

Mental Health in the Next Phase of Coronavirus

In any disaster or crisis, there are different emotional reactions to different phases. While the initial COVID-19 surge has passed in New York, it continues to be important to understand the mental health effects of the pandemic and the coping skills and resources that may help.

As noted by the CDC, stress during an infectious disease outbreak can sometimes cause the following:

- Fear and worry (about your own health and the health of your loved ones, your financial situation or job, or loss of support services you rely on)
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Chronic physical health conditions
- Increased use of tobacco, and/or alcohol and other substances

Normalizing and validating stress reactions

- **Remember that everyone on the planet is going through a once-in-a-century trauma.** Stress and anxiety are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. For many, COVID-19 related stress makes other routine and non-routine stressors (including the emotional effects of racism and racialized violence) even worse.
- **Be kind to yourself and be kind to others during this time.** Many people will feel overwhelmed and these feelings might cycle as the crisis goes forward. Most people will be resilient and go back to their everyday functioning, ending up stronger for having weathered the crisis.
- **When supporting others, practice coming from a place of validation.** People are going through a lot and there are no right or wrong emotional reactions. When people open up about their struggles, jumping right to giving advice or comparing their challenges to others can feel invalidating. Instead, try saying, “That sounds really hard.” You can ask, “Would it be more helpful to brainstorm solutions together or would it be more helpful just to vent right now?”

Adjusting to a new normal

- **Think about new opportunities that weren't available before.** Many of the things that may have brought you happiness, purpose, or structure are different now, and they may be different for a long time. Instead of living around the vacuum of your previous life activities, consider filling the space with new activities and opportunities.

- **Consider trying a few new hobbies.** Hobbies have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health. Commit to trying anything that sparks a tiny bit of interest. You may find a new passion.

Here are some ideas:

- ✓ Puzzles
- ✓ Drawing
- ✓ Learning a new language or musical instrument
- ✓ Video games
- ✓ Gardening
- ✓ Baking
- ✓ Exercising
- ✓ Digitizing old photos
- ✓ Board games
- ✓ Zumba
- ✓ Meditation

- **Assess if there is anything you've learned about your commitments during this pause from regular life.** Are there social or extracurricular commitments that don't seem like big losses when removed from the schedule? Is there a new virtual connection that you want to keep? Focusing only on when things get "back to normal" might keep you from seeing small positives in what is happening now.

Staying connected

- **Connecting to others is one of the best things you can do for your mental health.** It also helps others. Think about how to reach out to someone, reach back to someone who has contacted you, or find new, safe ways of socializing. Set a small goal, like texting a different person each day or waving to someone on your daily walk.

- **Remind yourself that small steps are all that is necessary to make a big impact.** You may feel pressure to make a big gesture when reaching out to someone you haven't connected with in a while. Most likely, they will appreciate a call, text, postcard, or even a meme.

- **Find ways to support others.** Reach out to those who might be affected most, especially by grief, illness, job loss, family conflict, etc. Though it may feel uncomfortable to reach out, your outreach might be what helps them get through that day.

- **If you don't have a community, take this opportunity to become someone else's community.** Leave a note in a mailbox, post on a forum thread online, or pick up the phone to call a long-lost acquaintance.

Healthy coping

- **Practice your healthy coping skills.** Think back to what has gotten you through hard times before. Consider making a list of 5-minute activities you can do to help yourself stay resilient. When you feel down, pull out the list and commit to doing one or more of the activities for 15 minutes. Monitor how you feel before and after.

Here are a few healthy coping tips to consider:

- ✓ Take breaks from media. Pick a trusted source and check in once a day or at another set interval. Other than that, try to unplug from media.

- ✓ Exercise. Moving your body regularly is helpful for your body and for your mind.
- ✓ Make it a priority to have regular, nutritious meals. Try to keep healthy snacks like fruits and vegetables around for snacking.
- ✓ Set a bed time and wake time on a regular schedule and keep a relaxing routine prior to sleep.
- ✓ Practice relaxation strategies such as deep breathing and meditation.
- ✓ Keep your mind busy. Instead of avoiding thinking about something, find something else to focus on, like learning a new skill or engaging in a conversation about a non-COVID topic.
- ✓ Practice gratitude, for example by making a goal to jot down 3 small positive moments at the end of the day.
- ✓ Connect to nature. Getting outside in the fresh air, even for a few minutes each day, is good for your mental health.

- **Take a harm reduction approach instead of an uncompromising, all-or-nothing approach.** Think about how to reduce your risk in any given situation. For example, if you are in a situation where you can't keep six feet of distance and may have to interact with others, wearing a mask can help make the situation safer. Anticipate that you may feel pressure to reduce your precautions. Rehearse what you might say in response to someone who questions your decisions.

Helping children and adolescents cope

Children and adolescents respond to stress in different ways. Parents and caretakers can look out for signs of stress including:

- ✓ Difficulty with attention and focus
- ✓ Changes in eating or sleeping
- ✓ Avoiding activities, especially activities they previously enjoyed
- ✓ Somatic/physical symptoms, like headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- ✓ High level of worry and rumination
- ✓ Sadness, irritability, and anger
- ✓ Seeming to lose attained skills, such as having more toileting accidents
- ✓ Use of substances

Parents and caretakers can help children and adolescents cope with this stress in many ways:

- **Validate your child and let them know it is normal to feel sad, scared, or mad sometimes.** Remind them that they won't always feel that way.
- **Help them remember how they've gotten through hard times in the past.**
- **Keep lines of communication open with your child.** Talk openly and bring up difficult topics even if your child doesn't.

Assessing risk

- **Know the facts.** As restrictions on socializing are lifted, it is common to feel paralyzed with anxiety and doubt. Not having enough information and having too much information are both scary. Find a trustworthy source of information and tune out other sources.
- **Spend some time with yourself and your family thinking about your personal tolerance of risk.** Do you have underlying health conditions or an immuno-compromised loved one? Do you have responsibilities and roles that make it critical for you to be out in public? Consider making rules for yourself to refer to (e.g. I will socialize outdoors, but not indoors, or I will socialize with my neighbors but not anyone else right now) so that you don't have to re-make the decision every time. Just refer to your rules instead.

- **When children ask questions, thank them for bringing up the topic and answer honestly.** If you don't know the answer, let them know, and think together about how to get the answer.
- **When children bring up opinions** they have heard, ask neutrally where they learned those so that you can help them evaluate whether and how much to trust their sources.
- **Share information at a developmentally appropriate level.** Reassure your children about the ways you and the community are keeping them safe. Check if your child has understood what you said by asking them to repeat back to you what they heard.
- **Talk with your older children or adolescents about how you are assessing risk and what helped you make your decisions.** While children may be upset about restrictions, it can be easier to accept if they understand the reasons for making them. Then, find a way for them to stay connected with their peers within the boundaries that you set. This could be virtually or through safe in-person socializing.
- **Show your child how you cope with stress.** Children are learning from what you do more than what you say. If you are staying up late, checking the news all the time, and not getting exercise, it will be harder for them to use their self-care skills.
- **As much as possible, keep some routines.** While it is important to build in flexibility, having some structure is good for mental health during a time of uncertainty.
- **Take advantage of a different schedule to try new ways to make meaningful connections with your children.** Take up reading a series out loud, listening to music, outdoor walks, or building sets together.

Reach out for parenting help if you need it.

Parents usually have much more support in the community in raising children, whether with schools, extracurriculars, neighbors, extended family, or faith-based communities. You as a parent

cannot and should not take on all of those roles. Bring in a team to surround you. Tap a family member to reach out, find a mentorship program for your teen to connect with, or seek professional help for parenting support or family counseling.

Dealing with complicated grief, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and other intense reactions

After the peak of a disaster, most people return to their regular functioning. However, in the months after the disaster, some more serious mental health consequences can start to arise.

Monitor yourself and loved ones for signs that you might need some additional supports.

Some of the more common mental health disorders that you or a loved one might experience are:

- Depression
- Complicated Bereavement
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Substance Use Disorder
- Anxiety Disorders

Remember that you are not alone. If you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or thinking about hurting yourself or killing yourself, reach out for help.

NY Project Hope Emotional Support Line

(844) 863-9314 | 8:00 AM-10:00 PM, 7 days/week

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

(800) 273-8255 (TALK) | 24/7/365

Crisis Text Line

Text: Got5 to 741741 | 24/7/365

NY HOPEline (Substance abuse/problem gambling)

Office of Addiction Supports and Services (OASAS)
(877) 8-HOPENY | Text: 467369 | 24/7/365

NYS Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline

(800) 942-6906 | Text: (844) 997-2121

Chat: opdv.ny.gov | 24/7/365