

Business Connections

Virginia
Commonwealth
University

May 2020

Managing Stress and Depression During Social Isolation: Tips for Parents and Caregivers

During the COVID-19 shutdown, our daily lives have abruptly changed. Fear and anxiety about an outbreak or becoming sick can be overwhelming and result in strong emotions. These emotions can be difficult to process leading to stress and depression in everyone from young children to adults. The goal of this fact sheet is to provide parents and caregivers with information on how to help their child, adolescent, or young adult manage stress and/or depression during social isolation.

Be a Role Model ●

Your child, adolescent, or young adult will follow your lead!

- Think before you react to news or situations and set a positive example.
- Model proper hygiene and explain the reasons why.
 - Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds
 - Sneeze or cough into your elbow
 - Avoid hugging or handshakes
 - Eat a balanced diet, exercise, and encourage healthy sleep habits
- A physical result our body experiences during stress can be rapid breathing. Demonstrate how to use deep breathing to increase calmness in those times. Do this with your child to model the technique.

Make Time to Talk ●

Some may have difficulty expressing their concerns about the virus and the shutdown. As parents and caregivers, it is important to make time to talk!

- **STAY CALM**
 - Focus on the positive! This can be challenging when faced with the unknown; however, focusing on the positives (safety and health, time together, etc.) can assist with decreasing stress or depression.
 - Be aware of how you talk about COVID-19 and provide reassurance to your child as their fear or anxiety will increase or decrease based on how you discuss the topic.
- **LISTEN**
 - Listen when they are expressing their emotions (verbally, written, through art, etc.). Remember, acting out behaviors are also a way of communicating!
 - When unsure of how to converse about the topic, people often ask questions. Allow your child's questions to be the guide for the conversation.
- **OFFER ANSWERS AND REASSURANCE**
 - Provide accurate information and make sure it is age appropriate.
 - Be honest and accurate! Often, situations that are imagined are worse than reality. Be honest in answering questions without providing unnecessary information as it can become overwhelming.
 - Explain social distancing and the importance of staying away from friends and family until the risk of spreading the virus has decreased. Use a picture or draw simple charts to help explain this confusing concept. For example, use the "flattening the curve" chart.
 - Correct any misinformation, as it can assist with reducing fear. You can stay up to date on the facts at this website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
 - Offer love and affection! Showing your child love and affection offers reassurance and comfort.

Help Make Connections ●

Routines have changed and we have become isolated from friends, family, teachers, and community. Assist your child with connecting to the important people in their life. This may require a bit of creativity!

- **Immediate Family:** Spend time together as a family. Make things fun by engaging in activities such as art projects, playing games, going outside, exercising, and laughing together.
- **School:** Take advantage of any virtual learning your child's school may be offering.
- **Explore** if your child's school is providing any free resources such as free meals or providing a tablet/laptop.
- **Other Relationships:** Reach out to important people in your child's life by phone, email, video chat, and letters/cards. Cultivate a pen pal relationship with a friend, teacher, or family member.

Be Aware of Mental Health Symptoms ●

Signs may start as difficulty concentrating or sleep disturbances. If your child is experiencing these symptoms for two or more weeks, please contact a professional.

- Children may show signs through bed-wetting, behavioral regression, and clinginess especially to parents or caregivers, loss of appetite, or withdrawal.
- Adolescents may show signs through aggressive behavior, nightmares, withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, or sleep disturbances.
- Young Adults may exhibit symptoms through sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, irritability, increase in conflicts, or poor concentration.

Monitor Television Viewing & Social Media ●

Watching the news or browsing social media content related to COVID-19 can increase feelings of stress and depression. Too much information can be difficult to process and different sources may give mixed messages.

- Establish and maintain a routine! Keeping a schedule provides a sense of control and predictability.
- Offer other activities to engage your child, such as playing games, to distract them from the media.
- Remember to ask if they have any questions after watching television or media related to COVID-19.

Activities to Promote Calmness ●

Gratitude Journal: Have your child take a few minutes to write, draw, or verbalize at least three things they are grateful for each day. You can do this as well to demonstrate the activity.

Walking: Being mindful while walking can promote calmness. Take in the sights, sounds and smells of nature. Avoid distractions to notice the positive things about nature. If desired, take a different route each day to notice new surroundings.

Write a Letter: Have your child write a letter to a family member or friend. They could even write a gratitude letter to a first responder, thanking them for their service during this time.

Mindful Breathing: Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes (if comfortable, if not you can leave them open), and focus on inhaling and exhaling. This method is particularly helpful in the moment of high stress or anxiety.

Resources

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>

<https://ggia.berkeley.edu/#filters=gratitude,mindfulness>

For more videos and tips from VCU-Business Connections, please visit:

<https://vcurrtc.org/businessconnections/covid19.cfm>

