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Keeping busy

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Keeping remote? Here's how to go with the floe

If you are struggling to cope with self-isolation, Ireland's solo adventurers have some tips to stop you feeling all at sea, writes *Yvonne Gordon*



Lightkeeper Butler read a lot, finding time passes 'when the mind is busy'

If you are unfortunate enough to have had to self-isolate in the past few weeks due to the coronavirus pandemic, you may be struggling with the idea of spending all your time alone. For some people though, this is all in a day's work. So how do they cope? Gregor McGuckin knows all about fear and isolation in extreme conditions. The 33-year-old Dubliner spent 90 days alone at sea as a participant of the 2018 Golden Globe around-the-world solo yacht race, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the original Sunday Times Golden Globe

Race by featuring vessels similar to those used in 1968. Except for safety equipment, no modern technology was allowed. Some 82 days in, his boat capsized and was dismantled during a violent storm in the Southern Ocean. In shock, he carried out DIY repairs and steered his mastless yacht to the aid of a nearby solo sailor. Both of them were more than 3,000km from land, far beyond the reach of helicopters or most shipping traffic, when they eventually rescued by a French fisheries patrol vessel. McGuckin learnt early on how to cope with loneliness. "I found the isolation



McGuckin makes daily goals, 'but don't be too ambitious; start simple'

surprisingly easy to manage. Since I had opted to put myself in the position I was in and there was a defined timeline, I could process that better in my own head," he says. "Also, there were other sailors in the same situation I could talk to on an almost daily basis, which helped ease the burden." Keeping the boat well-maintained also kept him busy. "I found taking each 24-hour period as a separate journey helped to stop a bad day from multiplying into a bad week. I had individual targets for each day: if I reached them, the day closed on a positive note; if not, then they didn't interfere with the next day's targets." McGuckin believes the best way to manage self-isolation is to take one day at a time and make goals for each day. "Don't be too ambitious; start simple," he says. "No one is alone in this – we are all in it together. And we are more connected through technology than ever. There are so many positive stories coming out at the moment that show people's willingness to band together and help each other out. "Everything has changed very suddenly and change is a difficult thing to manage for anyone. If people are feeling scared, I suggest they write down what they are scared about and draw up an action plan to manage these fears. Having a plan in place will make them easier to control." Fellow solo sailor Joan Mulloy is getting used to mastering isolation. Last year the 33-year-old from Westport in Co Mayo spent 35 days at sea alone, up to five days at a time; this November she plans to be the first Irish woman to compete in the Vendée Globe: a solo, non-stop, round-the-

world race that takes about three months. "My first solo trip started off a bit fraught; I hadn't learnt to trust myself and I was on edge," says Mulloy, who was the first Irish woman to compete in the single-handed Solitaire du Figaro race. "But as it wore on, and time passed without anything going wrong, I began to relax." She has developed coping mechanisms for loneliness. "First, I try to recognise if I am going on a downward spiral mentally and I give myself a few minutes to feel whatever is causing that – frustration, tiredness, sadness – then I move on. My failsafe method for moving on is making a list, which I use to ground myself when times are tough. It is simple things like: make sure you're sailing the right direction; check the weather; check where your competitors are; eat; drink water; put on sun cream. Once I've worked through a simple list of basics, I feel back on track. "The first step is to be able to recognise when you're on a downward trend, and to have prepared a few things to help slow this and bring yourself back to an even mindset. Make a list of little activities that ground you – like making a cup of tea or chatting to a friend – and if you're feeling a bit lost, run through it from start to finish. The normality of the actions will help." Someone else who knows all about being stuck at sea for an extended time is retired lighthouse keeper Gerald Butler, who during his long career was regularly stationed for four week periods at remote lighthouses including those on Skellig Michael, the Old Head of Kinsale, and Fastnet Rock in the Atlantic off the

southwest of Ireland. "I often refer to being a lightkeeper as being a prisoner for a month at a time, but we did not have to break any laws to get there," he says. Butler, 70, believes it is important to draw a distinction between being isolated and feeling lonely. "On the Fastnet Rock, I experienced isolation on a grand scale, but I nonetheless never experienced loneliness. I always kept my mind busy. I learnt early on that forced isolation, such as not being able to get off the lighthouse or even go outside during a storm when the sea relentlessly pounded the entire station, held an opportunity." To stave off boredom, Butler took to his books and hobbies. "Every moment seems to pass much quicker when the mind is busy, however that may be." Adventurer Mike O'Shea agrees that keeping the mind busy is important for mental health in situations of isolation. In 2012, the 50-year-old from Dingle and his expedition partner Clare O'Leary – the first Irish woman to climb Everest – launched a project to cross the world's eight main ice caps: the South and North Poles, South and North Patagonian ice caps, Kilimanjaro, Greenland, Iceland and the frozen Lake Baikal in Siberia. Their achievements include becoming the first Irish team to cross the Northern Patagonian ice field, crossing the Greenland cap, and two North Pole attempts, which involved taking to the ice for three weeks at a time in temperatures of -65C. According to O'Shea, the first two weeks of an expedition, which involve adjusting to change, are the hardest, so

routine is important. "The biggest thing we always have is routine," he says. "We develop a routine every day, even the days you are not travelling due to bad weather, so you have something to focus on. For us, it could be getting out of the tent every hour or putting on the kettle and having a cup of tea every three hours." Even though O'Shea was not alone on the expeditions, the team had little contact with the outside world: "We were off the grid for about 30 days, five of us crossing the Greenland ice cap with a dog team and camping out in about -30°C." Yet they carried a satellite phone to check in with someone once a day. "Have one person you speak to every day or every couple of days," he says. "It's important it's the same person every single time, so they can assess how you're getting on. It's someone keeping an eye on you from outside: that is very important." While the physical effects of Covid-19 on the vulnerable have made us aware to be mindful of older people, O'Shea points out that we should also look out for the mental effects on young people. "A lot of older people, who have seen and come through so much in life, are probably more resilient than the 20- or 30-year-olds who are out all the time. Now, their whole life is gone, they need a bit of attention. Older people are already used to a slower lifestyle." Dublin-based psychotherapist and cognitive behaviour therapist Susi Lodola says it is normal to struggle with this new stay-at-home situation. "Human beings have an innate need to connect and it's

natural to feel isolated and lonely as your routine is disrupted and you are told to practise social distancing or self-isolation," she says. Lodola warns that being out of our routine and spending more time alone can lead to unhelpful thoughts, but she recommends steps to help overcome this. "Explore what goes through your mind when you feel lonely or fearful," she says. "Often it is worry about the future. There are two types of worry: worrying about problems that need solutions now, and worrying about hypothetical problems, imagining worst-case scenarios. "There are situations that are out of your control and thinking about them constantly will not change them, but rather increase your feelings of fear and loneliness. On the other hand, knowing that there are problems that you can solve gives you a sense of control. Focus your attention towards making plans for activities which can help you feel better." She recommends planning activities (see panel) and building a new daily routine. "Think about activities you used to enjoy before life got too busy – maybe you used to crochet or plant vegetables. Also look into connecting with people through the internet. "Letting go of unhelpful thoughts, engaging in new activities and creating new routines will help you feel better. You may not get rid of feeling lonely and isolated completely, but that is OK. Feelings come, and they go again. They don't stay with you all the time. This too will pass."



THOMAS DEREGNEAUX; COLM HOGAN; CHRISTOPHE FAVREAU/PPL/JGR

REVAMP YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

- Keep to a schedule — this will give you a sense of control over your situation. Make a weekly planner, write down your schedule and pin it somewhere you can see it.
- Do something meaningful — this will help you get a sense of purpose. This may be signing up to be an online volunteer, or reaching out online to other people who may feel isolated.
- Look out for free online resources. Audible offers free audiobooks, for example, while the Metropolitan Opera streams nightly operas and universities across the globe provide free online courses.
- Write a letter — you may not be comfortable with technology, but even if you are, this is a nice way to connect. It could be to someone you have not been in touch with for a long time.
- Create some comfort — light scented candles, cook your favourite meal, put on a face mask and listen to your favourite music.
- Create something — arts and crafts, a journal, write a short story or colour in adult colouring books.

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