
MANAGING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DURING A PANDEMIC

A Guide for Mental Health Professionals



This handout is intended to provide tips for behavioral health providers in working with patients and also ideas of ways to manage their own stress at this time. As with any recommendations, not all skills will be effective for all people, but all skills have been helpful for some people some of the time. Remember, we can get through this.

Typical Reactions

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations, such as infectious disease outbreaks that require social (physical) distancing, quarantining, or isolation. People may feel:

- Anxiety, worry, or fear
- Emptiness
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Boredom
- Uncertainty or ambivalence
- Desire to use drugs, alcohol, or food to cope
- Symptoms of depression such as hopelessness, difficulty sleeping, or changes in appetite

Loneliness

A 2019 Cigna Study found 61% of Americans over the age of 18 are lonely sometimes. Loneliness is associated with a host of negative outcomes including poorer cognitive performance, poor physical health, substance abuse, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation.

Loneliness may:

- increase vulnerability to other stressors
 - cause more intense reactions to negatives
 - reduce the emotional boost of positives
 - contribute to greater feelings of helplessness
 - decrease sleep quality
 - diminish motivation to exercise and eat healthy
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EDUCATE YOURSELF

We have a responsibility as health care providers to provide accurate information on the disease, its diagnosis, and treatment. Read responsibly from reliable sources. Do not be afraid to ask questions—identify colleagues who may be resources. Also remember it's okay to say “I don't know. I can get back to you.”



Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and diligence.

-Abigail Adams

Behavioral Health and Self-Care

- Behavioral health providers should follow the guidance for health care protocols set by your organization.
- Fear, stigma, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder can follow major infectious disease outbreaks, and all health care providers should be prepared for those reactions with the COVID-19 outbreak.
- The importance of self-care during stressful times cannot be over-estimated and all health providers, including behavioral health providers, are at risk for burnout and secondary trauma.
- Be aware of the behavioral health crisis services that are available. Identify ways you can manage your overall health.

Signs of Burnout

- Sadness, depression, or apathy.
- Irritability, blaming others, and getting easily frustrated
- Indifference
- Self-isolation or detachment.
- Poor hygiene and self-care
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Hopelessness
- Powerlessness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling like a failure, personally or professionally
- Needing alcohol or other drugs to cope

Signs of Secondary Trauma

- The feeling that others' traumatic experiences are your own.
- Excessive fear or worry that something bad may happen.
- Nightmares.
- Feeling hyperaware or “on guard” at all times.
- Recurring thoughts about traumatic incidents.
- Elevated breathing, heartbeat, and blood pressure.
- Changes in your typical sleep or eating patterns.

What You Can Do to Help Children Cope with a Disaster

Setting a good example for children by managing your stress through healthy lifestyle choices, such as eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep, and avoiding drugs and alcohol, is critical for parents and caregivers. When you are prepared, rested, and relaxed you can respond better to unexpected events and can make decisions in the best interest of your family and loved ones. The following tips can help reduce stress before, during, and after a disaster or traumatic event.

Before

- Talk to children so that they know you are prepared to keep them safe.
- Review safety plans before a disaster or emergency happens. Having a plan will increase your children's confidence and help give them a sense of control.

During

- Stay calm and provide comfort to children.
- Talk to children about what is happening in a way that they can understand. Keep it simple and appropriate for each child's age.

After

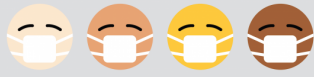
- Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they went through or what they think about it. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions.
- You can help children feel a sense of control and manage their feelings by encouraging them to take action directly. For example, children can help others after a disaster, including calling family or making cards.
- It is difficult to predict how some children will respond to disasters and traumatic events. Because parents, teachers, and other adults see children in different situations, it is important for them to work together to share information about how each child is coping after a traumatic event.

Your Immune System

The immune system is important for your ability to deal with exposures to infectious diseases such as COVID-19. The immune system is also quite important in making sure that you can recover from an infection. During the current COVID-19 pandemic there are a few things that you can do that may improve the function of your immune system.

- Exercise: There are data that show moderate to vigorous exercise increases the release and circulation of immune cells important for your ability to respond to infections. However, it is critical if you vigorously exercise that you maintain adequate hydration and carbohydrate intake. Limiting these may diminish the benefit of exercise on the immune system and your general health.

- Manage Stress: Continued levels of stress, as found unfortunately from the current pandemic, may diminish your ability to respond to infections possibly by the production of the anti-inflammatory protein cortisol. Studies have shown that individuals with increased stress are more likely to become infected with a virus. Approaches to limit stress such as yoga, meditation or exercise may be helpful for better immune function.
- Healthy Diet: Multiple studies have indicated that certain foods decrease the inflammatory response, which may be important in limiting the damage caused by infections. Fermentable fiber may be important in the production of products in the intestine that limit inflammation. Beans and legumes are good sources of this fiber. Resistant starches are also helpful and are found in cashews, slightly unripe bananas, and oats.



Tips to Cope with COVID-19 Pandemic

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Reaching out to people you trust is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness, and boredom during social (physical) distancing, quarantine, and isolation. You can:

- Use the telephone, email, text messaging, and social media.
- Talk “face to face” with friends and loved ones using video.
- Try an online support group such as NAMI.
- Write letters.
- Remember frequency is more important than duration- try to reach out to others several times a week.

Use Practical Ways to Cope and Relax

- **Take stock.** As routines drastically change, health choices may falter. Ask yourself how you are doing in regard to daily health behaviors: the quantity and quality of sleep, exercise, nutrition, and hydration.
- **Relax your body** often by doing things that work for you- take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or pray, or engage in activities you enjoy.
- **Pace yourself** between stressful activities, and take regular brain breaks.
- **Talk** about your experiences and feelings to loved ones and friends, if you find it helpful.
- **Maintain a sense of hope** and positive thinking. Consider keeping a journal where you write down things you are grateful for or that are going well.
- **Name what is known.** If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by everything we do not know, identify what you do know. This can be naming objects around you and/ or identifying who is healthy/ supportive.
- **Have compassion for yourself and others.** Recognize that everyone is doing his/ her/ their best in this time of crisis, including yourself. Remind yourself that everyone is navigating uncharted territory without a playbook. Anchor yourself and avoid reacting to the emotional instability of others.
- **If you are experiencing overwhelming emotions/ panic attacks, try the TIP(P) skills:** temperature- hold ice on the face or right side of neck; intense exercise- try jumping jacks or speed walking; paced breathing; progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Find personal space in isolation.** Paradoxically, physical distancing is forcing people and families in close proximity for extended periods of time. During a stable time of emotional neutrality, discuss individual needs for personal space and develop a plan.

Special note to parents

Many parents are now struggling to balance work, childcare, schooling, and managing worries- both yours and your children's.

Skills to try:

1. Schedule 1:1 time, even for five minutes
2. Keep it positive- identify the behavior you want to see and reinforce.
3. Create consistent but flexible routine.
4. Redirect unwanted behavior, take a pause, use consequences.
5. Be honest and open to questions.
6. End each day with a positive/ gratitude.

Helpful Resources

Hotlines

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline

1-800-985-5990 (English and español)

SMS: Text TalkWithUs to 66746

SMS (español): "Hablamos" al 66746

TTY: 1-800-846-8517

Website (English):

<http://www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

Website (español):

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/espanol>

SAMHSA's National Helpline

1-800-662-HELP (24/7/365 Treatment Referral)

Information Service in English and español

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

English: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Español: 1-888-628-9454

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

Website (English):

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Website (español):

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/gethelp/spanish.aspx>

Treatment Locators

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

Website:

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

FindTreatment.gov

1-800-662-HELP (4357)

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center

1-800-308-3515

Email: DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

FINANCIAL STRESS

If you're unable to work during this time, you may experience stress related to your job status or financial situation. Provide your employer with a clear explanation of why you are away from work if you have had to take a leave. Contact the U.S. Department of Labor toll-free at 1-866-487-2365 about the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows U.S. employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for serious medical conditions, or to care for a family member with a serious medical condition. Contact your utility providers, cable and Internet provider, and other companies from whom you get monthly bills to explain your

AFTER SOCIAL DISTANCING, QUARANTINE, OR ISOLATION

You may experience mixed emotions, including a sense of relief. There may still be fear present and thoughts of being contaminated. Continue to educate yourself and follow guidelines from the health department. Talk with your treatment provider about your feelings including fears.

Continued patience may be needed as we wait for a vaccine.

If you are feeling overwhelmed with emotions such as sadness, depression, anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or someone else, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

References/ Additional Resources

Brooks, SK et al. The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence. The Lancet. Published online February 26, 2020.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

SAMHSA

<http://www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS)

<https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response>

Cigna on Loneliness

<https://www.cigna.com/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/>

Full Potential: Podcasts

www.fullpotentialnow.org

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