

Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak

18 March 2020

In January 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus disease, COVID-19, to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. WHO stated that there is a high risk of COVID-19 spreading to other countries around the world. In March 2020, WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.

WHO and public health authorities around the world are acting to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this time of crisis is generating stress throughout the population. The considerations presented in this document have been developed by the WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Use as a series of messages that can be used in communications to support mental and psychosocial well-being in different target groups during the outbreak.

Messages for the general population

1. COVID-19 has and is likely to affect people from many countries, in many geographical locations. When referring to people with COVID-19, do not attach the disease to any particular ethnicity or nationality. Be empathetic to all those who are affected, in and from any country. People who are affected by COVID-19 have not done anything wrong, and they deserve our support, compassion and kindness.
2. Do not refer to people with the disease as “COVID-19 cases”, “victims” “COVID-19 families” or “the diseased”. They are “people who have COVID-19”, “people who are being treated for COVID-19”, or “people who are recovering from COVID-19”, and after recovering from COVID-19 their life will go on with their jobs, families and loved ones. It is important to separate a person from having an identity defined by COVID-19, in order to reduce stigma.
3. Minimize watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 that causes you to feel anxious or distressed; seek information only from trusted sources and mainly so that you can take practical steps to prepare your plans and protect yourself and loved ones. Seek information updates at specific times during the day, once or twice. The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried. Get the facts; not rumours and misinformation. Gather information at regular intervals from the [WHO website](#) and local health authority platforms in order to help you distinguish facts from rumours. Facts can help to minimize fears.

4. Protect yourself and be supportive to others. Assisting others in their time of need can benefit both the person receiving support and the helper. For example, check by telephone on neighbours or people in your community who may need some extra assistance. Working together as one community can help to create solidarity in addressing COVID-19 together.

5. Find opportunities to amplify positive and hopeful stories and positive images of local people who have experienced COVID-19. For example, stories of people who have recovered or who have supported a loved one and are willing to share their experience.

6. Honour carers and healthcare workers supporting people affected with COVID-19 in your community. Acknowledge the role they play in saving lives and keeping your loved ones safe.

Messages for healthcare workers

7. Feeling under pressure is a likely experience for you and many of your colleagues. It is quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak. Managing your mental health and psychosocial well-being during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

8. Take care of yourself at this time. Try and use helpful coping strategies such as ensuring sufficient rest and respite during work or between shifts, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity, and stay in contact with family and friends. Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical well-being. The COVID-19 outbreak is a unique and unprecedented scenario for many workers, particularly if they have not been involved in similar responses. Even so, using strategies that have worked for you in the past to manage times of stress can benefit you now. You are the person most likely to know how you can de-stress and you should not be hesitant in keeping yourself psychologically well. This is not a sprint; it's a marathon.

9. Some healthcare workers may unfortunately experience avoidance by their family or community owing to stigma or fear. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult. If possible, staying connected with your loved ones, including through digital methods, is one way to maintain contact. Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted persons for social support – your colleagues may be having similar experiences to you.

10. Use understandable ways to share messages with people with intellectual, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities. Where possible, include forms of communication that do not rely solely on written information.

11. Know how to provide support to people who are affected by COVID-19 and know how to link them with available resources. This is especially important for those who require mental health and psychosocial support. The stigma associated with mental health problems may cause reluctance to seek support for both COVID-19 and mental health conditions. The [mhGAP Humanitarian Intervention Guide](#) includes clinical guidance for addressing priority mental health conditions and is designed for use by general healthcare workers.

Messages for team leaders or managers in health facilities

12. Keeping all staff protected from chronic stress and poor mental health during this response means that they will have a better capacity to fulfil their roles. Be sure to keep in mind that the current situation will not go away overnight and you should focus on longer-term occupational capacity rather than repeated short-term crisis responses.

13. Ensure that good quality communication and accurate information updates are provided to all staff. Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions. Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures. Ensure that outreach personnel enter the community in pairs. Initiate, encourage and monitor work breaks. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member affected by a stressful event. Ensure that you build in time for colleagues to provide social support to each other.

14. Ensure that staff are aware of where and how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services and facilitate access to such services. Managers and team leaders are facing similar stresses to their staff and may experience additional pressure relating to the responsibilities of their role. It is important that the above provisions and strategies are in place for both workers and managers, and that managers can be role-models for self-care strategies to mitigate stress.

15. Orient all responders, including nurses, ambulance drivers, volunteers, case identifiers, teachers and community leaders and workers in quarantine sites, on how to provide basic emotional and practical support to affected people using [psychological first aid](#).

16. Manage urgent mental health and neurological complaints (e.g. delirium, psychosis, severe anxiety or depression) within emergency or general healthcare facilities. Appropriate trained and qualified staff may need to be deployed to these locations when time permits, and the capacity of general healthcare staff capacity to provide mental health and psychosocial support should be increased (see the [mhGAP Humanitarian Intervention Guide](#)).

17. Ensure availability of essential, generic psychotropic medications at all levels of health care. People living with long-term mental health conditions or epileptic seizures will need uninterrupted access to their medication, and sudden discontinuation should be avoided.

Messages for carers of children

18. Help children find positive ways to express feelings such as fear and sadness. Every child has his or her own way of expressing emotions. Sometimes engaging in a creative activity, such as playing or drawing can facilitate this process. Children feel relieved if they can express and communicate their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

19. Keep children close to their parents and family, if considered safe, and avoid separating children and their carers as much as possible. If a child needs to be separated from his or her primary carer, ensure that appropriate alternative care is provided and that a social worker or equivalent will regularly follow up on the child. Further, ensure that during periods of separation, regular contact with parents and carers is maintained, such as twice-daily scheduled telephone or video calls or other age-appropriate communication (e.g. social media).

20. Maintain familiar routines in daily life as much as possible, or create new routines, especially if children must stay at home. Provide engaging age-appropriate activities for children, including activities for their learning. Where possible, encourage children to continue to play and socialize with others, even if only within the family when advised to restrict social contact.

21. During times of stress and crisis, it is common for children to seek more attachment and be more demanding on parents. Discuss COVID-19 with your children in an honest and age-appropriate way. If your children have concerns, addressing them together may ease their anxiety. Children will observe adults' behaviours and emotions for cues on how to manage their own emotions during difficult times. Additional advice is available [here](#).

Messages for older adults, people with underlying health conditions and their carers

22. Older adults, especially in isolation and those with cognitive decline/dementia, may become more anxious, angry, stressed, agitated and withdrawn during the outbreak or while in quarantine. Provide practical and emotional support through informal networks (families) and health professionals.

23. Share simple facts about what is going on and give clear information about how to reduce risk of infection in words older people with/without cognitive impairment can understand. Repeat the information whenever necessary. Instructions need to be communicated in a clear, concise, respectful and patient way. It may also be helpful for information to be displayed in writing or pictures. Engage family members and other support networks in providing information and helping people to practise prevention measures (e.g. handwashing, etc.).

24. If you have an underlying health condition, make sure to have access to any medications that you are currently using. Activate your social contacts to provide you with assistance, if needed.

25. Be prepared and know in advance where and how to get practical help if needed, like calling a taxi, having food delivered and requesting medical care. Make sure you have up to two weeks of all your regular medicines that you may require.

26. Learn simple daily physical exercises to perform at home, in quarantine or isolation so you can maintain mobility and reduce boredom.

27. Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible or help create new ones in a new environment, including regular exercising, cleaning, daily chores, singing, painting or other activities. Keep in regular contact with loved ones (e.g. via telephone, e-mail, social media or video conference).

Messages for people in isolation

28. Stay connected and maintain your social networks. Try as much as possible to keep your personal daily routines or create new routines if circumstances change. If health authorities have recommended limiting your physical social contact to contain the outbreak, you can stay connected via telephone, e-mail, social media or video conference.

29. During times of stress, pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in healthy activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly, keep regular sleep routines and eat healthy food. Keep things in perspective. Public health agencies and experts in all countries are working on the outbreak to ensure the availability of the best care to those affected

30. A near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel anxious or distressed. Seek information updates and practical guidance at specific times during the day from health professionals and WHO website and avoid listening to or following rumours that make you feel uncomfortable.

Stay informed

Find the latest information from WHO on where COVID-19 is spreading:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>

Advice and guidance from WHO on COVID-19 :

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

<https://www.epi-win.com/>

Addressing social stigma:

https://www.epi-win.com/sites/epiwin/files/content/attachments/2020-02-24/COVID19%20Stigma%20Guide%2024022020_1.pdf

Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19:

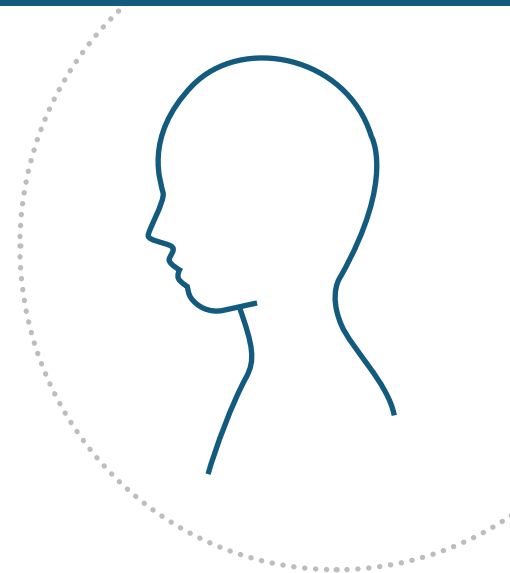
<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/interim-briefing-note-addressing-mental-health-and-psychosocial-aspects-covid-19-outbreak>

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WHO reference number: [WHO/2019-nCoV/MentalHealth/2020.1](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/WHO/2019-nCoV/MentalHealth/2020.1)

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19)

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



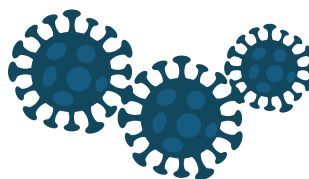
FEELINGS OF FEAR, STRESS AND WORRY ARE NORMAL IN A CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic is new and unexpected. This situation can be unsettling and can cause a sense of loss of control. It is normal for people and communities to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or worried. People may react in different ways. Some common feelings may include:

- ▶ Fear of becoming ill or infected with COVID-19, or infecting others
- ▶ A sense of being socially excluded or judged by others
- ▶ Fear of being separated from loved ones due to isolation or physical distancing
- ▶ Feelings of helplessness, boredom, loneliness and depression as a result of isolation or physical distancing
- ▶ Fear of losing your job or not being able to work and struggling financially
- ▶ Concern about your children's education and wellbeing

CARE FOR YOUR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

- ▶ Stay informed but take breaks from social media, watching, reading, or listening to news stories
- ▶ Practice **physical distancing**, but stay connected. Talk to friends or family about your feelings and concerns through email, phone calls, video chats and social media platforms
- ▶ Practice mindfulness. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate
- ▶ Try to eat healthy meals, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep
- ▶ Consider how to take advantage of any unexpected flexibility in your daily routine
- ▶ Focus on the positive aspects of your life and things you can control
- ▶ Be kind and compassionate to yourself and others
- ▶ If you can, minimize substance use. If you do use substances, practice safer use and good hygiene



YOU'RE NOT ALONE—ASK FOR HELP IF YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED

If you need additional support, call your primary health provider, a registered psychologist or other mental health provider in your community.

If you are in crisis, please contact:

HOPE FOR WELLNESS HELP LINE

Call the toll-free Help Line at
1-855-242-3310 or connect to [the online chat](#).

Available to all **Indigenous peoples across Canada** who are seeking immediate crisis intervention.

Experienced and culturally competent Help Line counsellors can help if you want to talk or are distressed.

Telephone and **online** counselling are available in English and French. On request, telephone counselling is also available in Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut.

CRISIS SERVICES CANADA

1-833-456-4566

Available to **all Canadians** seeking support. Visit [Crisis Services Canada](#) for the distress centres and crisis organizations nearest you.



KIDS HELP PHONE

1-800-668-6868 or
Text **CONNECT** to **686868**

Available to **young Canadians between 5–29 years old** who are seeking 24-hour confidential and anonymous care with professional counsellors.

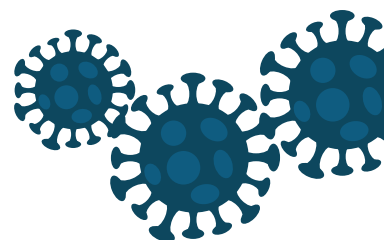
Download the **Always There app** for additional support.

IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE SYMPTOMS, USE THE COVID-19 SYMPTOM SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CORONAVIRUS:

 **1-833-784-4397**

 canada.ca/coronavirus





Taking care of Mental Health of elderly during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 outbreak, all of us should take some extra time and care for ourselves. Follow some simple strategies to improve your well-being

SPEND TIME WITH FAMILY

Spending quality time with family and getting involved in family discussions, while staying at home during this period will help reduce anxiety and distress. Try to connect with your family members through phone call or video call if they stay far from you.



GETTING INVOLVED IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

Keep doing small activities at home to reduce boredom. Keeping yourself busy in the daily activities like gardening, cleaning and cooking will help reduce anxiety. If there is no other family member to help you, identify a support system to buy groceries, medicines and other essentials.



SPEND TIME ON RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

During this stressful time, it is important that you make some time for things you like. Engage in recreational activities like solving puzzles, playing some board games like carrom board or chess, listening to music, reading etc. These will help reduce boredom



CONNECTING TO LOVED ONES

During this time, you might be worried about your loved ones such as children and grandchildren, who stay away from you. Connect with them once in a while through phone calls or video call to keep the stress at bay and for any emergencies.



MAKE SOME TIME FOR EXERCISE

It is important to be physically active. Simple stretching exercises, simple yoga postures, walking indoors or meditation will be beneficial not only for your physical health but also mental health.



CUT DOWN ON LISTENING TO NEWS

With the news of the pandemic everywhere, it is difficult to filter out reliable news. Do not watch news reports all the time as it may be upsetting and misleading. Seek information from credible sources like the website of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (mohfw.gov.in). In case of doubt, ask your loved ones.



Take special care of elderly persons in your family. Remind them to practice hand washing as often as possible. Make sure to tell them to cover their mouth and nose with bent elbow, when they cough or sneeze. Watch out for any symptoms of COVID-19 and reach out for medical help, if necessary. Make sure they eat healthy food and get good sleep.

IN CASE YOU NEED ANY HELP

Please contact COVID -19 Psycho social toll free helpline at 080-46110007
or consult your doctor or a mental health professional

Minding our minds during the COVID-19

These can be difficult times for all of us as we hear about spread of COVID-19 from all over the world, through television, social media, newspapers, family and friends and other sources. The most common emotion faced by all is Fear. It makes us anxious, panicky and can even possibly make us think, say or do things that we might not consider appropriate under normal circumstances.

Understanding the importance of Lockdown

Lockdown is meant to prevent the spread of infection from one person to another, to protect ourselves and others. This means, not stepping out of the house except for buying necessities, reducing the number of trips outside, and ideally only a single, healthy family member making the trips when absolutely necessary. If there is anyone in the house who is very sick and may need to get medical help, you must be aware of the health facility nearest to you.

Handling Social isolation

Staying at home can be quite nice for some time, but can also be boring and restricting. Here are some ways to keep positive and cheerful.

1. Be busy. Have a regular schedule. Help in doing some of the work at home.
2. Distract yourself from negative emotions by listening to music, reading, watching an entertaining programme on television. If you had old hobbies like painting, gardening or stitching, go back to them. Rediscover your hobbies.
3. Eat well and drink plenty of fluids.
4. Be physically active. Do simple indoor exercises that will keep you fit and feeling fit.
5. Sharing is caring. Understand if someone around you needs advice, food or other essentials. Be willing to share.
6. Elderly people may feel confused, lost and need help. Offer them help by getting them what they need, their medicines, daily needs etc.
7. If you have children at home, keep them busy by allowing them to help in the household chores - make them feel responsible and acquire new skills.

Focus on facts, reject rumours and theories

1. Knowledge is power; the more you know about a certain issue, the less fearful you may feel. Make sure to access and believe only the most reliable sources of information for self-protection.
2. Do not follow sensational news or social media posts which may impact your mental state. Do not spread or share any unverified news or information further.
3. Do not keep discussing all the time about who got sick and how. Instead learn about who got well and recovered.
4. Stick to the known advice- hand hygiene and keeping a physical distance from others. It is being careful about yourself, and also about care of others.
5. A common cold is not Corona infection. The symptoms of Corona have been well described. Follow etiquette of sneezing, coughing, avoiding spitting in public places etc.

6. In most people, the Corona infection causes mild symptoms and the person only needs to follow social distancing till he/she stops being infective, usually 2 weeks. Mild infection does not require a person to be admitted in hospital. Only people who have breathing difficulties need to be in hospital. Most people recover.

Handling emotional problems

1. At times of anxiety, practice breathing slowly for a few minutes. Try and distance the thoughts that are making you anxious. Think of something calm and serene, and slow down your mind.
2. When feeling angry and irritated, calming your mind, counting back from 10 to 1, distracting yourself helps.
3. Even when feeling afraid, deal with it by asking yourself:
 - a. What is under my control?
 - b. Am I unnecessarily worrying about the worst thing that can happen?
 - c. When I have been stressed in the past, how have I managed?
 - d. What are the things I can do to help myself and be positive?
4. Feeling lonely or sad is also quite common. Stay connected with others. Communication can help you to connect with family and friends. Call up people whom you haven't spoken to and surprise them. Discuss happy events, common interests, exchange cooking tips, share music.
5. If any of these emotions persist continuously for several days, despite your trying to get out of it, talk about it with someone. If the feelings worsen, a person may feel helpless, hopeless and feel that life is not worth living. If that happens, call at helpline number (080-46110007) for advice from a mental health professional or contact your doctor / mental health professional.

What is NOT advisable

1. Avoid tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. Use of tobacco or alcohol or other drugs to cope with emotions or boredom can worsen physical, mental health and reduce immunity. People who already have a substance use problem may require professional help, especially when they feel low in mood or stressed.
2. Do not shun or judge people with a CoVid infection. While you need to maintain a physical distance and keep yourself safe to prevent such infection, remember they need care and concern. If you know someone who might have the infection, tell them about precautions, and how to get medical assistance, if required.
3. If you happen to get infected with Corona, remember most people get better. Do not panic. Practice self-isolation and take medications that are advised.

Emotional issues after recovery

1. While it is wonderful to recover from Covid infection, you may actually face stress after you have recovered and wish to get back into the community. You may have fear about your loved ones falling ill.
2. People who do not understand the illness well may actually keep you at a distance, which is also very stressful and isolating.

3. You may experience feelings of guilt that you were not able to work or care for others. This may lead to feelings of depression, helplessness or frustration.
4. Use the ways mentioned earlier to deal with these feelings. Share your positive story that it is possible to recover from COVID infection.

Recognise mental health problems in your near and dear ones

Just as you can recognise your own mental health problems, be sensitive to such problems in your near and dear ones, which may include:

1. Changes in sleep patterns
2. Difficulty in sleeping and concentrating
3. Worsening of health problems
4. Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs

Be supportive to them. If the problems persist, please contact the helpline (080-46110007) or contact your doctor or a mental health professional.

Persons with mental illness

Persons who had previous mental illness may face newer challenges during self-isolation or Covid infection:

1. They would also have the same fears and stress as others which may worsen their previous mental health condition
2. Social isolation may make them more withdrawn, moody and irritable
3. They may not seek/ get easy access to medicines and counselling

Help and support is vital for persons with mental illness from their families and other care givers. Health helplines can provide support, in addition to regular taking of prescribed medication, a regular daily routine, keeping engaged and positive.

Remember, good mental status in the difficult times may win you the battle more easily!



Taking care of Mental Health of Children during COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID -19 and its consequences can make children anxious and stressed. Take care of their mental health with these simple strategies.

PROVIDE ASSURANCE WHENEVER NEEDED

It is important to reassure your children. Listen to their concerns and try answering their queries related to the outbreak. Spend quality time with them and give them the attention they need. Reading them stories to put them to sleep will make them feel loved.



KEEP THEM IN CONTACT WITH THEIR FRIENDS

Physical distancing from friends can be a cause of distress for the children. Encourage them to talk to their friends, cousins and loved ones by calling them up or through video calls. You can also involve your children and their friends in some fun activities which they can do together by staying connected virtually.



MANAGE YOUR CHILD'S ANXIETY

It is normal for your child to become anxious at this time. Look out for the emotional cues in your child and talk to them regarding the same. Avoid being judgemental when they express their feelings. Do not avoid their questions related to COVID or speak to them harshly. This can increase their fear and anxiety. Instead, make them understand that things will be better if we take proper care. Remember that this is a new situation for your children and do not get irritated with them.



GIVE THEM CLEAR INFORMATION

It is not advisable to provide children with a lot of reports and news related to the outbreak. However it is important to give them correct information as to what is happening around the world. Give them proper facts in a way that they can understand so that they do not remain confused, as this may increase their anxiety. You can make the explanations creative through pictures and drawings.



ENGAGE THEM IN INDOOR ACTIVITIES

During this time, children may get easily bored. Involve them in indoor games to cut down the boredom. You can also make their learning fun by giving them puzzles to solve and teaching them crafts. Encourage them to pick up a hobby. Involve the children in some stretching exercises, yoga or dancing which they will enjoy. You can also involve them in doing simple household activities to keep them engaged



MAKE A ROUTINE OF LEARNING AT HOME

At this time, schools are closed, however this should not stop the children from learning. Ensure that they have a regular habit of studying by giving them small assignments related to their lessons. Check the assignments to understand their progress



Above all, take good care of your children's health. Ensure that they practise hand washing and cover their mouth and nose with bent elbow when they cough or sneeze. Watch out for any symptoms of COVID-19 and reach out to the doctor if necessary. Have a plan in advance in case your child falls sick. Ensure that the children eat healthy food and get good sleep and rest.

IN CASE YOU NEED ANY HELP

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सुखमेव जयते
MINISTRY OF HEALTH & FAMILY WELFARE
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (Institute of National Importance)



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