

Taking Care of Mental Health During COVID-19

During this time of unprecedented global public health crisis, many people across all communities are feeling the stress of the health threat: concerns about becoming ill, uncertainty about the future, possible financial strain, and dramatic changes in daily routines. Individuals respond to stress in different ways and some, especially those with mental health conditions, are prone to negative impact on their mood, anxiety, sleep and overall well-being. This is a critically important time for everyone to take extra care to protect their mental health. Here are some practical tips to be as proactive as possible about our mental health.

Encourage people to take care of their mental and physical health. The two are interrelated and we know that taking care of our physical health can also support our mental health.

- Encourage people to be vigilant about getting good sleep. This is a time to worry less about getting things done and more about making sure you are getting enough sleep and rest. Sleep is restorative and important to our physical health, and we all want to help our immune systems right now. Basic sleep hygiene rules include not using sedatives or alcohol to sleep, keeping to the same sleep hours every day, and only using the bed for sleep and sex.
- As much as possible, encourage people to move throughout their day. This includes stretching, finding yoga videos on Youtube, walking around their house or property, dancing, and playing active video games. Since many can't access their gym or usual forms of activities, this requires some creative thinking. If you find a good resource online that works for you, share it with those you know.
- There are many meditation and breathing apps. A simple breathing exercise encourages inhaling for four seconds, hold the breath for seven seconds, and exhaling for eight seconds (4-7-8 for short).
- Drink water regularly and limit alcohol intake. Alcohol can worsen depression over time.
- Follow doctors' orders to take prescribed medication on time. Check in with your pharmacy to see if they have delivery services if needed.

Encourage people to stay focused on what they can control

- Engage in activities you don't normally have time for: play that instrument that's been sitting in the corner gathering dust; research Youtube videos on things you've always wanted to know or found interesting; journal; watch nature videos; fold your laundry; meditate; or play with your pets.
- Limit news intake (including news on social media) if it is making you feel more anxious than connected. For example, turn off TV news and limit your intake to two 15-minute periods a day and read news from trusted sources in addition to what you find on social media.
- Stick to a daily routine. If you are working from home, don't work from bed. Get up, get dressed and shower at your usual times. Have meals when you usually do and put the kids to bed on time.



- Make your environment safe and comfortable. This is a good time to check your environment to see what might help you feel more comfortable and safe. Pull out “creature comforts” like favorite blankets, scented candles, etc. Safely secure anything that you might be concerned if kids got into if they are home with you (this is especially true for firearms right now).

Encourage people to stay connected

- Reach out when you are feeling lonely. Use technology and find creative ways to stay connected. Start group text chats that check in with each other regularly. Talk about things other than current news. It’s OK to limit talking about things that increase your stress, but it’s also important to seek reassurance from others when you need it. Organize a coffee break chat via FaceTime or Zoom with your coworkers. Write that letter to your elderly relative or, better yet, call them. Invite friends to a virtual dinner party using video chat.
- Check if your therapist is providing telehealth services. If you are in mental health care, many therapists are able to provide online telehealth services on the phone or online. Reach out to your provider to see if yours is. If you are not in therapy or if your therapist is not using telepsychiatry, know that many providers are already doing it. Gather the names of a few so you have them. Our federal government has already passed legislation for this period of COVID-19 that encourages healthcare providers to offer tele-services.
- Check in on your older neighbors: Leave a note for your older neighbor that lets them know you are available via phone or to help with a small errand (if safe for you). Many cities are organizing support resources for older adults, some of whom do not have access to the Internet. Write some down and leave that with a note for your neighbor with information on how they can access the service.

Youth and COVID-19

- This is a time of uncertainty for youth and young adults, and they don’t have the life experience to know that this will pass. In addition, their schedules are disrupted: they are having fewer opportunities for socialization and events they have been looking forward to (graduation, sporting events, dances) may be canceled or already have been canceled.
- It is important for adults to listen to their kids’ feelings about what is happening, reassure them and remind them that we are all in this together. It is also important not to minimize their disappointment but to hear and validate it. Also instruct them about the importance of universal precautions (washing hands) and explain that we are taking these measures so that we help others who are more vulnerable stay healthy.
- Create “virtual opportunities” for socialization for them whenever possible. Online chats or video calls with friends are great examples.
- For kids who have existing mental health issues, current uncertainty may make things worse. Encourage your child to continue to take care of their health (regular sleep, eating, and exercise), make sure they are taking medication if prescribed, and be in touch with your child’s mental health provider if needed, especially if you think their mental health symptoms may be worsening.
- With kids home more, it’s important to make sure your environment is safe. Make sure medications, firearms and other items that may be accessible are stored securely.
- Staff can share the AFSP COVID-19 related blogs on protecting our mental health, dealing with uncertainty, and other social media shareables widely during this time to really encourage people and communities to protect mental health. We can make a difference in making these messages widely heard while making it the norm to pay attention to and care for our mental health.