

Some thoughts on managing Winter Lockdown

I am being asked what we can do to address the fact that many of our boys are struggling with low motivation, apathy and procrastination. There is an article that I have written about low motivation and procrastination in general. It's certainly not an uncommon problem, especially in years 11, 12 and 13, frequently getting really pronounced at this time of year, which usually combines the after-effects of Mocks with mud, rain and grey skies. This year we have the added challenge of lockdown.

So what might help specifically in the weird situation we are in? Let's look at what we're up against.

1. It really is genuinely weird! Humans are pack animals who are designed to be physically active. We are being asked to go against our natures in every respect so it is bound to make us feel very odd. People are reporting feeling apathetic, sleepy, like they want to hibernate etc. Humans adapt rapidly – that's why we've been able to survive. Many of us are adapting by becoming less energetic because our usual outlets are denied us – but that is against our natures so we are feeling the impact. It's an adaptation that isn't making us feel great!
2. Many of us, and this includes Warwick boys are spending unprecedented amounts of time hunched over computers. We are in the 'sad chimp' position.



Our brains and bodies are continuously feeding back to one another. If we are in the 'sad chimp' position, our brain gets the message that something is wrong. We are in a defensive,

protective, energy-saving position. This becomes self-reinforcing. Something is wrong? Right, well, we need to protect ourselves! Better hunker down! It's a vicious circle. The more you hunker down, the more you will want to hunker down!

3. What we need is to counteract 'sad chimp' with 'happy chimp'. (See attached photo). When we are in the 'happy chimp' position which is expansive, wide, active and relaxed, our brains get the message that all is well – it's OK to play and relax – and so our mood will tend to improve. In this case, we can create a virtuous circle. The more active we are, (providing we don't exhaust ourselves!), the more alert we will feel and the more active we will want to be.



We all need to understand this! It is vital that we get away from 'sad chimp' position as much as we can. In school, even the little breaks as boys move between buildings help but we don't have those now.

4. Many Warwick boys are used to huge amounts of competitive sport. It is important that they understand that stopping suddenly, as they have been forced to, is like doing 'cold turkey' when coming off drugs. Their bodies have been used to a wonderful mix of endorphin, adrenalin and dopamine – and suddenly they've stopped. It's not surprising that some of them are becoming increasingly apathetic and are also seeking the thrills of video games even more than normal. Unfortunately, whilst video games will help add back some helpful neurochemicals, they tend to put boys back in the 'sad chimp' position.
5. Teenagers tend to be 'all or nothing' thinkers. Think how vehement they can be in their political views or in their belief that, for example, 'She is the only one I will ever love!' For

some, then, it's rugby or nothing, hockey or nothing and so on. If you suggest running, for example, some will go for it, others will fire back with 'I hate running.' And that's that.

6. Teenage boys are known for enjoying taking risks. It's all part of the individuation process, the assertion of their place in the pack and sexual display. Unfortunately, they're also not very good at assessing risk – hence, the number of car accidents involving young men, the risk taking with drugs, sex and alcohol etc. They are unlikely to see that if, for example, they choose to react to lockdown by never leaving the house, it's not the ideal recipe for fantastic mental health!
7. Boys are not physically and mentally fully grown until they are 25. They therefore need at least 8 hours of sleep, preferably more, until then. If they are young teenagers, they need considerably more. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-much-sleep-do-kids-need/> Getting out of a good sleep routine because of lockdown is only going to make things worse. You can't feel alert and motivated, if you are tired.

So what can we do about it?

I'm sorry if what I'm going to say sounds obvious. I'm also sorry if it sounds impossible. I am the mother of 4 myself, 2 boys, 2 girls and I am very grateful they are now adults and I'm not having to deal with this!

However, it is **essential** that we keep the boys active.

Teachers, I suggest that you start or lessons with some physical movement. Maybe this could be discussed amongst you so that it becomes a cross school pattern. Mr Wood, from the leisure centre, has sent out suggestions for exercises etc and I'm sure the PE department has resources available too, as I know they're working very hard to get boys active.

Set activities which take boys out of 'sad chimp', both classwork and homework, where you possibly can.

Form Tutors, you could explain points 1 – 7 above in a pupil friendly way. Also consider how you can use form periods to get boys physically active and away from 'sad chimp'.

Parents, do absolutely everything you can to get the boys outside and active or at least active. Running, walking, cycling (both road and mountain) are obvious. I know many of you have table tennis tables and trampolines. Have family competitions. Set up a basketball hoop. Use indoor gym equipment. Suggest roller skating or skateboarding. Consider investing in an e-scooter. Get some simple circus equipment eg. Juggling balls, diabolo. Get involved in geo-caching. See if you can get them to do an online sport, exercise or dance class. If you're feeling particularly brave, take them wild swimming. There are several good spots in rivers locally and people have been doing it, even without wetsuits – though it's very important not to swim after heavy rain and when the rivers are in flood and essential to check out details of how to wild swim safely on the outdoor swimming society website. <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/category/survive/rivers/>

You might have to lead by example! Modelling is generally more productive than nagging. Nagging simply creates resistance and a more entrenched 'no'.

Remember too, that kids don't actually have to be 'doing something' to enjoy hanging out outside. Suggest that they meet up with a friend and go and hang out in the park. Teens need the opportunity to be independent and to have some privacy and space from their families and they are

so lacking in those opportunities now. Providing they are only hanging out with one person and are observing social distancing, they are following the guidance. You can set boundaries for them, reinforce advice about 'stranger danger' and, of course, make sure they have their phones with them, if you are concerned about their safety.

It's also important to try to keep as normal as possible a routine going, to ensure a healthy eating and sleeping pattern.

Everyone, do as much as you can to encourage flexible thinking. eg. Going for a run might be a useful experiment to see how it might affect one's mood. It isn't a lifelong commitment, just worth giving a try.

Nagging is counter-productive. You might consider the Motivational Interviewing approach instead. Here's a great recent Guardian article about it and you'll find masses more on the Internet about this approach to encouraging change.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/opinion/change-someones-mind.html?referringSource=articleShare>

Important note: Those recovering from Covid 19 need to be careful building up exercise. There is research showing that overdoing it in the early stages can leave the patient feeling exhausted the next day.

Good luck, everyone!

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