

## **Mental Health: Coping and Connection for Children & Families During COVID-19**

Children react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. Coping with COVID-19 calmly and confidently, can help you support your child. Here are some things you can do to support your child.

### **Get the facts about COVID-19.**

Find a few credible sources of information. Understanding the latest facts about the outbreak and knowing where to turn for reliable information can help you talk to your kids open and honestly and help them think more realistically about the risk visit, <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page16944.aspx>

### **Check in with your child, encourage questions to make sense of the current situation.**

- Start by asking your child what they know about this situation.
- Pay attention to what your child says and really listen with your head and heart.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and thoughts. If they have difficulty expressing their emotions in words, help them express their feelings through creativity (e.g., drawing, music).
- Accept their feelings without judging. Emotions come and go. It's okay to feel sad, upset, or distressed. In most cases, these feelings won't last long. It's how we act when we feel these emotions that can get us into trouble.
- Answer questions calmly, reassuringly, and honestly. Give answers that your child will understand for their age and ability.
- Correct misinformation.
- Avoid telling them not to worry. The goal is to help your child realistically evaluate risk based on reliable information.
- Focus on how they can protect themselves and others from getting sick.
- Ask your child to come to you if they have questions or concerns as they may hear strange things or see strange things and wonder if they are true.
- Provide comfort and be patient.
- Check on your child's feelings on a regular basis.

### **Encourage positive activities and thoughts of safety**

Continue doing regular activities (e.g., having family meals, bedtime routines, games, movies, faith activities, keeping physically active, listening to music). It helps provide a sense of security and safety. Talk about all of the people who are working hard to prevent the spread of illness and how you and your child can help protect yourselves and the community too (e.g., good handwashing, coughing or sneezing into your elbow).

### **Self-care for parents and caregivers**

The high volume of information, concerns, and potential uncertainty in these situations can be overwhelming. Care for yourself by keeping routines, eating healthy meals, getting enough sleep, keeping physically active, staying connected, and handling stress. Take deep breaths and breaks to handle stress. Be honest about your feelings and show that you can still do things, and finish tasks, even if you're feeling worried. Look for creative ways to adapt your go-to activities, as needed, (and perhaps discover new opportunities to enhance your wellness and self-care). You are best able to support your children when you take care of yourself too.



## Limit media coverage

Keep informed but limit your time for media and social media. It can leave you and your children feeling overwhelmed. (<https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/screen-time-and-digital-media>)

## Seek support and continued connections

If you need to isolate yourself from others, call, text, email, video conference, and communicate through social media. You can also try playing online games with friends or family to keep entertained and connected with others.

## Keep active

Although it's tough to stay indoors away from friends and sports we enjoy, we can still keep those screens away and be active. There are a lot of physical activities that can be done in our homes with each other. Look with your loved ones for small space activities that would be fun and would keep you physically active. Here are two great ideas:

1. Riverbank – This is an indoor version of Red Light, Green Light that is a lot of fun.
  - Form a line with string, tape, or an item already on the ground.
  - The leader will yell “river,” “bank,” or “riverbank.”
  - Players hop forward when they hear “river” and backward when they hear “bank.”
  - When the leader calls out “riverbank,” players hop sideways with one foot in the river and one foot in the bank.
  - Add an additional physical activity component by having participants do jumping jacks when they make a mistake before rejoining the game.
2. Everyone Around Me
  - Form a circle with chairs or specific spots on the floor with tape or string.
  - Select one person to stand in the middle (without a chair or space) as the caller.
  - The caller shouts out a fact about himself or herself. Example: Everyone around me wearing a blue shirt.
  - Anyone wearing a blue shirt must find a new seat as quickly as possible, including the caller.
  - The person left without a chair or spot becomes the caller.

*Adapted from: asphaltgreen.org*

## Be mindful of how you speak

Rather than placing blame on certain communities or groups of people, put people first. This is a person who has the COVID-19 virus.

## Need more help?

If your child is having on-going trouble coping with their emotions or is experiencing symptoms of stress (e.g., problems with sleep, goes back to having separation anxiety, needs a large amount of reassurance, stops having interest in friends, does repetitive behaviours such as excessive hand washing) ask your healthcare professional for help.

## COVID-19 and Your Mental Health

A public health emergency, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, can be anxiety/stress inducing for some, especially for people who have a pre-existing medical condition, who are travelling, or are separated from friends and family members at home and abroad.

For individuals and communities who have to self-isolate, are choosing to socially distance themselves or who have otherwise directly been impacted by COVID-19, there may be heightened awareness, concern, anxiety and fear. For many, a sense of loss or feeling like you don't have control may be common. Try to be patient with yourself and others, because people may not cope like they usually do.

When you have no control over a stressful situation like a pandemic or emergency, having a plan and being emotionally prepared can help you stay calm, feel more in control and reduce stress. . In addition, using healthy coping skills to overcome daily challenges in your life is important to help you cope with your present situation and maintain good mental health.

### Helpful Tips:

- Limit the amount of time you spend watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19. Seek information at specific times once or twice a day, for example once in the morning and once in the evening.
- Get the facts about COVID-19 from reliable sources such as <https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx#p22780s1>) or Health Canada <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html> These sources of information will help you be able to tell facts apart from rumours.
- Focus on getting information that will help you take practical steps to protect yourself and your loved ones. Taking in too much or constant information about COVID-19 can cause you or those around you to feel worried or anxious.
- Be mindful, gently paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This can help you understand why you're feeling anxious or stressed. And it may help you to identify actions you can take to feel more in control. If you notice that you are reacting in ways that feel difficult to calm on your own, seek support from someone you trust and/or your healthcare practitioner
- Use healthy approaches and skills you normally use to cope with stressful situations. Keep up healthy behaviours that have helped in the past. Exercise, eating healthy, getting enough rest or sleep are all examples of healthy coping behaviours.
- Keep in mind that this situation is temporary, and eventually things will return to normal.
- Try to remain focused on the positive. There is effective care for COVID-19; people with COVID-19 are recovering and after recovering from COVID-19, will go on with their lives, including jobs, families and loved ones.
- Maintain your regular routines as much as possible. Focus on what needs to happen today, and make a list of what you need to do in the next day or week to keep yourself safe and comfortable. Keeping your regular household routine is important if children are confined to home. Encourage children to play and socialize with others, even if it is only within the family when advised to restrict social activities.
- During stressful times, it can be common for children to seek more attachment or be more demanding of parents. Discuss COVID-19 with children honestly using age-appropriate information. If children have concerns, addressing these concerns together may ease their anxiety. Holding and comforting your child helps them feel safe and secure as well. Reassure children especially at bedtime. Children will watch adult behaviours and emotions for examples on how to manage their own emotions during difficult times.



- For parents and caregivers, try to model healthy and positive coping skills. Your child sees your emotions through your words, facial expressions and actions. How you respond to the stress of a pandemic can affect how your child reacts. Modeling calm and constructive reactions to the event will help your child feel calmer and cope better. It's okay to have strong emotions. Name them (e.g., "I feel frustrated." or "I feel sad."). Talk about how you feel and how you're going to cope (e.g., deep breathing, positive thinking) so your child learns how to do the same.
- It is important to think about what actions you can take to stay healthy and prevent the spread of COVID-19. If the illness becomes common in your community, your plan should consider how you will need to change your behaviours to reduce the risk of infection and what to do if you or someone in your family or household becomes sick. Visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/being-prepared.html> to help you plan.
- Being prepared by having a plan can help you stay calm and feel more in control. Also helping others in their time of need can benefit them as well as you.
- Be sure to rest and try to get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can make you feel overwhelmed, which in turn will make it harder to cope with any impact you might be feeling because of COVID-19.
- Avoid or limit drinks with caffeine for example pop, coffee, tea and energy drinks because they can make you feel anxious or restless and affect your sleep.
- Avoid or limit drinks with alcohol, for example beer, wine and spirits (e.g., vodka, rum, gin). Using alcohol to cope with feelings of stress or anxiety is not advised as alcohol disrupts normal sleep patterns, can cause mood fluctuations and can make underlying feelings of stress and trauma worse.
- For those living with an existing mental illness (e.g., anxiety disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder, mood disorders like major depressive disorder and/or psychotic disorders like schizophrenia) no alcohol use is the safest choice as alcohol use can make symptoms of the mental illness worse.
- Breathing techniques can be an effective tool to manage stress and anxiety; take a slow deep breath in as you count to 5 and then exhale, also counting to 5 (repeat 10 times). This can help calm your nervous system and help you think more clearly.
- Find comfort in your spiritual/personal beliefs and practices.
- If you are in self-isolation, look for opportunities to stay in contact with family and friends. If health authorities advise or tell you to limit your physical or direct social contact to contain the outbreak, stay connected through phone calls and social media, such as text messaging, email, Skype, and face-time. Try as much as possible to keep your personal daily routines and engage in healthy activities you enjoy and find relaxing.
- If you decide to voluntarily socially distance yourself, consider spending time at home with friends and family; engage in activities that you can do together whether it's making and sharing meals, playing games or watching TV.

## Helpful Resources

- Health Link 811 or Mental Health Helpline: 1-877-303-2642
- Provincial 211 – provides referrals for community, government and social services
- Employee and Family Assistance Program – contact your Human Resources (HR) or your employer's provider
- Kids and teens can call the Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868



## Practical and Emotional Preparedness for a Pandemic

### Practical Preparedness

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If your hands are not visibly dirty and if soap and water are not available, you can use hand sanitizer. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- When you cough or sneeze, cover with a tissue or cough or sneeze into your sleeve.
- Regularly clean and disinfect frequently touched and shared surfaces like doorknobs.
- You should not share dishes utensils, or other items with other people in your home.
- Stay at home and away from others if you are feeling ill. Where possible, contact a friend, family member, or delivery services to carry out errands.
- Where possible, don't use public transportation (e.g., buses, taxis, ride sharing).
- Limit your contact with people and avoid having visitors to your home.
- Self-isolation means staying home and avoiding situations where you could infect other people (e.g., social and public settings, work, school, faith-based gatherings).
- Social distancing means **limiting** not stopping your public interactions. For example choosing to stay away from mass gatherings like sporting or large social events, limiting all non-essential travel, and if possible working from home.

### Emotional Preparedness

- Get timely and accurate information from credible sources. Misinformation can be incredibly dangerous during any epidemic or emergency.  
For latest updates, go to: <https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>
- If possible, maintain your normal daily routine.
- Focus on positive things such as exercising, writing, organizing, and sleep.
- Be mindful, gently paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. This can help you understand why you're feeling anxious or stressed. It may help you to identify actions you can take to feel more in control.
- Spend time with family and family indoors and engage in activities that you can do together (e.g., sharing meals, playing games, or watching TV).
- If you are in self-isolation, look for opportunities to stay connected with family and friends.
- Find comfort in your spiritual and personal beliefs.

### Additional Information

- An influenza pandemic can occur at any time and occurs every few decades.
- Breathing techniques can help calm your nervous system and help you think more clearly. Take a slow deep breath in and then exhale slowly (repeat 10 times).

If you are concerned about your symptoms or may be at risk, call Health Link at **811**  
or access the online COVID-19 screening tool at: [www.ahs.ca/COVID](http://www.ahs.ca/COVID)

