

TIP SHEET: MENTAL HEALTH AND COPING DURING COVID-19

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) may be stressful for people and communities. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. The emotional impact of an emergency on a person can depend on the person's characteristics and experiences, the social and economic circumstances of the person and their community as well as the availability of local resources. People can become more distressed if they see repeated images or hear repeated reports about the outbreak in the media.

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

- Individuals with preexisting mental health conditions, including problems with substance abuse
- Individuals helping with the response to COVID-19, like doctors and other healthcare providers or first responders
- Children

Reactions during an infectious disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about your own health status and that of your loved ones who may have been exposed to COVID-19.
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns.
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating.
- Worsening of chronic health problems.
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms.

Coping with these feelings and getting help when you need it will help you, your family and your community recover from a disaster. Connect with family, friends and others in your community. Take care of yourself and each other and know when and how to seek help. You should be sure to call your healthcare provider if stress reactions interfere with your daily activities for several days in a row.

Things you can do to support yourself:

- Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19.
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Take breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do some other activities you enjoy to return to your normal life.
- Connect with others. Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member. Maintain healthy relationships.
- Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking.

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FOR PARENTS

Children 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 respond to stress in the same way. Some common changes to watch for in children:

- Excessive crying and irritation
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (e.g., toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs

If your child is experiencing the signs of stress, there are things you can do to support them, such as:

- Take time to talk with your child about the COVID-19 outbreak. Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child can understand.
- Reassure your child 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 child’s exposure to media coverage of the event. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Help your child to have a sense of structure. Once it is safe to return to school or childcare, help them return to their regular activity.
- Be a role model; take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members and rely on your social support system.

Source: National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases