

Managing Anxiety and Stress in Families with Children and Youth During the COVID-19 Outbreak

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults, children, and youth. The Child & Youth Mental Health & Substance Use (CYMHSU) Community of Practice has created the following document to provide information and advice on managing anxiety and stress in families with children and youth during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keys to Managing Anxiety & Stress

Quick Links:

- [Reducing stress in yourself and others](#)
- [Information for parents](#)

Stress and Coping

Uncertainty is hard for everyone, yet there are many simple and practical ways to cope through even the most difficult situations. Research even shows that coping with stress builds resilience; in other words, it can make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger. We are already seeing creative solutions, acts of kindness and many, many people working together to improve life for each other.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. How you respond to the outbreak can depend on your background, your previous life experiences, and the community you live in. There is no right or wrong reaction.

Some people may seem not to react at all and still be very concerned on the inside. Stress and anxiety can make people tired, irritable or lead to muscle tension. Sometimes, it shows up as anger, or leads to more arguing with those close to us.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis include

- Older people and people with chronic diseases who are at higher risk for COVID-19
- Children and teens
- People who are helping with the response to COVID-19, like doctors and other health care providers, or first responders
- People who have mental health conditions, including problems with substance use

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak can include

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed or feel like you want to harm yourself or others call

- 911
- BC Suicide Line: If you are considering suicide or are concerned about someone who may be, please call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or visit the [Crisis Centre FAQ page](#).

RESOURCES

Links to tools & supports

For Everyone

- [Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event](#)
- [How to Talk to Your Friends About COVID-19](#)

For Communities

- [Coping with Stress During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#)
- [Taking Care of Your Behavioural Health During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#)

For Families & Children

- [Helping Children Cope with Emergencies](#)
- [Coping After a Disaster – A Ready Wrigley activity book for children ages 3-10](#)
- [7 Tips for Talking to Kids About COVID-19](#)
- [Support Your Kids During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

People with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms. Additional information can be found at the Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre (KeltyMentalHealth.ca) website.

Taking care of yourself, your friends, and your family can help you cope with stress. Helping others cope with their stress can also make your community stronger

Things you can do to support yourself

- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting. Consider setting a specific time each day for consuming information and avoid repeated checking. It fuels anxiety.
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise outdoors regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Make time to unwind. Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling. Virtual connection with others can improve mood and lower stress.
- Learn more about [managing your anxiety during COVID-19](#).

Call your healthcare provider if stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row.

Reduce stress in yourself and others

[Sharing the facts](#) about COVID-19 and understanding the actual risk to yourself and people you care about can make an outbreak less stressful.

When you share accurate information about COVID-19 you can help make people feel less stressed and allow you to connect with them.

Learn more about [taking care of your emotional health](#).

For parents

Children and teens react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with the COVID-19 calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. Some common changes to watch for include

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- More refusal to cooperate than usual
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

There are many things you can do to support your child

- Take time to talk with your child or teen about the COVID-19 outbreak. Answer questions and [share facts](#) about COVID-19 in a way that your child or teen can understand.
- Reassure your child or teen that they are safe. Let them know it is ok if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope from you.
- Limit your family’s exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Try to keep up with regular routines. If schools are closed, create a schedule for learning activities and relaxing or fun activities.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise outdoors, and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members.

Learn more about [helping children cope](#) and [talking to your child about COVID-19](#).