

COVID-19 Resources

Coping With the COVID-19 Crisis: The Importance of Care for Caregivers—Tips for Parents and Teachers

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis unlike any our country has faced before. Unlike other events, the pandemic is affecting every community in some way. The constantly evolving situation may create significant stress and uncertainty—not only for children and youth, but also for those charged with caring for those students at home and in schools. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of this crisis creates anxiety and a sense of helplessness. It is important for parents and teachers to understand what puts individuals at higher risk for traumatic stress, as well as stress mediation strategies. When caregivers engage in self-care activities that help promote a sense of safety and security, children and youth are more capable of addressing their own challenges related to COVID-19.

CHRONIC STRESS

Unlike an acute traumatic stressor that has a discrete beginning and end, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing event that has the potential to cause chronic stress. Chronic stress causes the body to stay in a constant state of alertness, despite being in no immediate danger. Prolonged chronic stress can disturb the all major systems in the body (e.g., immune, digestive, cardiovascular, sleep) and can increase risk for psychiatric disorders and some physical disorders such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.

RISKS AND STRESSORS

Caregivers may experience varying reactions during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to remember that a variety of factors will influence how a person feels including personal characteristics (physical health conditions, pre-existing mental health conditions) and other vulnerabilities (such as job, finances, family). Crisis events that are shorter in duration are generally less traumatic than those that are long-lasting. The rapidly evolving and prolonged situation of the pandemic has the potential to add additional stress. Parents and teachers are experiencing a number of changes and potential stressors.

BE AWARE OF WARNING SIGNS

Caregivers may experience varying reactions when learning about a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The signs and symptoms of chronic stress and secondary trauma can sometimes be observed by others and sometimes are only known to the individual who is affected. Consequently, monitoring both oneself and others is important. Indicators of chronic stress and secondary trauma can come in the form of physical reactions, emotional symptoms, and social or interpersonal signs.

- Physical reactions, such as chronic fatigue and exhaustion are the most frequently reported. Difficulty paying attention, confusion, hypervigilance, headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension may also be felt. Sleeping and eating may be difficult.
- Emotional symptoms can include excessive worry or anxiety, disconnection or numbing, feelings of anger, compassion fatigue, demoralization, or resignation. Recurrent crisis thoughts or distressing dreams and even some confusion and difficulty making everyday decisions can occur. Some people may experience sadness,

depression, hopelessness, and/or suicidal thoughts.

- Social or interpersonal signs can include difficulties in relationships at home or work, irritability, outbursts of anger, social withdrawal, or isolation. Excessive use of alcohol and other substances can also be warning signs of stress or secondary trauma.

ASSOCIATED GRIEF

The pandemic has resulted in a great deal of loss for caregivers. For teachers, schools are a type of community, and staff members feel very connected to the school and to work colleagues. For parents, many of them also have lost the sense of community felt though their own places of work. In addition, homes have now become a site for teaching, learning, and working. The once normal flow of home life has been lost. Grief is a natural response to such losses for caregivers, and it is not unusual for them to feel a sense of sadness, emptiness, guilt, anxiety, and/or anger. It is important for caregivers to grieve and mourn by talking about the sense of loss and sharing their feelings with others.

COVID-19 has resulted in feelings of grief. Common losses include:

- Social connections, as we no longer may have contact with close friends. Children are not able to play together, there is no in-person social engagement, no touching, and no hugging. This can be disruptive to our emotional well-being.
- Losing the way we carry out our daily lives, as it is no longer safe to continue as in the past. We can't engage in many of our familiar routines anymore.
- Questioning our assumptions of safety and security. We may be losing our sense of safety in the environment, and we may question our ability to stay safe. The changing nature of what is known about the virus has contributed to this loss of safety and security.
- Losing trust in our systems. Government leaders and agencies, medical systems, religious bodies, the stock market, and corporations may be perceived as having failed to meet our expectations.
- Even if not directly affected by a specific loss, we tend to feel the grief of others. This compassionate grief can just as painful as a personal loss.
- Anticipatory grief is the feeling we get when the future is uncertain. The current situation is more confusing because the threat is something that cannot be seen, thus compromising our sense of general safety.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Self-care can come in many forms, and each can help address stress and feelings of loss and grief. Parents and teachers are encouraged to take time to take care of themselves and model self-care strategies for children. The following strategies can be effective in managing some of the challenges associated with this crisis.

- **Create a structure and routine for the day.** By maintaining a daily routine and building structure into the day, you can foster a sense of control and bring predictability to this unpredictable situation. This will help to reduce stress responses, keep our bodies regulated, and facilitate recovery.
 - Establish a morning routine, meal routine, exercise routine, bedtime routine.
 - Create a “to do” list.
 - If you are working from home or your children are engaged in schoolwork, have a designated workspace.
 - Do allow for flexibility in the routine given the challenges with social distancing and stay at home orders.
- **Reduce and limit exposure to media coverage of the pandemic.** The anxiety associated with the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the pandemic makes us crave information as a means of making sense of what is going on and regaining control. However, watching media coverage for long periods of time may actually increase anxiety, as this can keep our response systems activated. As a way to reduce stress, get

news only from reputable sources, watch or read the news for short periods of time (i.e., no more than 30 minutes), and don't view the news right before bed.

- Instead you may want to watch a documentary, funny shows/movies, YouTube Videos, and TEDTalks, or listen to humorous podcasts, etc.
- **Attend to your physical self-care.** This includes getting adequate sleep and taking breaks during the workday.
 - Exercise can help calm the physical body and reduce stress. Examples include taking walks or bike rides, or working in the garden.
 - Eat healthy foods and limit the use of alcohol or other substances, which can interfere with sleep, and should not be relied upon to help cope or relax.
 - Use stress management techniques such as using yoga, deep breathing, calming self-talk, or soothing music.
- **Care for your emotional health.** Finding a balance between work and home is important, especially during times when crisis demands add to already busy workloads. The use of good time management skills and priority setting can help people focus on something practical to do right now to manage the situation. Keep in mind the difference between things one can change (in the system or the world) and accepting those one cannot.
 - Use meditation and deep breathing strategies. There are several websites, audio files, and apps that can help you with the steps of meditation and deep breathing.
 - Use a journal to take a few minutes and focus on gratitude and write a few things you are thankful for in life. Identifying things to be grateful for in life is a strategy to shift your mindset.
- **Provide for your intellectual care.** Activities that allow for creativity, learning, and knowledge development can help to motivate us and develop our problem-solving skills.
 - Read a book. Setting time aside to read can help you shift your mental focus. You can also participate in book clubs online as a way to connect with others.
 - Write stories or a personal journal as a way to get your thoughts on paper.
 - Identify a project to complete that may be challenging and rewarding.
 - Return to old hobbies or learn a new hobby.
- **Maintain social connections and focus on social care. This can contribute to resilience. We can still talk and listen to each other while maintaining physical distance.**
 - Communicate regularly with family and friends. Even though this virus requires social distancing, you can connect using phones, social media, virtual meetings, text messages, and letters.
 - Practice your spiritual or religious faith; this may provide comfort and be calming.
 - Engage in acts of kindness, activism, or advocacy. These actions can reduce stress.
 - Engage in hobbies or passions for creativity.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation that is causing stress and uncertainty. However, there are steps that parents and teachers can take to foster their own health and well-being and the health and well-being of children. Keep in mind that recovery from a crisis takes time and may not happen in a linear fashion—especially during a pandemic that does not have a discrete, known end. It will take time to integrate new self-care strategies into your routines. Awareness, balance, and connection can help! Set and celebrate achievable goals and celebrate the resilience of the great people in your school who go above and beyond as they support and help others in times of crises.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Resources for Parents

Grief Resources

- [Addressing Grief: Brief Facts and Tips](#)
- [When Grief/Loss Hits Close to Home: Tips for Caregivers](#)
- [Sesame Street in Communities: Helping Kids Grieve](#)
- [Coping With Grief – BYU Social Skills: Self Awareness](#)
- [Being Resilient – BYU Social Skills: Self Awareness](#)
- [Recommended books for children coping with grief or trauma](#)

Bailey, B. (2020). COVID-19: Five Helpful Responses for Families. Conscious Discipline. <https://consciousdiscipline.com/covid-19-five-helpful-responses-for-families/>

Child Mind Institute. (n.d.). *Anxiety and Coping with the Coronavirus*. <https://childmind.org/article/anxiety-and-coping-with-coronavirus/>

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (n.d.). *How to Ease Children's Anxiety About COVID-19*. <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/March-2020/How-to-Ease-Children-s-Anxiety-About-COVID-19>

Other Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Emergency Responders: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>

Institute for Disaster Mental Health, SUNY at New Paltz. (2020). *Tips for community members: COVID-19: Managing stress in this anxious time*. <https://newpaltz.edu/media/idmh/covid-19/IDMH%20COVID19%20Community%20Stress%20Management%20Tip%20Sheet%202020%20Final.pdf>

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National Institute of Health. (n.d.). Your Healthiest Self: Wellness Toolkits <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/your-healthiest-self-wellness-toolkits>

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