



**COVID-19
Back to School Resources**

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- COVID-19: Back to School Planning
- Using Cloth Face Coverings
- Mask Anxiety: Calming Yourself while Staying Safe
- Planning for Virtual or At-home Learning
- When Children Have to be Home Alone
- Preparing Your Children to be Home Alone
- Mental Health and Social-Emotional Well-being
- How can I nurture my child's mental health?
- Children's Reactions to the Ongoing Outbreak
- Discussing Coronavirus with Your Children
- Navigating Life's Transitions
- Make a Daily Habit of Success
- 5 Simple Ways to Improve Your Mood
- Mental Health Maintenance

COVID-19: Back to School Planning

Going back to school this fall will require schools and families to work together even more than before. It will be important for parents to emphasize and model healthy behaviours at home and talk to children about changes to expect this school year. Even if your child will attend school in person, it is important to prepare for the possibility of virtual learning if school closes or if your child becomes exposed to COVID-19 and needs to stay home.

This checklist can help with back to school planning for the school year, whether children will be attending school or learning virtually:

Actions to take and points to consider

- Check in with your child each morning for signs of illness. If your child has a fever, they should not go to school.
- Make sure your child does not have a sore throat or other signs of illness, like a cough, diarrhea, severe headache, vomiting, or body aches.
- If your child has had close contact to a COVID-19 case, they should not go to school.
- Identify your school point person(s) to contact if your child gets sick.

Name of school point person(s):

Contact information:

- Be familiar with local COVID-19 testing sites in the event you or your child develops symptoms. These may include sites with free testing available.

My local testing options:

- Make sure your child is up to date with all recommended vaccines, including for flu. All school-aged children with no underlying conditions should get an influenza flu vaccine every season. This is especially important this year because we do not yet know if being sick with COVID-19 at the same time as the flu will result in more severe illness.

Date of flu vaccination:

- Review and practice proper hand-washing techniques at home, especially before and after eating, sneezing, coughing, and adjusting a face cover. Make hand washing fun and explain to your child why it's important.
- Be familiar with how your school will make water available during the day. Consider packing a water bottle.
- Develop daily routines before and after school—for example, things to pack for school in the morning (like hand sanitizer and an additional (back up) cloth face covering) and things to do when you return home (like washing hands immediately and washing worn cloth face coverings).

- Talk to your child about precautions to take at school. Children may be advised to:
 - Wash and sanitize their hands more often.
 - Keep physical distance from other students.
 - Wear a cloth face covering.
 - Avoid sharing objects with other students, including water bottles, devices, writing instruments, and books.
 - Use hand sanitizer (that contains at least 60 percent alcohol.)
- Develop a plan as a family to protect household members who are at increased risk for severe illness.
- Make sure your information is current at school, including emergency contacts and individuals authorized to pick up your child(ren) from school. If that list includes anyone who is at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, consider identifying an alternate person.
- Be familiar with your school's plan for how they will communicate with families when a positive case or exposure to someone with COVID-19 is identified and ensure student privacy is upheld.
- Plan for possible school closures or periods of quarantine. If transmission is increasing in your community or if multiple children or staff test positive for COVID-19, the school building might close. Similarly, if a close contact of your child (within or outside of school) tests positive for COVID-19, your child may need to stay home for a 2-week quarantine period. You may need to consider the feasibility of teleworking, taking leave from work, or identifying someone who can supervise your child in the event of school building closures or quarantine.
- Plan for transportation:
 - If your child rides a bus, plan for your child to wear a cloth face covering on the bus and talk to your child about the importance of following bus rules and any spaced seating rules.
 - If carpooling, plan on every child in the carpool and the driver wearing cloth face coverings for the entire trip. If your school uses the cohort model, consider finding families within your child's group/cohort at school to be part of the carpool.
- If your child receives learning support, such as tutoring, occupational or physical therapy, or similar services, ask your school how these services will continue.
- If your child receives mental health or behavioural services (e.g., social skills training, counselling), ask your school how these services will continue.
- If your school uses a cohorting model in which smaller groups of students attend school together, consider limiting your child's in-person out-of-school interactions to children in the same cohort or to activities where physical distancing can be maintained.
- Reinforce the concept of physical distancing with your child.
- Talk to your school administrators and teachers about their plans for physical education and physical activity (e.g., recess).
- Ask how your school plans to help ensure that students are following practices to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Using Cloth Face Coverings

If your school is requiring or encouraging the use of cloth face coverings, think about the following actions. Consider asking what steps your school will take to minimize the potential for students to be singled out, bullied or teased for wearing or not wearing a mask.

Appropriate and consistent use of face coverings may be challenging for some children. Wearing cloth face coverings should be a priority, especially when it is difficult for students to stay 6 feet apart from each other, for example during carpool drop off or pick up, when entering the building or standing in line at school, or while on the bus.

Cloth face coverings should **not** be worn by:

- Children younger than 2 years old
- Anyone who has trouble breathing
- Anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the cloth face covering without assistance

Actions to take and points to consider

- Have multiple cloth face coverings, so you can wash them daily and have back-ups ready. Choose cloth face coverings that:
 - Fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
 - Completely cover the nose and mouth
 - Are secured with ties or ear loops
 - Include multiple layers of fabric
 - Allow for breathing without restriction
 - Can be washed and machine dried without damage or change to shape
- Label your child's cloth face coverings clearly in a permanent marker so that they are not confused with those of other children.
- Practice with your child putting on and taking off cloth face coverings without touching the cloth.
- Explain the importance of wearing a cloth face covering and how it protects other people from getting sick.
- Consider talking to your child about other people who may not be able to wear cloth face coverings for medical reasons (e.g., asthma).
- As a family, model wearing cloth face coverings, especially when you are in situations where physical distancing is difficult to maintain or impossible.
- If you have a young child, help build their comfort wearing a cloth face covering and become comfortable seeing others in face covers.
 - Praise your child for wearing a cloth face covering correctly.
 - Put a cloth face covering on stuffed animals.
 - Draw a cloth face covering on a favourite book character.
 - Show images of other children wearing cloth face coverings.
 - Allow your child to choose their cloth face covering that meets any dress requirements your school may have.
- Consider providing your child with a container (e.g., labelled resealable bag) to bring to school to store their cloth face coverings when not wearing it (e.g., when eating).

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Mask Anxiety: Calming Yourself while Staying Safe

The use of face masks is recommended in public places where social distancing is difficult to maintain. Some cities and states have even passed laws requiring the wearing of masks in public. While the measures are intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, they can have some unintended consequences, especially for those prone to anxiety.

Psychologists are reporting a rise in anxiety symptoms and even panic attacks as a result of mask requirements. Those same experts say that it is not surprising given the negative associations we have with masks in general, including illness or threat of violence, as well as the physical and psychological effects they have on wearers. Among the reasons for the rise in anxiety:

- Wearing a mask in public is a novel situation for most people and such situations provoke anxious feelings in and of themselves.
- Humans gain understanding from facial expressions, which are all but erased by masks. Without those non-verbal cues, we can become disoriented and uncomfortable.
- People who have experienced trauma as a result of violent crime in which the perpetrator wore a mask are likely to experience that trauma anew when surrounded by people wearing masks.
- With our natural anxiety levels elevated as a result of the pandemic, wearing a mask may further increase those anxiety levels. That's because, for many people, masks mimic the feeling of being smothered. This in turn excites the "fight-or-flight" response, which raises heartbeat and blood pressure, both of which also happen when we're anxious.
- Whether the mask sparks panic for you, or just an uncomfortable feeling, experts suggest some steps you can take to ease the symptoms, including:
 - Wear the mask more often. The more time you spend wearing the mask the less novel the sensation and the lower the anxiety.
 - Try to ignore the minor discomfort and tell yourself it's only temporary.
 - Think about positive thoughts and remember that you are wearing a mask to help protect the people around you as well as the people you love at home.

Reducing Anxiety

Most of us are feeling higher anxiety and stress levels than normal. These are normal responses to tough times. Prolonged feelings of stress and anxiety, however, can have negative effects on our health and general well-being. Learning to relax by reducing stress and anxiety can improve your outlook and your long-term health. Try the following techniques:

Deep Breathing

Breathing from our chests or shoulders can create more tension and stress by preventing air from reaching the bottom of our lungs, increasing blood pressure and preparing the body for action. Deep breathing focuses on using the diaphragm (the spot just under your rib cage) to draw slow, deep breaths of air into the lungs and to release them slowly.

Stretching and Yoga

Stress often appears as tension in our necks, shoulders and head, what's commonly referred to as the stress triangle. Stretching exercises can relieve tension, make your body more flexible and produce a calming effect. Yoga is a more formal method of stretching, but even just shrugging your shoulders, stretching your arms and rolling your neck a few times a day can have positive effects.

Massage

Physically, massage can help alleviate tense muscles, lower blood pressure, promote deep breathing and improve posture. Mental benefits of massage include reduced anxiety, increased body awareness and enhanced creativity. Remember, you don't need anyone else to massage tight muscles. Foam rollers, muscle rollers or even a tennis ball can be used to relieve muscle tension.

Meditation and Visualization

Meditation involves "quieting the mind" by blocking out sensory input and distraction, while visualization involves using the brain's creative capacity to create a stress-free experience, much like daydreaming. Both meditation and visualization can be helpful in relieving stress.

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Planning for Virtual or At-home Learning

Virtual learning may be a choice for some children and families, and it may be necessary if your child has certain underlying health conditions or is immunocompromised.

Going back to school virtually may pose additional challenges with staying connected to peers, since students may have less frequent or no in-person interactions with each other. You may want to talk to school staff to learn more about what they are doing to support connection among students, interactive learning with feedback, building resilience, and social-emotional well-being for students who will not be on site. In addition, if your child receives speech, occupational, or physical therapy or other related services from the school, ask your school how these services will continue during virtual at-home learning. Likewise, if your child receives mental health or behavioural services (e.g., social skills training, counselling), ask your school how these services will continue during virtual at-home learning.

Setting up for Virtual or At-Home Learning

Things to consider as you get ready for virtual or at-home learning.

Actions to take and points to consider

- Try to attend school activities and meetings. Schools may offer more of these virtually. These meetings can be a way to express any concerns you may have about the school's plans.
- Create a schedule with your child and make a commitment to stick with it. Structure and routine can greatly help your child from falling behind with assignments. Discuss your family's schedule and identify the best times for learning and instruction, as well as family-oriented physical activity, such as walks outside. A family calendar or other visuals could be useful for keeping track of deadlines and assignments.
- Try to find a space where you live that's free of distractions, noise, and clutter for learning and doing homework. This could be a quiet, well-lit place in your dining room or living room or a corner of your home that could fit a small table, if available.
- Identify opportunities for your child to connect with peers and be social—either virtually or in person, while maintaining physical distance.

Here are some things to look for when reviewing your school's plan for virtual or at-home learning. Some of these action items and points to consider might warrant additional conversations with your school administrators or health care provider.

Actions to take and points to consider

- Find out if there will be regular and consistent opportunities during each day for staff and student check-ins and peer-to-peer learning.
- Find out if students have regular opportunities for live video instruction by teachers or if they will primarily be watching pre-recorded videos and receive accompanying assignments.
- Ask if the school will offer virtual or socially distanced physical activity. If not, identify ways to add physical activity to your child's daily routine.
- Ask your school what steps they are taking to help students adjust to being back in school and to the ways that COVID-19 may have disrupted their daily life. Support may include school counselling and psychological services, social-emotional learning (SEL)-focused programs, and peer/social support groups.
- If your child participates in school meal programs, identify how your school district plans to make meals available to students who are learning virtually at home.
- If your child receives speech, occupational or physical therapy or other related services from the school, ask your school how these services will continue during virtual at-home learning.
- If your child receives mental health or behavioural services (e.g., social skills training, counselling), ask your school how these services will continue during virtual at-home learning.

- If you anticipate having technological barriers to learning from home, ask if your school or community can provide support or assistance for students without appropriate electronic devices for schoolwork (like a computer/laptop or tablet).

If your school offers a hybrid model, be familiar with your school's plan for how they will communicate with families when a positive case or exposure to someone with COVID-19 is identified and ensure student privacy is upheld.

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When Children Have to be Home Alone

With the uncertainty of finding child care and whether children will remain at home for virtual learning, many parents are facing a decision: Are my kids able to stay home alone when I return to work?

The following information can help you make that decision, as well as help you prepare yourself and your children for them to be home alone.

Assessment

Being trusted to stay home alone can be a positive experience for a child who is mature and well prepared and can boost the child's confidence and promote independence and responsibility. However, children face risks when left unsupervised. Those risks, as well as a child's comfort level and ability to deal with challenges, must be considered.

Keep in mind that, depending on the laws and child protective policies in your area, leaving a young child unsupervised may be considered neglect, especially if doing so places the child in danger. Before you make any decision, check with your local authorities to determine what the laws are regarding the legal age at which children may be left home unsupervised.

Once those requirements are satisfied, parents should determine whether their child is comfortable staying home alone. Children who are easily frightened or do not wish to stay alone are not ready for the responsibility. If a child wants to stay home alone, parents should consider the following factors before making the decision.

Does the child:

- Have good judgment?
- Have self-discipline?
- Follow directions well?
- Manage simple chores?
- Problem-solve well?
- Know how to remain calm in difficult situations?
- Know basic first-aid procedures?
- Have experience handling emergencies?
- Understand and follow safety measures?

Parents who feel comfortable about their child's responsibility and maturity level should first have a trial period. Leave the child home alone for a short time and stay close to home. Thirty minutes is a good amount of time for a trial period. Be sure to be reachable during that trial period.

If this is successful and staying home alone is possible, parents should still:

- Establish rules and be sure the child knows what is and is not allowed when home alone.
- Check in while away to see how the child is doing. If calling, it is good to set an exact time so the child knows it is a parent calling. An alternative to calling the child is to have a trusted neighbour or friend pop in to check on what is happening.
- Get a report from the child afterwards and encourage him or her to share feelings about staying home alone.
- Some rules parents might consider establishing while the child is home alone include:
 - Having friends over while an adult is not present is not acceptable
 - Television and video games have time limits
 - Computer and Internet rules ban the surfing of unapproved sites
 - Cooking and kitchen tool rules (for example, is he or she allowed to use the microwave but not the stove?)
 - Doors should always remain locked (and security system turned on, if appropriate)
 - Never tell anyone he or she is home alone
- In preparation for the time the child is to be home alone, parents should:
 - Have emergency numbers of friends, family members and neighbours in an easily visible location
 - Post a schedule with location information for parents during the time away from home
 - Be sure emergency supplies such as flashlights are accessible
 - Have a stocked first-aid kit and make sure the child is aware of its location

- Have a well-stocked cupboard and refrigerator so the child has easy access to snacks and/or meals
- Lock up any items children should not access such as liquor, medications, car keys and cigarettes
- Have an extra house key made and store it in a secure location outside so the child can access it if he or she is locked out

Communication

As cell phones are more widely used as the primary method of contact, landlines are becoming rarer. If your house does not have a landline and your child does not have his or her own cell phone, parents need to consider how their child will be able to communicate in case of an emergency.

If you have reliable Internet access at home, an iPod, iPad, other tablet, or computer are additional options to consider as means of communication. These often have features such as FaceTime, Messaging, Skype, or similar apps and may allow you to communicate with your child. However, these applications cannot make emergency phone calls to 9-1-1. Another option is to get your child an inexpensive mobile phone to use while they are alone. Many retail outlets offer inexpensive phones with limited features, sometimes called a “dumb phone,” that could be a good fit for this purpose. Your choice will differ depending on your circumstances, but the importance of having reliable communication cannot be overstated.

Tech Help

Thanks to current technology, including video doorbells and video monitoring systems, it can be easier and safer to allow children to be home alone. Many companies now offer versions of the video doorbell, which alerts users when someone has approached the front door and/or rang the doorbell and allows them to see who it is via a cell phone. This can help parents alert children to any visitors and decide whether it is safe for the children to answer the door. In the same way, video monitoring systems can alert parents should someone enter or leave the house. Keep in mind that these systems are merely backups. As a working parent, you can't always be sure that you will be able to monitor a doorbell or video alert. Equipping your children with the tools and knowledge to keep themselves safe while you are away is the best solution. Parents should also note that even mature and responsible children should not be left alone too often or for too long. It can become a strain and put them in a situation where they become lonely. Consider other options, such as after-school programs, community centres or the option to stay with friends to help keep the child involved, if those options are available in your area.

Preparing Your Children to be Home Alone

Once you have determined that your children are ready to stay home alone, the following suggestions may help you to prepare your child and to feel more comfortable about leaving him or her home alone:

- **Have a trial period.** Leave the child home alone for a short time while staying close to home. This is a good way to see how he or she will manage.
- **Role play.** Act out possible situations to help your child learn what to do, such as how to manage visitors who come to the door or how to answer phone calls in a way that doesn't reveal that a parent is not at home.
- **Establish rules.** Make sure your child knows what is (and is not) allowed when you are not home. Set clear limits on the use of television, computers and other electronic devices, and the Internet. Some experts suggest making a list of chores or other tasks to keep children busy while you are gone.
- **Discuss emergencies.** What does the child consider an emergency? What does the parent consider an emergency? Have a code word that the parent and child can use in the event of any emergency.
- **Check in.** Call your child while you are away to see how it's going, or let them know they'll have a trusted neighbour or friend check in on them.
- **Talk about it.** Encourage your child to share his or her feelings with you about staying home alone. Have this conversation before leaving your child and then, when you return, talk with your child about his or her experiences and feelings while you were away. This is particularly important when your child is first beginning to stay home alone, but a quick check-in is always helpful after being away.
- **Don't overdo it.** Even a mature, responsible child shouldn't be home alone too much. Consider other options, such as programs offered by schools, community centres, youth organizations, or faith-based organizations, to help keep your child connected and involved.
- **Follow up.** After a child is left home alone, talk about his or her experience. How did he or she feel about it? Was your child nervous? Did anything unexpected come up? If the child was watching a younger sibling, ask how he or she felt about doing so.

Mental Health and Social-Emotional Well-being

With school expected to be unlike anything your child is used to, you may want to talk to your child before the start of the year to explain all the steps being taken to keep everyone safe and healthy. The list below provides actions and considerations regarding your child's mental health and emotional well-being as they transition back to in-person school.

Actions to take and points to consider

- Talk with your child about how school will look different (e.g., desks far apart from each other, teachers maintaining physical distance, possibility of staying in the classroom for lunch).
- Talk with your child about how school is going and about interactions with classmates and teachers. Find out how your child is feeling and communicate that what they may be feeling is normal.

Anticipate behaviour changes in your child. Watch for changes like excessive crying or irritation, excessive worry or sadness, unhealthy eating or sleeping habits, difficulty concentrating, which may be signs of your child struggling with stress and anxiety.

- Try to attend school activities and meetings. Schools may offer more of these virtually. As a parent, staying informed and connected may reduce your feelings of anxiety and provide a way for you to express any concerns you may have about your child's school.
- Ask your school about any plans to reduce potential stigma related to having or being suspected of having COVID-19.
- Check if your school has any systems in place to identify and provide mental health services to students in need of support. If so, identify a point of contact for these services at your school.

Name of school point person(s):

Contact information:

- Check if your school has a plan to help students adjust to being back in school. Students might need help adjusting to how COVID-19 has disrupted their daily life. Support may include school counselling and psychological services (including grief counselling), social-emotional learning (SEL)-focused programs and curricula, and peer/social support groups.
- Check if your school will provide training for students in mindfulness, incorporating SEL into classroom curriculum (either virtually or in-person), or support a child's ability to cope with stress and anxiety. If not, consider asking about ways to add this to your child's at-home learning.
- You can be a role model for your child by practicing self-care:
 - Take breaks
 - Get plenty of sleep
 - Exercise
 - Eat well
 - Stay socially connected

How can I nurture my child's mental health?

Mental health determines how we look at ourselves, our lives and the people we know and care about. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, evaluate our options and make choices. Given the trauma we have all faced recently with the COVID-19 outbreak, this is a good time to assess whether you are supporting your child's mental health.

A child's mental health affects his or her daily life and future. Schoolwork, relationships and physical health can be affected by mental health. Like physical fitness, mental fitness is important at every stage of life. Caring for and protecting a child's mental health is a major part of helping that child grow to become the best he or she can be. The following tips can help you promote your child's physical safety and emotional well-being:

- Set clear and consistent expectations for your child. It is important that these expectations are understood and enforced by anyone who is responsible for your child's care.
- Do your best to provide a safe home and community for your child, as well as nutritious meals, regular health check-ups, immunizations and exercise.
- Be aware of stages in child development so you do not expect too much or too little from your child.
- Encourage your child to express his or her feelings; respect those feelings. Let your child know that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger and anxiety. Try to learn the source of these feelings. Help your child express anger positively, without resorting to violence.
- Promote mutual respect and trust. Keep your voice down—even when you do not agree. Keep communication channels open.
- Listen to your child. Use words and examples your child can understand. Encourage questions.
- Provide comfort and assurance. Be honest. Focus on the positives. Express your willingness to talk about any subject.
- Look at your own problem-solving and coping skills. Are you setting a good example? Seek help if you are overwhelmed by your child's feelings or behaviours or if you are unable to control your own frustration or anger.
- Encourage your child's talents and accept his or her limitations.
- Set goals based on your child's abilities and interests—not someone else's expectations. Do not compare your child's abilities to those of other children; appreciate the uniqueness of your child. Spend time regularly with your child.
- Foster your child's independence and self-worth.
- Help your child deal with life's ups and downs. Show confidence in your child's ability to handle problems and tackle new experiences.
- Discipline constructively, fairly and consistently. All children and families are different; learn what is effective for your child. Show approval for positive behaviours. Help your child learn from mistakes.
- Love unconditionally. Teach the value of apologies, cooperation, patience, forgiveness and consideration for others. Do not expect to be perfect; parenting is a difficult job.

Children's Reactions to the Ongoing Outbreak

Your children may respond differently to an outbreak depending on their age. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network lists typical reactions according to age group and the best ways parents can respond:

Age Group	Reactions	How to Help
Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of being alone, bad dreams, speech difficulties Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bedwetting Change in appetite Increased temper tantrums, whining, or clinging behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patience and tolerance Provide reassurance (verbal and physical) Encourage expression through play, reenactment, story-telling Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime Maintain regular family routines Avoid media exposure
School-age (ages 6-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Irritability, whining, aggressive behaviour Clinging, nightmares, sleep/appetite disturbance Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches) Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest Competition for parents' attention Forgetfulness about chores and new information learned at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patience, tolerance, and reassurance Play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and Internet Regular exercise and stretching Engage in educational activities (workbooks, educational games) Participate in structured household chores Set gentle but firm limits Discuss the current outbreak and encourage questions. Include what is being done in the family and community Encourage expression through play and conversation Help family create ideas for enhancing health promotion behaviours and maintaining family routines Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation
Adolescent (ages 13-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.) Sleep/appetite disturbance Agitation or decrease in energy, apathy Ignoring health promotion behaviours Isolating from peers and loved ones Concerns about stigma and injustices Avoiding/cutting school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patience, tolerance, and reassurance Encourage continuation of routines Encourage discussion of outbreak experience with peers, family (but do not force) Stay in touch with friends through telephone, Internet, video games Participate in family routines, including chores, supporting younger siblings, and planning strategies to enhance health promotion behaviours Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school Discuss and address stigma, prejudice and potential injustices occurring during outbreak

Discussing Coronavirus with Your Children

COVID-19 can be challenging for parents to talk about with their children, especially as schools discuss reopening to in-person learning. It is natural to want to protect children from unpleasant information. The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress offers the following suggestions:

Goals of Speaking with Children About Coronavirus

- Provide basic information to help children understand what they may be seeing and hearing about the outbreak, and help them make sense of the changes happening in their families, schools and neighbourhoods.
- Develop a “shared understanding” within the family about coronavirus, what it is and is not, remembering that younger children are likely to look to their parents and siblings for guidance and reassurance.
- Reassure children that if anyone in their family becomes sick, they will receive the medical care they need.
- Use developmentally appropriate explanations tailored to your child’s age, verbal ability, and cognitive understanding.

Communicating with Children at Different Developmental Levels

- The amount, type, and complexity of information sharing is different depending on the age and developmental level of each child.
- Communication with infants and toddlers involves communicating safety and consistency through physical presence and touch, and by maintaining family routines and schedules.
- Preschool children (3- to 5-year-olds) are less likely to understand and will have had minimal exposure to the news. Staying home, using physical distancing, and promoting hygiene can be described as fun activities for preschool children.
- School aged children (6- to 12-year-olds) may have a basic understanding of what the virus is and understand it is dangerous, but they may not understand why changes in their routines are required. Assess their level of understanding, and then provide further explanations to avoid misconceptions and confusion. Be honest and direct when answering their questions.
- Adolescents and young adults (13 years and older) have a broader understanding of coronavirus, but may not fully comprehend the severity of the situation. They are exposed to social media more frequently, and are therefore more likely to receive inaccurate information. Address misconceptions and ensure access to reliable sources for up-to-date information. Be honest and direct.

Opportunities/Activities to Engage Your Children

Preschool and early school-aged children:

- Present the current situation as an adventure. Encourage children to keep a journal about their experiences.
- Encourage educational activities outside of school assignments
- Use drawings or dolls and figures to explain how germs can spread. These re-enactments can also be used to demonstrate the precautions needed to protect at-risk populations, such as older adults.
- Create games or sing songs that promote healthy hygiene habits around the household.

School-aged children and adolescents:

- Explain that children can help at-risk individuals (e.g., “Grandma and Grandpa”) stay healthy by staying apart from them while still maintaining communication with them.
- Engage in family discussions to answer children’s questions and address their concerns.
- Promote connectivity with children’s peers through technology and the Internet.

All ages:

- Promote activities that include the entire family, such as going on walks or watching movies that family members of all ages may enjoy.

Navigating Life's Transitions

With more people coping with stress from the COVID-19 outbreak and efforts to reopen businesses and schools, we are experiencing a massive wake-up call. More and more people have been heard saying, "Suddenly I have a new perspective on what really matters."

Whenever life throws us off course, it presents an opportunity to pause, reassess and reflect on what we truly want to create. Then we can move forward feeling more on course and avoiding that uneasy feeling that we are just going through the motions with no feelings of accomplishment or satisfaction.

One's perspective about what's happening is critical. With a job loss, troubled relationship or unplanned life change, one voice within us whines, "Why is this happening to me?" while another voice may ask, "What's the lesson in this for me?" or "How do I use this experience to help me grow, and how might I take advantage of this chance for a fresh start?" While it is important to be realistic about the negative aspects of life transitions and to acknowledge feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and fear, your next move is a crucial choice. Do you want to remain stuck in pain and stress, or are you ready to focus your energy forward, looking at what's possible?

Making life changes can be scary and may leave you feeling overwhelmed. Follow the steps below to get started. It is dangerous to oversimplify the complex nature of any life transition, so tailor these suggestions to your own unique situation.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** Let yourself feel what you feel, and find a way to release some of the emotion. Physical activity, writing down your thoughts or talking with others can help let this energy out and prevent the distraction of negative thoughts and self-defeating behaviours.
- **Reflect and refocus.** Take stock of what you still have, and express gratitude, such as "I still have my ability to think, my special talents and my aspirations. I'm grateful for relationships and for my family." Take a walk, a bike ride or a longer hot shower than usual, and ask yourself some powerful questions, such as "How do I want to feel three months from now? What will it take to get there? What does my ideal week look like? What could I do to realize that? Who could help with that?"
- **Choose.** Entertain the notion that everything is a choice. Decide what you want to choose as the next chapter of your life. Simply choosing doesn't guarantee you'll get it, however. The power of your intentions makes a huge difference. Feeling like you have a choice is certainly better than feeling like you have no influence, so why not adopt this philosophy? Choosing what matters most and what you'll honour as authentic priorities is absolutely up to you. It is about being resilient and truly empowered to choose your life's course rather than being a victim of circumstance and replaying old thought patterns.
- **Get into action.** Start by visualizing how you want to feel or where you want to be, perhaps three months from now. Work backwards from this goal until you find something small enough that you can do the next day or the next week. Picking first steps and finding the right people for encouragement and support will help you realize your goal.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Make a Daily Habit of Success

We all define success differently. Regardless of how we define success, there are some basic habits shared by everyone who achieves it. Here are some habits to keep in mind:

- List your to-dos for the week and prioritize
- Plan when your brain is freshest
- Organize tasks by importance
- Establish a routine for daily tasks. A routine can help make you more efficient.
- Schedule similar tasks back to back. Try making all your phone calls one after another or writing and sending emails all at one time
- Take breaks. Take a short walk or socialize with a co-worker.
- Don't multitask. Focus on one item at a time to ensure that you catch any mistakes and do not have to redo the task.
- Go at a reasonable pace; it will actually save you time in the long run.
- Tackle your most important work when you have the most energy.

The Role of Positive Thinking

Changing the way you think can help you put a more positive spin on what happens in your life. This makes you more productive overall.

- If you are depressed or anxious, think of the opposite. Instead of dwelling on the worst-case scenario, imagine the most likely best-case outcome.
- Pick an area in which you are having trouble and create or invent new options to deal with that situation.
- If your confidence and self-esteem are low, imagine scenes in which your confidence is increased.
- Negative thoughts maintain their power unless neutralized by stronger, positive thoughts. With practice, eventually the positive thought will grow and associate with other positive thoughts.
- When you cannot do anything to change a situation, work toward acceptance.

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5 Simple Ways to Improve Your Mood

Whatever has you feeling blue, there are at least five no-fail ways to brighten your day—and they don't take much effort:

- 1. Give a little something back.** You might not feel your best right now, but it's been proven that moods can improve with random acts of kindness: helping someone with a chore, presenting a friend with a small gift or writing that note of appreciation you've been meaning to send.
- 2. Get moving.** Whether it's pedalling around the neighbourhood on your mountain bike or hiking a local trail, exercising improves your physical and mental well-being.
- 3. Remove that frown.** Even if you're faking it, a smile can improve your mood, confidence and the way others see you.
- 4. Stay positive.** Instead of dwelling on what's wrong, or what you feel is wrong, get into the habit of positive self-talk. Remember, the way you think affects the way you feel.
- 5. Give yourself some credit.** Just because you're having a tough day doesn't mean it has always been that way. List your achievements on a piece of paper, then take some time to be proud of what you've accomplished.

The best option when all else fails? Talk to someone. Whether it's a partner, friend, relative or a professional counsellor, contact with other people gives you a chance to talk through what's bothering you and lighten your mood.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

Mental Health Maintenance

Sleep and Mood

Sleep is one of the essential elements of good mental health. Yet researchers and the media alike routinely report that people across the globe are sleep deprived. Getting the right amount of sleep is key to proper functioning of the mind, as well as the body. Sleep gives the brain a much-needed break, providing a distraction from the complex cognitive and emotional processing needed during the day.

Experts suggest adults get at least seven hours of sleep a night to be at their mental, emotional and physical best. Some of the mental health benefits of sleep include:

- Helping you feel energized and well rested.
- Aiding mood and emotional regulation
- Improving learning capacity and memory
- Regulating appetite, energy use and weight control
- Sharpening mental alertness
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Contributing to the stability of relationships

Count the Hours

Experts warn that even small levels of sleep deprivation can chip away at your happiness over time. As a lack of sleep builds, people may feel less enthusiastic, more irritable or even show symptoms of clinical depression, such as feeling persistently sad or empty. All these alterations to mood can affect not only individual mental health but relationships and family dynamics, as well.

Quantity and Quality of Sleep

There is no magic number for ideal hours of sleep because different age groups need different amounts of sleep and these needs tend to be individualized even within each age group. To attain the best quality of sleep, get at least seven hours a night and practice the following habits:

- Develop a bedtime routine
- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends
- Make sure your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable
- Avoid work and video or computer screens before bed
- Do not drink caffeine or alcohol, or smoke four to six hours before bedtime
- Stop eating 2-3 hours before regular bedtime
- Check and monitor all medication, supplements and herbs that may be interfering with sleep

Getting Out of an Emotional Rut

Almost all of us will go through down periods. Family conflicts, personal disappointments, even a couple of weeks of bad weather can give you the blues. If the blues you are feeling linger for several weeks and are interfering with your ability to enjoy life and function effectively, seek help. A therapist can assist you in exploring your feelings. For those simply feeling a bit blue, however, some simple, positive lifestyle changes may be all that's needed to turn things around:

- **Find support in others.** Try confiding in trusted family members and friends about how you have been feeling. An understanding loved one can give you the strength and support you need to help cope with depressive feelings.
- **Manage your stress.** Learn effective ways to reduce your stress and anxiety, which may minimize your feelings of depression.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular fitness activities can improve your mood and boost your self-esteem. Talk to your doctor about an exercise program that is right for you.

- **Eat right.** Discipline yourself not to overeat. Avoid junk foods and environments that may encourage bingeing. Stick to a nutritionally balanced diet. Avoid alcohol, which is a depressant.
- **Get the proper amount of sleep.** Experts recommend at least seven to eight hours a night. Resist the urge to oversleep, and try to maintain a regular sleeping schedule.
- **Make more time for recreational, fun activities.** Try to spend more time outdoors, especially on sunny days.
- **Consider using a light box.** These devices have been used successfully to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder. Talk with your doctor or therapist about whether the increased amount of light could be helpful to you.
- **Educate yourself.** Learn all you can about depression, support groups in your area and ways to manage your feelings.

Do not let feelings of depression and sadness control your life. Get help to manage your symptoms. Learn to feel comfortable talking about your difficult emotions. Take care of your mind and body by giving it the food, rest and activity it needs. Do not be afraid to treat yourself to the things you enjoy more often. Aim to get out of the funk you may be feeling and to experience life to the fullest.

Source

- Canadian Mental Health Association: <https://cmha.ca/>