Occupational Therapy Australia

Normal life is being disrupted (again)

Navigating disruption in a changing world



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Normal life is being disrupted (again)

The world is changing, and it's impacting everyday life:

- Conflict in the Middle East is causing widespread disruption across the world
- Disruption to national and international transport may affect distribution and cost of fresh produce and manufactured goods
- Fuel availability has reduced, with immediate and future impacts for vehicle, rail, air and sea transport
- Everyday products made using oil-based materials will become less available or more expensive

The cost of living was already rising and now the economy is feeling even less stable. Changes in fuel availability and cost may affect how easily we can move around and access some goods.

Each of us will be affected differently according to where we live, our personal situation, skills and experience, and the things we need to do. During COVID we stayed apart to stay safe; this time we'll need to work together to share resources and minimize disruption. We'll also need to be mindful of how disruption can affect our mental, physical and occupational health.

What can we do?

Many of us will experience disruption to everyday life, so it's helpful to think about how we can adapt daily life by looking at:



Getting where we need to go



Managing everyday resources



Doing what we do

- Productivity
- Self-care
- Leisure



Connecting with others



Getting where we need to go

Changes to fuel availability and transport costs can affect how we get around. Be proactive in prioritising and planning how to get where you need to go.



Reduce travel where possible

Thinking carefully about travel can help reduce strain while still supporting participation in everyday activities.

- Consider which trips are essential and which could happen less often
- Combine errands into one trip instead of multiple shorter trips
- Consider phone, online, or local alternatives for face-to-face commitments

Use active and public transport

Active and public transport are often low cost and offer the bonus of exercising as you travel:

- Walk, cycle or scoot to your destination, nearest train station or bus stop
- Offer to travel with others who are less confident using public transport
- Use travel time for rest, reading, or simple tasks on a mobile device

Share the journey

Sharing the journey reduces costs and can build community:

- Coordinate rides with family, friends, or colleagues
- Find out if your region, club or workplace has a centralised carpool system, or set one up using a carpool app
- Invite someone to stay the night at your place to avoid repeated long drives

Keep it local

Travel limitations provide an opportunity to explore your own backyard:

- Consider accessing services and activities closer to home
- Plan a staycation for your annual leave or take holidays or day trips closer to home



Managing everyday resources

Everyday life depends on access to money, food, goods, and services. When resources are under pressure, being deliberate about how we use them can help reduce stress and support daily routines.



Reflect on your values

Values describe the things that are important to you, that shape the decisions you make about how you spend your time, what you do and how you spend your money. Reflecting on what you value most helps when resources are limited.

Review your budget

Budgeting can feel boring, but this is an important time to review your household budget:

- Will your income be affected?
- Which expenses might increase? (e.g. transport, travel, goods and services)
- Where could spending be reduced? (e.g. reducing spending on “treats”, choosing lower cost alternatives)

If you are concerned about meeting the increasing cost of living, speak with an independent or community based service that offers financial advice and support, and ask utilities providers about payment plans.

Tap into the circular economy

Tapping into the circular economy can help reduce costs by re using, sharing, borrowing, or selling items instead of buying new.

Check out second-hand stores or online platforms for pre-owned goods.

Think about what could be borrowed rather than bought – put a call out to friends or family when you need something.

Public libraries offer books, DVDs and online resources, and there are other kinds of libraries too – with toys, tools, baby equipment, clothing. Some are free and others have membership or borrowing fees.

You could even make some money by selling items you no longer need.



Food shopping

When food prices rise or income is less predictable, small changes in how we plan, shop and cook can make a difference. Preparing meals at home is usually cheaper than takeaway or ready made foods – find recipes from friends, online, or in supermarkets for simple, nutritious meals using basic ingredients.

Plan before you shop

- Check what you already have before buying more
- Plan meals around ingredients you already have
- Write a shopping list and stick to it
- Shop less often to reduce impulse buys
- Avoid shopping when hungry

Choose lower cost options

- Store brand items are often cheaper
- Compare prices by weight or unit price rather than package size
- Buy seasonal fruit and vegetables
- Buy cheaper cuts of meat and slow cook them
- Consider frozen or tinned vegetables and legumes

Reduce food waste

- Store food carefully so it stays fresh for longer
- Use leftovers creatively for lunches or second meals
- Freeze excess food for later use

Grow at home

You don't need a large garden to start growing produce. Grab some pots or old tubs to plant your favourite vegetables and herbs. Select vegetables that can be harvested a little at a time, not all at once. Share seeds, cuttings or produce with neighbours and friends.



Doing what we do

We all have things we want to do (like playing chess), need to do (like looking after others), or are expected to do (like submitting paperwork). These things shape how we use time. It can be helpful to think about what we do in terms of productivity, self-care and leisure.



Productivity

This includes everything you do for your paid or voluntary work, learning or studying, caring and anything that contributes to your household and community.

Working or studying from home

For people doing desk-based work or study, it may be possible or necessary to reduce commuting and long distance travel. If you are working from home:

- Set up a dedicated workspace – look into whether you can access equipment such as a desk chair, desk of suitable height, keyboard, mouse and monitor if you are using a laptop. Check out resources and advice for working from home
- Keep your work hours similar to your usual schedule
- Be deliberate about taking breaks, moving your body, and eating regularly
- Stay connected with colleagues through phone or online check ins
- If internet or digital services are unreliable, discuss back-up plans with your employer (for example, tasks that can be done offline)

When work still requires travel

Some roles cannot be done from home and rely on travel, transportation, or being physically present. In times of constraint, these roles may feel more demanding. You might need to:

- Check in regularly with your employer or team about expectations and supports
- Look for opportunities to combine trips, share transport, or adjust schedules
- Reach out early if travel costs or logistics become unmanageable



Productivity

This includes everything you do for your paid or voluntary work, learning or studying, caring and anything that contributes to your household and community.

Changes to hours, roles, or tasks

In some industries, disruptions may lead to reduced hours or shifts, temporary changes to duties, redeployment into different tasks, or periods of uncertainty. If your usual work is reduced or becomes unavailable:

- Seek early information about entitlements and supports available to you
- Maintain a daily structure that gives shape to your time
- Consider what you can do to stay productive

Contributing in different ways

Productivity is not only about earning money – feeling useful, capable, and connected is important for mental health and wellbeing. If work as you know it changes, think about how you could contribute by:

- Caring for family members or neighbours
- Offering practical help within your local community
- Supporting others to navigate change
- Maintaining key household or community functions
- Learning new skills



Self-care

When normal life is disrupted, self care can slip down the priority list. Paying attention to your health and wellbeing supports your ability to manage during periods of change.

Personal care

Most personal care tasks shouldn't be disrupted by the current situation but do reach out for help if you don't have the things you need to support health and hygiene, like medicine and soap.

Exercise

Include exercise in your day – it's essential for physical and mental health. Find a form of exercise that you enjoy. Many people find exercising with others to be more motivating – you could walk with a neighbour or join a local tai chi group.

Healthy eating

Nourish yourself with regular, balanced meals and plenty of water. Borrow recipe books from the library or look online for healthy meal ideas.

Sleep and rest

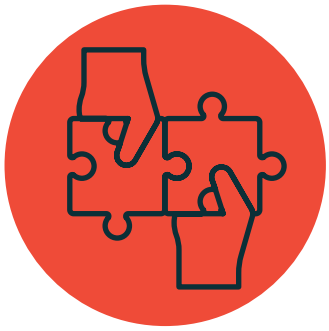
Sleep is important for your health. Be disciplined and keep regular bedtime and waking times, develop routines to wind down.

Health care

If attending health appointments in person is difficult, find out if telehealth or online appointments are available.

Mental health

These are uncertain times, and it's natural to feel stressed or anxious or experience disrupted sleep, especially if worrying about finances. Reach out to friends, family and your usual care providers, or access phone or online mental health support services.



Leisure

Leisure activities are important for rest, enjoyment, creativity, and connection. When resources are tight, leisure may need to be simpler and more local – but it can still be meaningful and enjoyable.

Leisure ideas to try

- Listen to music you enjoy – revisit an old album, play music while cooking
- Read for pleasure – perhaps using physical books or magazines (borrow, swap, or re-read favourites)
- Play board or card games
- Invite friends over to watch a movie or sports game on TV
- Explore your local area on foot or by bike, noticing details you might usually pass by – trees, architecture, seasonal changes
- Get active – shoot some hoops at a local basketball court, join a pickleball club, use an outdoor fitness station
- Attend community events – local festivals, workshops, film screenings and exhibitions
- Create something using materials you already have – drawing, writing, sewing, or simple DIY projects
- Spend time outdoors – in a park or garden, playground, birdwatching



Connecting with others

Maintaining connection with others is essential when navigating uncertain times. Together, groups and communities may be able to creatively address resource challenges.

Find ways to meet

If travelling longer distances isn't possible, use online platforms to connect with friends and family.

If you're a member of an organisation or club, explore options for hybrid (online and face-to-face) or smaller local hub events in place of larger centralized events, to reduce the need to travel.

Share skills and assets

Consider what skills or assets you can offer, and encourage others to share theirs:

- Could you give someone the unused bike from your shed?
- Could you refurbish or service an old bike for someone?
- Could you coach someone who wants to get back to cycling?

Or perhaps you could help with planting a vegetable patch, donating to a local charity, setting up online meetings, helping someone use public transport or making home-cooked meals.

Check in with others

People who already experience disadvantage are often the most vulnerable when disruptions occur. Check in with your colleagues after a meeting, make time to call a relative or drop in to a neighbour to ask how they're going and if they need any support in navigating the disruptions to normal life.



Look for hidden treasure...

Changes to mobility and resources are unpleasant and can feel frustrating or restrictive. Focus on what remains possible and be realistic about what can be achieved under changing conditions. Aim for a balance of self-care, productivity and leisure, with variety throughout your day and week.

Look for hidden treasure amongst the disruption. Embracing local living may be more sustainable and allow for a slower pace, rediscovering simple pleasures and spending more time with those nearest to you.

What do occupational therapists do?

Occupational therapists (OTs) are health professionals who support health and wellbeing for people at all life stages. They have a broad understanding of the word 'occupation' – using it to describe everything that people want to do (like going to the movies), need to do (like looking after themselves), or are expected to do (like going to work or handing in assignments).

Illness, injury, developmental challenges and external disruptions can impact peoples' abilities to participate in occupations, so OTs work with people to explore whether making a change to the person, the occupation or the environment might help them to participate in the things they want, need, and are expected to do. Making a change to the person might involve learning new skills or ways of doing things. Making a change to the occupation might involve doing the same occupation in a different way or finding an alternate occupation that meets the same need. Changing the environment might involve adjustments to the physical setting, objects and resources, social supports, or expectations.

This guide may be shared freely.

This is general information intended to support you in managing occupational disruption caused by energy and economic challenges. Consider any suggestions in line with current government recommendations. Please contact a health professional for specific health advice or a financial professional for specific financial advice.

Lorrae Mynard is an occupational therapist, educator, and researcher with practice experience in Australia, Canada, and the UK. She was awarded 2023 Occupational Therapist of the Year and is the founder of OccupationalFormulation.com. Her 2020 COVID guides for Occupational Therapy Australia were translated into more than a dozen languages and used internationally.

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