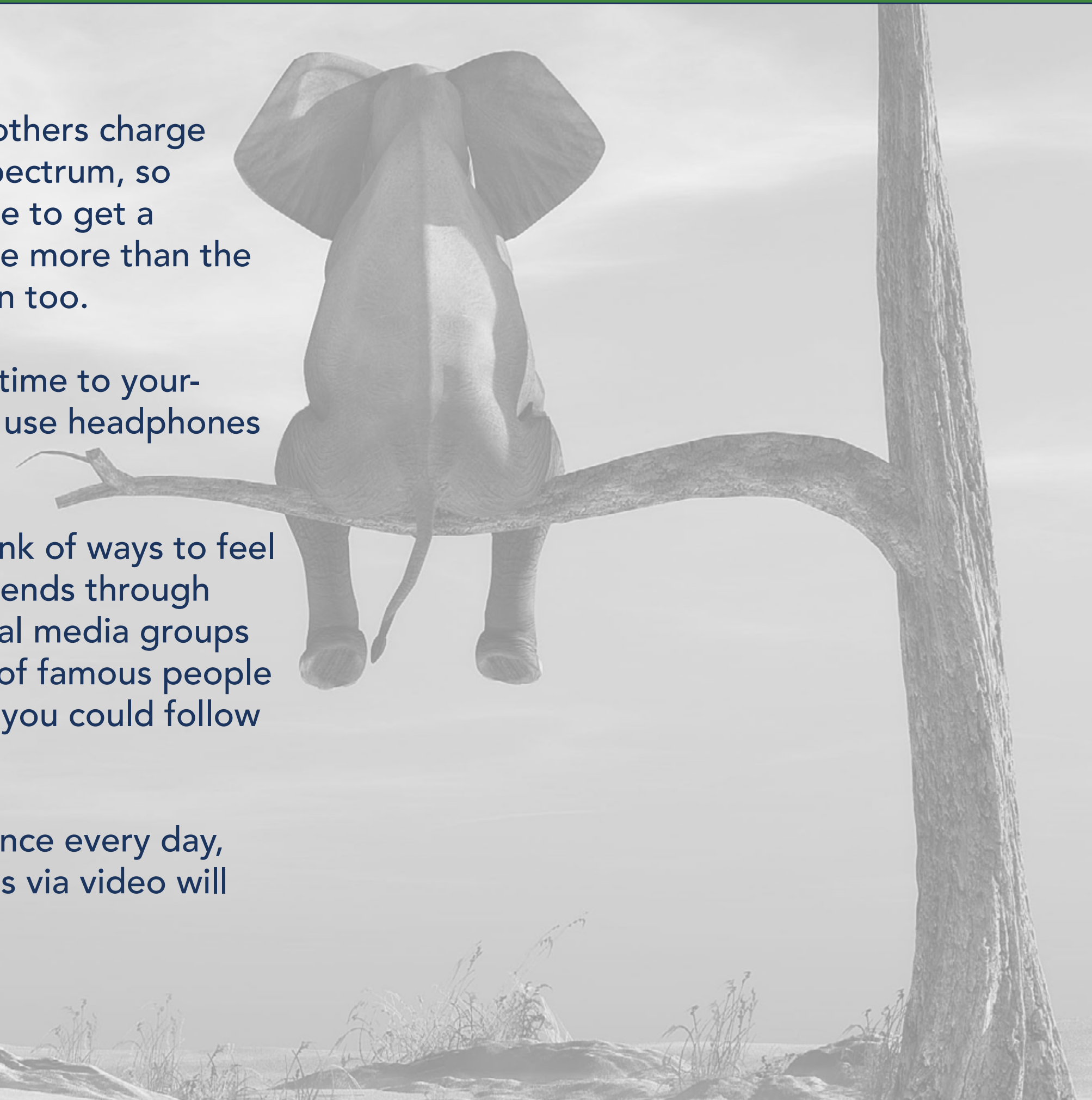
Solitude v interaction with others

Some people feel more energised by being around people whereas others charge their batteries by being alone. We are all on an extrovert/introvert spectrum, so just be mindful about which types of activities you may need to create to get a balance in your life. Most of us will need both, but some will need one more than the other and given life has changed so much, it is worth paying attention too.

You may need to get up earlier than your family to experience alone time to yourself, write a sign with 'no entry' on your door to have some peace or use headphones around the house.

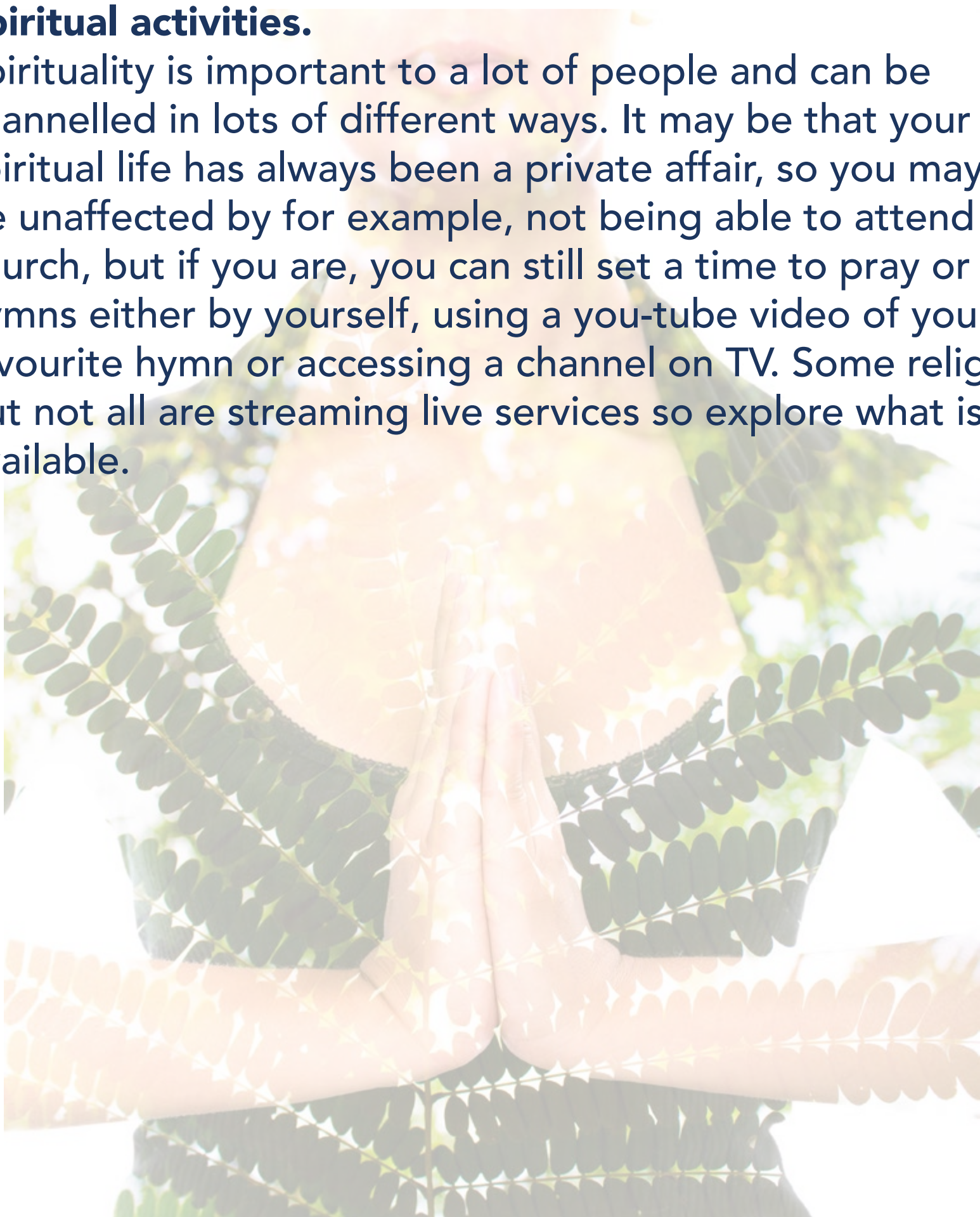
Alternatively, if you feel lonely and miss people, then you need to think of ways to feel connected with others, join face book groups, facetime family and friends through skype, what's app or other social media and on-line apps, set up social media groups with your friends/family/colleagues if they do not already exist. Lots of famous people are doing live daily streaming whether they are musicians or singers, you could follow someone and feel a part of an audience.

Telephone people and pay attention to talking to someone at least once every day, but remember humans like to see other humans so accessing a means via video will be important and a sense of belonging matters to most of us.



Spiritual activities.

Spirituality is important to a lot of people and can be channelled in lots of different ways. It may be that your spiritual life has always been a private affair, so you may be unaffected by for example, not being able to attend church, but if you are, you can still set a time to pray or sing hymns either by yourself, using a you-tube video of your favourite hymn or accessing a channel on TV. Some religions but not all are streaming live services so explore what is available.



Self-care activities

Being at home does not have to mean you take less care of yourself, feeling clean and well-groomed is good for self-esteem. You may have enjoyed getting your hair and nails done so try to plan some self-care time to make you feel good. A lot of videos are emerging on 'how to' take care of your hands and nails, give yourself a facial and do your own pedicure. Do not feel guilty about missing self-care activities or feel they are too trivial to do, just problem solve doing them yourself or getting another family member to help you. Even playing some relaxing spa music with lighted candles in your bathroom whilst you have a hot bath, can feel like a treat, so make time for it. If you share your house with others, it is a good way of having alone time as you can lock the door. Spray perfume for yourself, its ok and may help elevate your mood.

Helping activities

Sometimes, we feel good because we have helped someone else and you may think opportunities are limited but there are lots of small things you can do to make yourself feel good that do not necessitate you leaving your home or officially volunteering for something. For example, you could ring an elderly relative, friend, or neighbour and chat to them. You will have helped someone else and you will feel good. Do one call per day and once you have got through your list, start again. If you prefer nature then feed the birds, leave food out for hedgehogs or squirrels.

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Covid 19 dominates the news, conversations and social media so we all have an increased exposure to stress that can trigger our stress hormone cortisol. Although useful as a survival hormone, cortisol released over a long period of time is unhelpful and damaging to our bodies and minds. Current concerns are realistic, so trying to take a CBT approach to explore your thoughts and underlying beliefs may help but is limited, therefore managing your daily routine through activities is the healthiest way to adapt to our current situation.

NB Nutrition: What we eat can affect our mood, so maintaining a healthy diet that are rich with vitamins is important for our mental health. It may be tempting to reach for comfort food whilst being at home but remember to eat fruit and vegetables each day or take a multivitamin.

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