

# HACKING SOCIAL DISTANCING AND DIGITAL DISORIENTATION: A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR ISOLATING WITH TECHNOLOGY DURING THE CORONAPOCALYPSE

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented social isolation responsible for creating a condition on high mental and physical stress and increased anxiety at local and global levels. The 'coronapocalypse' has imposed new behavioral patterns of social distancing, social isolation and engagement with technology. This virtual interaction has had a significant impact on human nature, having led the world society to a state of digital disorientation, confusion, and often desperation. The current paper reports on a research during the pandemic period, of early 2020 and the following months, aiming to create awareness of the new social conditions brought into the world society by COVID-19, and to identify solutions that would ease the mental strain and provide healthy routines for using technology and for interacting digitally in most aspects of daily life. The research identifies techniques and strategies to cope with digital isolation and disorientation due to physical and social distancing.

**Keywords:** Keywords: COVID-19, social isolation, social distancing, disorientation

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## Introduction

The quest in researching for survival techniques amidst a spreading disease that kept us all hostages in isolated closed spaces, starts with a report on the results of a survey on mental health during the pandemic. The paper carries out next a literature search to provide an understanding of social distancing, digital disorientation, the nature of anxiety and its association with feelings of loneliness. Suggestions and solutions are sought on how to break the cycle of stress, how to increase hope and positive thinking, how to relieve physical and mental stress and anxiety. Mental health is connected to physical health and keeping physically active during the periods of social isolation at homes, ways to find relief and keep engaged are sought in employing group game sessions, and applying healthy practices of using technology while keeping fit mentally and physically.

## Research Design & Methodology

The majority of responses were from female respondents (76%), male respondents accounted for ¼ of the responses (24%) (Fig.1). The respondents' age ranged from less than 20yrs (4.7%) as the smallest group to over 50yrs (15.8%). The majority of the respondents were between 20-30yrs (30.4%) and 31-40yrs (31.6%). The nationality responses were grouped per continent of origin (Fig.3). Most of the

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responses were recorded from Asia (incl. Middle East) countries (39.2%), followed by Europe (27.4%), Africa (19.2%), America (10.5%) and Oceania (3.5%).

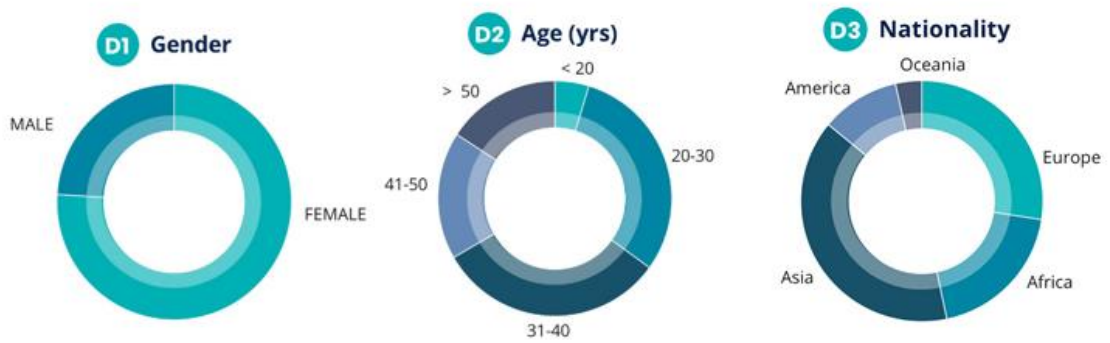


Figure 1: Gender, age and nationality of respondents

### COVID-19-Related Responses

Respondents were asked three questions on their opinion about COVID-19. Most seem to believe that COVID-19 has been a more dangerous disease than the common flu (57.9%). Still, more than one third of the respondents believe or are not sure that COVID-19 is a hoax (Fig.2).

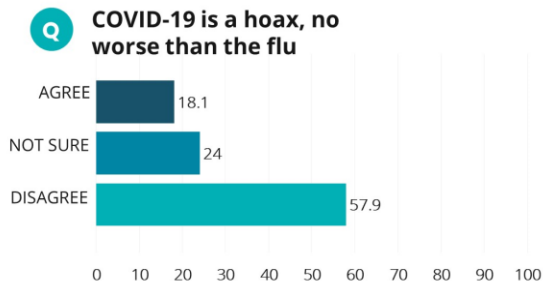


Figure 2: Opinion of the seriousness of COVID-19.

The majority of the respondents (86%) has been vaccinated for COVID-19 (Fig.3). One third of the respondents (32.2%) has contracted COVID-19 and recovered with a 10.5% being unsure (Fig.3, 4).

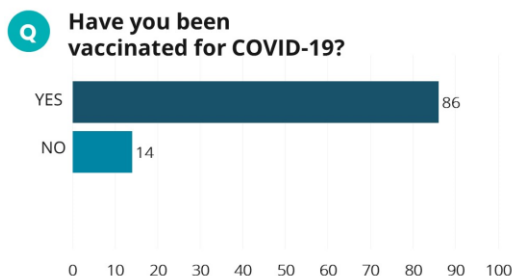


Figure 3: Status of COVID-19 vaccination.

During the pandemic the world suffered a great deal of physical and mental stress due to the imposed full and/or partial social isolation and quarantine periods. The survey results showed a familiar to everyone pattern of stress feelings and emotional distress: fear of the unknown, of dying and of the future of the virus (45.6%); panic attacks due to depression (39.8%), stress (27.5%), anxiety (27.5%) loneliness (8.2%) and a great deal of other undefined and uncategorized feelings of despair, suicidal thoughts, and so on. This pattern of mental health effects was prevalent in the results from all the geographical range of the sample (Fig.5).

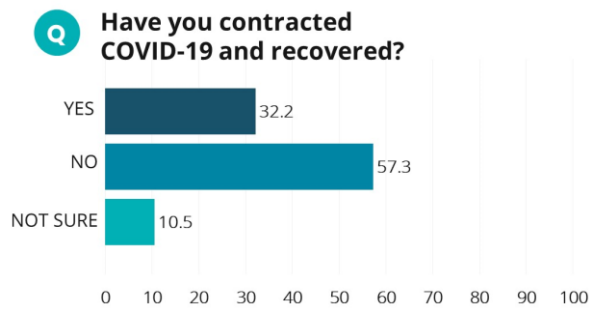


Figure 4: Status of COVID-19 disease.

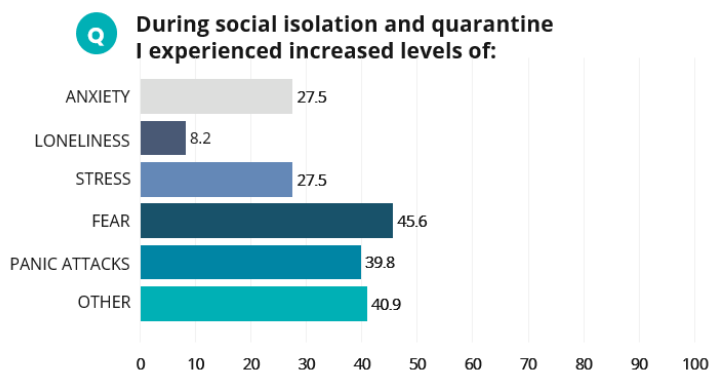
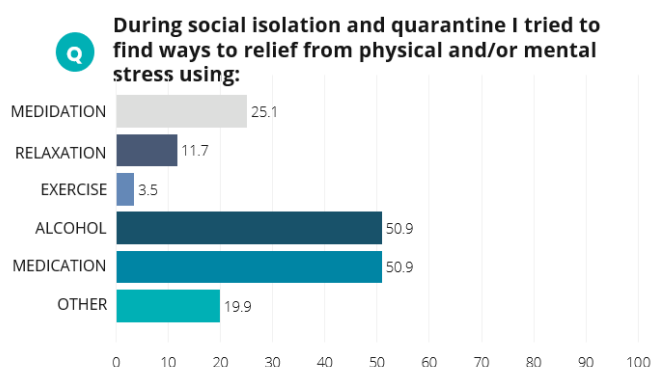


Figure 5: Physical and mental stress during the pandemic social isolation and quarantine.

During this unprecedented time of social isolation people have resorted to numerous ways to find relief and cope with the emotional and physical stress. Alcohol consumption (50.9%) and medicine prescriptions (50.9%) topped the responses, followed by meditation (25.1%) and relaxation (11.7%) techniques, and exercise (3.5%). A significant percentage of 19.9% could not indicate how they coped with the pandemic social isolation (Fig.6).



**Figure 6: Physical and mental stress relief during the pandemic social isolation and quarantine**

### **Social Distancing, Anxiety and Loneliness**

### **Social Distancing and Digital Disorientation**

#### **Social distancing (noun)**

‘the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance (such as six feet or more) from other people or of avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection’ (Merriam-webster.com, 2021d).

More than two years into the coronavirus pandemic and human nature is still challenged by social distancing, practice of good personal hygiene, masking, quarantines, lockdowns, curfews, isolation, and lately by COVID-19 tests and vaccination fever. It has been deemed necessary to implement measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic and minimize its impact on public health. Keeping physical distance or social distancing has become the new norm of human interaction and communication, especially in education, public places and closed spaces. The aim to restrict the spread of the virus and minimize the amount of people infected simultaneously.

The social distancing strategy arose from the coronavirus's long incubation period, the time between exposure to the virus and the appearance of symptoms. The social distancing practice to avoid crowds was also recommended to restrict the spread from spreading from close personal contact. The practice of social distancing is different though from quarantine or physical isolation. Isolation is a medical procedure used to hospitalize and treat infected individuals until they recover. In contrast, quarantine involves separating asymptomatic individuals who are suspected of being infected and placing them in a restricted space with limited movement while monitoring them closely or remotely. Social distancing is an intervention tool aimed at reducing the spread of the virus by limiting personal

contact. In contrast quarantine and isolation aim in containing the spread of the virus. None of these strategies eliminates the virus, but significantly reduces the infections and deaths.

The concept of social distancing involves maintaining an adequate physical distance between yourself and others, both at work and elsewhere, with the goal of protecting yourself and others by eliminating transmission routes of the virus (Fig.7).



Figure 7: Practicing social distancing (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020)

### **Disorientation (noun)**

‘a usually transient state of confusion especially as to time, place, or identity’

(Merriam-webster.com, 2021b).

Following the pandemic outbreak, we were forced towards a daily online digital diet as the only way out to interact with, and to feed our need to comprehend and respond to the new reality. The capacity of our brains to perceive the suffering of the world as a whole is limited. When we are exposed to the totality of the world's pain and cruelty, it can lead to a state of learned helplessness. We tend to feel good when we encounter information that confirms our beliefs, but we feel uncomfortable with information that challenges them (Harris, 2019).

The '*coronapocalypse*' and our enforced excess engagement with technology, made evident our diminished capacity to address some of our mental and psychosocial weaknesses and the world's most pressing challenges, and had led us to a condition of altered states of confusion, disorientation and often desperation.

## **Coping with Anxiety**

### **Anxiety (noun)**

'an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it' (Merriam-webster.com, 2021a).

The ongoing implementation of the social distancing strategy for over a year to contain the spread of coronavirus has put at high risk the individual and collective mental health of whole societies. It has been more serious for people that have had to isolate by staying at home and for those already suffering from stress-related disorders. How to keep oneself engaged and avoid anxiety while social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been one of the most important social issues that medical sciences and experts had to resolve and come up with quick and effective solutions (Verbanas-Rutgers, 2020).

Strategies for remaining engaged and avoiding anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic include using technology to stay active and socially connected despite social distancing. Regular video chats, calling friends and family, engaging oneself in creative activities, watching movies, playing online games, participating in virtually held events. Older people with chronic health conditions will be in need for more meaningful social contact during social distancing and isolation.

Another strategy to help with anxiety is distraction. Stop thinking continuously about risk of illness, get involved in engaging activities or talk to people. To combat the effects of social isolation caused by COVID-19 restrictions, one can take walks in open spaces and spend time outdoors whenever possible. Additionally, practicing mindfulness meditation can be beneficial, and there are several mobile apps that can teach the basics of meditation and mindfulness. Other mobile apps are available for sleep disorders and insomnia due to anxiety and will help quiet your mind at night.

Maintaining an active lifestyle is crucial for good mental health. Evidence suggests that increasing physical activity can reduce feelings of depression and improve overall wellbeing. The motto "do more, feel better" is a scientifically validated approach to enhancing mental health. Stick to your usual schedule when isolating, try keep the members of the family on their usual routines, do not sleep in, get dressed every day, do not work from your bed and engage in video chats with work colleagues. Engaging in hobbies, in house maintenance tasks, organizing your space will also give you a sense of accomplishment and a mood boost when the tasks are complete. Finally, exercise regularly (YouTube exercise videos and gym virtual classes) and look for ways to volunteer safely delivering resources to people who cannot get out to shops.

## **Fighting Loneliness**

### **Loneliness (noun)**

‘being without company cut off from others; not frequented by human being; sad from being alone; producing a feeling of bleakness or desolation’ (Merriam-webster.com, 2021c).

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has been rated as the worst public health crisis for a generation. Social distancing has been one of the most effective strategies to stop the spread of the virus. It has been a particularly worrying and anxiety-inducing time for people with compromised or vulnerable immune systems. Although unaccustomed to working or studying from home, distancing practices have become a lifestyle, the 'new normal.'

Spending a long period of time away from other humans can be quite unnerving if you live alone or already experiencing loneliness. Millions of people around the world has already been experiencing the loneliness before pandemic, adding the coronavirus anxiety and social distancing, simply intensified the problem. The coronavirus pandemic has shown how important friendship and connection are in our lives, and how difficult it can be when they are missing.

There are plenty of useful resources online on ways to fight loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic (Thompson, 2020). Loneliness can create added fear and anxiety to people already susceptible to the new life-threatening virus. Additional measures to restrict visitors, avoid contact with older relatives have exacerbated feelings of loneliness among older population. Things that could help would be picking up some shopping or helping them by running some errands, visiting if safe or staying in touch over the phone or online with video calls.

When it comes to one's own loneliness, one can share how they are getting on and asking other people how they are, post photos or even silly viral videos to lighten their mood. Keep the mind occupied and challenged, use physical or free online courses to start a new project, read books, keep yourself busy with puzzles, clean, re-organize, decorate, at any time try to take notice of the moment and use your creative side. Remember, too, that people all around the world are likely experiencing similar feelings to you.

## **Stress, Hope and Mental Relief**

### **Breaking the Cycle of Stress**

Stress is a common condition, a natural reaction to increasing demands without the necessary resources to face them. The result is physical and mental exhaustion. There is what is called '*advantageous stress*,' that can elicit beneficial responses to enhance well-being, such as increased memory formation, still, when exposed too much for too long it can become toxic. Stress has become part of a normalization process, a part of the way we live our contemporary lives. Excessive levels of psychosocial stress can create a harmful cycle that ultimately results in burnout, as chronic stress wears down both the body and mind, diminishes resilience, limits our perception of life's value, and leaves us feeling empty (Duncan, 2020).

The principle of '*allostatic load*' provides an integrated framework for understanding the lasting effects of chronic stress, including '*maladaptation*', whereby prolonged pressure can fundamentally alter an individual's functioning and response to future stressors. Research in positive psychology and organizational dynamics has demonstrated that '*goal diversification*' can enhance subjective well-being. Pursuing different types of personally meaningful goals is linked to decreased stress and mitigates the negative effects of allostatic load on both the body and mind. Mindfulness meditation, hope-building exercises, and active self-reflection are suggested as potential intervention strategies to promote goal diversification (Duncan, 2020).

### **Increasing Hope**

Hope is something we create. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than ever, overcoming fear and holding onto hope has been essential. Hope can be built in phases and conflict resolution and peacemaking approaches can contribute valuable ideas and suggestions.

First of all, be kind to yourself, think what is most important and what you need most and then do it. Take a break from your busy daily routine and fulfill your impulse. Meditate or reflect daily, by creating a 5-mins silence ritual. Trying to connect with your inner self during this very intimate moment can be very powerful. On a daily basis, curtail your intake of news' whether it is TV, radio, social media or friends and relatives. Oversaturation with especially bad news is detrimental to emotional health. To cherish each day as a precious gift, try to appreciate the people and situations around you, letting go of minor irritations that can upset your balance. Take 30-second breaks throughout the day to look at the sky and find hope. Believe that you have the ability to find solutions to the challenges you face. Be indiscriminately generous with hugs, words, notes, acts of kindness,



express love tangibly. Thank people, express gratitude, it will add positive energy to our own life and the lives of people around us. Showing gratitude and thanking people can increase positive energy in your life and the lives of those around you. Remember that peace starts with each individual and can only be brought about by people themselves. Strive to make a difference in the lives of others, and you will create hope within yourself (Drew, 2020).

### **Relieving Physical and Mental Stress, and Anxiety**

Stress and anxiety are common experiences for most people. There are numerous suggestions on how to relieve stress and anxiety.

Many people experience stress and anxiety, but there are ways to alleviate these feelings. *Exercise* can release endorphins, improve sleep and self-image, and reduce stress and anxiety. Consider taking supplements such as ashwagandha, omega-3 fatty acids, green tea, or lemon balm to help reduce stress and anxiety. Aromatherapy and reducing caffeine intake can also be helpful. Keeping a journal focused on positive thoughts can also help relieve stress and anxiety. Laughter can relax muscles and improve mood and the immune system. Prioritize tasks to avoid procrastination-related stress and say 'no' when taking on too many responsibilities. Yoga, mindfulness practices, and listening to calming music can also lower stress and anxiety. Spending time with a pet can promote relaxation and a positive mood. Deep breathing exercises can activate the relaxation response by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system. Prioritize what needs to get done and make time for it avoiding procrastination-related stress. Procrastination can cause stress, which negatively affects health and sleep quality. Yoga is widely used for stress reduction. It may help lower stress hormone levels and blood pressure. Yoga can enhance mood and may even be as effective as antidepressant drugs at treating depression and anxiety. Mindfulness practices can help lower symptoms of anxiety and depression and combat the anxiety-inducing effects of negative thinking. To alleviate stress, consider listening to calming music that you enjoy. Slow-paced instrumental music can help induce the relaxation response, leading to decreased blood pressure, heart rate, and stress hormones. Deep breathing exercises can also activate the relaxation response by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for relaxation. In contrast, mental stress can activate the sympathetic nervous system, which releases stress hormones that can cause physical symptoms. Spending time with a pet can be a relaxing and enjoyable way to reduce stress. This is because it can help release oxytocin, a brain chemical that promotes a positive mood (Healthline.com, 2020; Gil, 2020).

Actively force body and mind to slow down, and become more aware of the daily pace with simple yoga exercises that are easy to incorporate into a morning routine or lunch break to help reduce daily

stress. Such exercises combine breathing and body posture. Practice breath awareness in a seated position, breathe in deeply for a five count, then exhale for a seven count. Most people 'over breathe,' usually when they creating increased levels of carbon dioxide in their blood stream for proper oxygen exchange. Other popular yoga relaxation exercises include the poses include the 'Y' position, 'warrior two', 'mountain pose', 'lunge with arms up', 'legs up the wall' or 'on a chair' and the 'corpse pose' (Valdellon, 2020).

## **Survival Strategies for Quarantine Life**

### **Best Games to Play During Quarantine**

During the coronavirus lockdowns and physical distancing, we found ourselves at home a lot more than usual. There have been endless things to do, and even more game online, still, assuming the existence of fellow human beings sharing the lockdown boredom, there are also nice, competitive, and invigorating games with those around and willing to participate.

*Codenames* is a game where two spymasters compete to contact all their agents on the table using only codenames while avoiding the assassin card. Their teammates are not aware of the agents' secret identities. *Coup* is a game that takes place in a dystopian universe, where a player must use manipulation, bluffing, and bribery to gain power as the head of a family in an Italian city-state run by a corrupt court. *Monopoly Deal*, is the card game version of the classic Monopoly board game, where players aim to collect three full property sets of different colors and use action cards to charge rent, steal cards, or demand money. *Dictionary Dabble* is a game where players come up with definitions for obscure words, including the real definition mixed in with the fake ones, leading to laughter as funny definitions are read aloud. In *Sequence*, players place cards and chips on a game board to create a sequence of five in a row. *Loaded Questions*, is a game where players guess who wrote each answer while creating their responses to funny and loaded questions. *Twister*, a 1960s classic, is a game where players get tangled and twisted while following instructions on a mat. *Cards Against Humanity* is a party game where players answer questions from black cards with their funniest white card responses. *Unstable Unicorns* is a strategic card game where players build a Unicorn Army, betray friends, and compete for destruction. *Skip Bo* is a card game with strategic opportunities to organize cards into discard piles and avoid setting up good plays for the next player. Finally, *Azul* is a tile-placement game where players claim tiles and arrange them on their board to score points and compete for the highest score. (Newman, 2020).

## Computer Sitting Posture Exercises

The pandemic kept us at home in front of computer screen for long hours, often neglecting physical exercise. Poor sitting posture in front of a monitor can lead to a series of health problems, such as, rounded shoulders, potbelly, headaches, muscle fatigue, back, neck and bodily pains (Ergonomics.com, 2020). A proper sitting posture (Fig.8) includes: keeping back straight, pushing shoulders back, ensuring eyes are level with the top of the monitor, resting wrists on the table and not on the keypad, bending knees at 90%, and keeping feet flat on the ground (Smith, 2020).

Roll shoulders forward and backward will relieve tension and ease the muscles. Stretch neck forward, backward, to the left and right. Open arms wide while pushing wrists and thumbs back and stretching arms away from shoulders. Suck in belly and hold it in for a few seconds. Hold a full water bottle over the head, rotate arms clockwise and anticlockwise. Every now and then, rotate your wrists clockwise and counterclockwise. Squeeze a hand gripper for at least a minute with each hand. Use exercise rubber bands to stretch around your forefingers as far as possible and release. Rotate your ankles clockwise and counterclockwise every hour. Contract and relax all toes for a few seconds. Stretch your legs out in front of you and pull your feet back. Inhale and lift both legs towards your chest, holding them up for 30 seconds before exhaling and releasing. Alternately clench and release your buttocks. Bring your shoulders back until they meet in the middle of your back. Lean slightly forward and exercise your back muscles. Blink twice every hour. Gently press the pads of your palms onto your eyes and apply light pressure (Smith, 2020; Ergonomics.com, 2020).

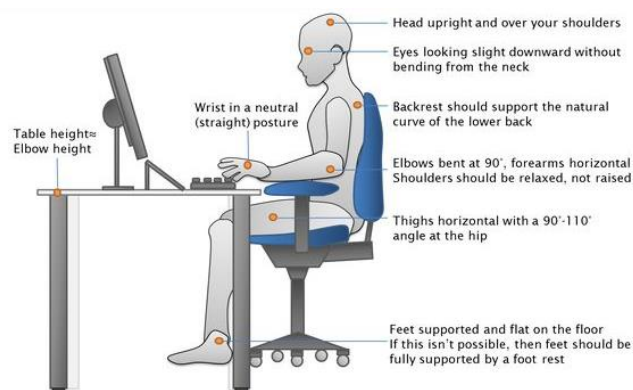


Figure 8: What is a good posture? (Ergonomics.com, 2020).

## Relieving Computer Eye Strain

*Blue light*, a type of radiation emitted from phone/computer LCD screens, is directly related to the pain and strain that one experiences when looking at the computer screen for prolonged times. Computer glasses with blue light blocking lenses could be a solution to protect from computer

screen's blue light rays. Still, there some methods one can try to cope with eye strain without relying on computer glasses.

Relief treatments, such as, artificial tears, or eye-moisture drops for eye strain, can comfort sore, exhausted eyes. Good quality glasses can help protect eyes, as well as removing direct light sources, to reduce glare. Sometimes anti-reflection computer screen can help and create a conscious effort to blink more while working on a computer. Develop some good habits to ease eye strain, such as, taking short breaks, stand and stretch out, change postures, place monitors about 2-3ft (60-90cm) from the eyes. Use the correct glasses or lenses prescribed and do not gaze constantly at the particular monitor for a lengthy time. If the eyes start feeling tired or strained try the 20-20-20 rule: for each and every 20 minutes spent concentrating on a phone/computer screen, a break should be taken to look out the window into the distance of 20ft (6m), for about 20 seconds (Leong, 2020).

Some key daily exercises are recommended, if one spends a long time looking at a computer screen, mobile device or other screen. The *eye roll* is a workout for your eye muscles (Fig.9). The *palm eye* where you cup your hands over the sockets of your closed eyes and the *eye press* exercises, where you put all your fingers on your eyelids and press lightly, will also relieve eye strain. *Palming* is a technique in which you rub both palms together until they are nice and warm and then place them over your closed eyelids. In *zooming* you hold your arm straight out in front of you with your thumb up, then keeping your eyes on your thumb, you slowly bend your elbow to bring your thumb closer to your eyes. *Figure eights* is a similar exercise where you trace a figure 8 in the air. *Slow blink* is self-explanatory, blinking is important as it helps to keep our eyes properly lubricated. Finally, a good exercise to strengthen and work your eye muscles is *writing messages on the wall*, where you imagine that your eyes are lasers, and you use them to write words on the wall (Lenspüre.com).

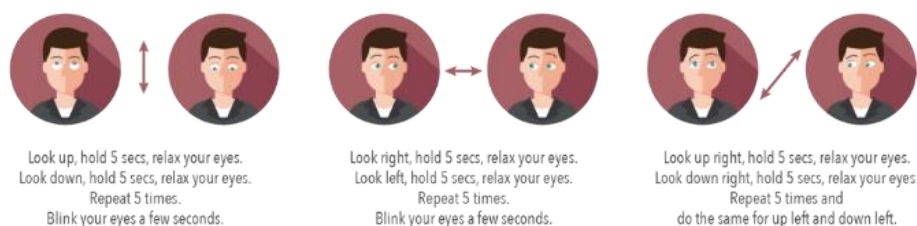


Figure 9: Simple steps for better eyes (Leong, 2020).

## Conclusion

Our survival in isolation with technology seems to depend on the level of our mental strength and balance, our physical condition, our ability to identify and use those offered solutions that work best for us at an individual, and in some cases, at collective level. Our relationship with using and

understanding technology and how it affects us is not a new one. The conditions and the deadlines, under which digital technologies have been imposed on our daily routines - among fear and insecurities the pandemic has been creating - are confusing, disorientating and stress generating. Ironically, the quest for a survival guide has been enriched with suggestions and solutions which are mediated through the same computer technologies that have partly led to this social condition of social uneasiness and discomfort. Unable still to move freely and return to a kind of previously lived 'normality', this survival guide can provide a temporary relief and a hopeful outlook to the future of our world.

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