Ward off Covid-19 by taking care of both your body AND mind

By SANDY CLARKE

As the world comes to grip with Covid-19 developments, there's been a lot of helpful information about prevention through personal hygiene.
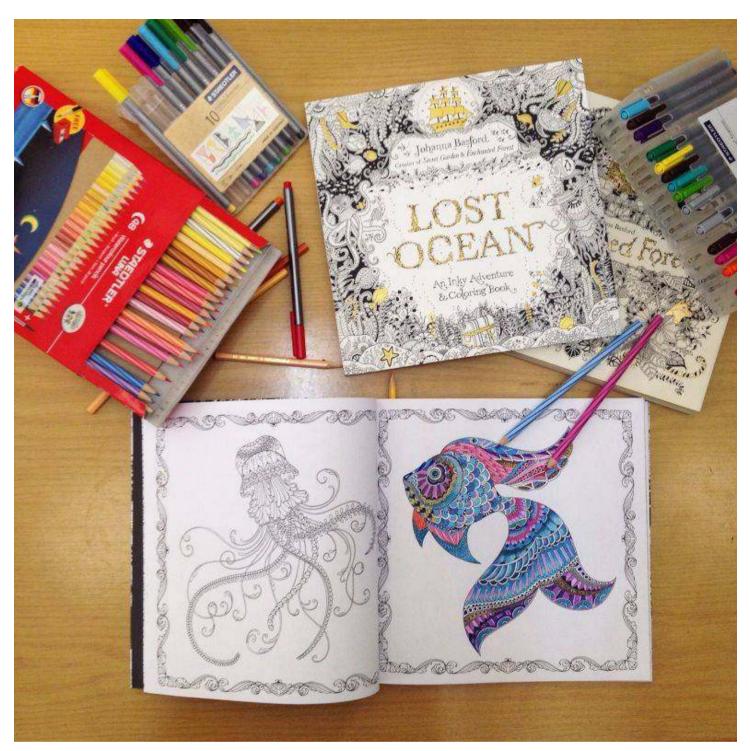
Practical advice includes washing our hands often for at least 20 seconds with soap and water, using hand sanitisers, and covering our mouth and nose with a tissue or a sleeve when coughing or sneezing. To keep our immune system healthy, it's been suggested that we eat well, exercise, get enough rest, and take supplements like Vitamin C. It's all good advice worth heeding in the current environment and also for our general health.

Another consideration that helps our immune system is keeping stress levels under control.

Research from the field of psychoneuroimmunology – the study of the effect of the mind on health and resistance to disease – suggests that our immune system becomes weakened when we're feeling stressed or anxious.

The American Psychological Association cites studies that reveal students who feel nervous prior to and during exams have weaker immune systems due to "the simple stress of the three-day exam period". Whether stress is mild or intense, it can affect our health if it's unmanaged.

The association advises that managing our stress effectively "may help people to fight germs". Our immune system stands a better chance of resisting infection when we make a conscious effort to look after our physical *and* mental health.

Adult colouring books can help reduce stress by engaging one's mind in a relaxed way. — FilepicEngaging in exercise, having a strong social network (ie, spending time with friends), and making time to relax are some of the ways that can help us manage stress and maintain a healthy immune system.

In one study from the 1990s, researchers Kiecolt-Glaser and Glaser compared the immune systems of exam-stressed medical students. The first group received relaxation training while the second group received none. The students who took the training seriously were shown to have "significantly better immune function during exams than students who practiced erratically or not at all".

So what does this mean for us in the face of the Covid-19 outbreak? Added to genuine worry, we also have to deal with the anxiety that arises from false information being shared on social media. It's sad to see so much misinformation being shared – a lie can travel the world in the time it takes the truth to put its jacket on, as they say.

For those with elderly relatives and young children, it can be an especially worrying time as they focus on keeping their families safe.

To help manage stress levels, here are some pointers that can reduce worry while aiding in the function of our immune system.

Make sure your information comes from a reputable source

So much misinformation is being shared online, and sometimes even the boldest conspiracy can seem plausible if you're feeling stressed. If you want to keep up to date with real developments, sticking to reputable news sources and health authorities like the World Health Organisation will keep you properly informed while keeping the myths and falsehoods at bay.

Look after your health

This is an obvious point to make but one that can often be neglected when we're anxious. Drinking plenty of water, eating healthy, exercising, getting enough rest, and taking care of personal hygiene all help to reduce stress. When we take care of our body, it takes care of us.

Spend time with family and friends

The American Psychological Association observes that "even just a few close friends can help someone feel connected and stay strong. Social ties may indirectly strengthen immunity because friends – at least health-minded friends – can encourage good health behaviours such as eating, sleeping and exercising well. Good friends also help to buffer the stress of negative events."

Focus on activities you enjoy

Some friends of mine like to destress by using adult colouring books, playing chess or building intricate Lego sets. These help to centre the mind while engaging in something fun and relaxing. Personally, I enjoy meditating or playing the guitar to help me unwind. The effects of stress increases when it compounds and builds up over time. Doing things we enjoy acts as an emotional pressure valve that helps to release any tension we feel.

Be mindful and grateful for your health

In times of distress, our focus often centres on what could go wrong and what bad things might happen. Despite taking every precaution, the worry is still there that we'll become ill or our family will suffer. When such thoughts arise, don't try to suppress them as doing so can increase stress. Instead, you can say to yourself, "It's normal to worry and that's OK. Thanks for the reminder, mind. The important thing is that I'm grateful for being healthy. I'm feeling good, my family is safe, and that's all that matters."

Sunny Side Up columnist Sandy Clarke has long held an interest in emotions, mental health, mindfulness and meditation. He believes the more we understand ourselves and each other, the better societies we can create. If you have any questions or comments, email lifestyle@thestar.com.my. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.