Finding community in isolation

As we enter uncertain times and endure social distancing measure, **RACHEL SETTI** shares her tips for maintaining health and wellbeing.

How the world has changed. As we navigate the uncharted waters of COVID-19, who thought toilet paper would become a commodity and age-old business practices – such as face-to-face meetings – would present dangers?

Humanity is no stranger to adversity, as per wars, famine, climate change and geological events. A common theme to emerge at such times is humans' innate ability to maintain resilience by banding together as a united tribe. Such behaviour protects wellbeing through pooled resources, creative problem solving, love, hope and compassion.

COVID-19, however, presents a conundrum. It requires us to isolate for physical safety and limits opportunities to act on our tribal instinct to huddle for security. Unfortunately, the absence of human collaboration can be dire – ever wondered why solitary confinement is considered the ultimate punishment for prisoners? Consequences span sleep and diet issues, heightened anxiety, depression and underlying mental health issues, cognitive decline, and maladaptive behaviours such as substance and alcohol abuse. Overlay this with the likely scenario of an economic downturn and the outlook is not rosy.

So how do we unite as a community when the overarching wisdom is to isolate? Many firms are introducing a work from home policy and using technology to maintain productivity and services. You would be wise to apply similar principles to maintain social cohesiveness and communal buoyancy.

How can this be done?

It's a two-way phenomenon. Personal wellbeing supports our capacity to help others (akin to applying your own airplane oxygen mask before helping others), and personal wellbeing is also enhanced when we give of ourselves to others. Though it takes creativity to achieve both personal and communal wellbeing outcomes in times of relative isolation, here are some recommendations worth considering.

Supporting your community

- **Create a boundary between work and leisure.** Your commute to and from work serves as an emotional distance between the two. Re-create that boundary via social interactions such as small group meals.
- **Maintain exercise and movement**, preferably in nature and sunlight with a companion.
- **Inject meaningful activity into your work.** Consider remote pro bono work if billable work reduces.
- **Immerse yourself in pastimes** you have often wished you had more time for. A lawyer I am working with loves teaching and plans to run online sessions for homebound students.
- **Maintain a practical outlook**. Relentlessly listening to (social) media can provoke anxiety. Instead, seek and share only practical information relating to COVID-19.
- **Maintain your social connections.** Keep in touch with your professional and personal network via phone and teleconferencing. Offer help to colleagues who need professional counsel or moral support. Check-in on elderly or vulnerable neighbours by phone or through glass.

Supporting teams and colleagues

- **Create a shared vision and reduce ambiguity.** Social bonding with your team is essential when working remotely, because distance working reduces capacity to seamlessly discuss, modify and recontract together as we would in the office. On a macro level, communicate your vision and updates regularly. On a micro level, enhance clarity by communicating work allocation, deadlines and success indicators in more detail than you normally would. Create sub-working groups to help keep people connected and on task, and embed regular review meetings.
- **Create a communication charter**. Face-to-face interactions allow us to gauge others' emotional state. Virtual communication rarely provides us with the same capability. To alleviate this, establish team communication norms. For instance, set regular teleconference times and allow extra space in the schedule for small talk. Notice changes in behaviour. If, for example, individuals disengage or become overly emotional, connect with them privately.
- **Check in frequently**.
  The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports one in four Australian adults lives in a lone-person household, which increases the risk of feeling lonely and isolated. Others may live in situations of domestic and other abuse – the office may be a place of refuge. The list goes on.
  Where possible, be aware of your team's domestic arrangements and, if required, offer appropriate management or specialist support.