

How to cope with COVID-19 impacting our mental health

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Never before has our society faced such far-reaching impacts to the way we live, work, and play. If ever there were a time to take care of your mental health, it's now.

We take so much for granted. When the balance of what we know and what we can control changes, our mental health is significantly affected. An increase in worries and fears about our health, financial security and the future is normal.

In the face of these uncertainties, increased states of stress will surely follow. Many of the typical things we do to help us cope and manage our stress, such as going to the gym, having coffee with friends, or enjoying a nice dinner at a restaurant, are no longer available to us. We are challenged to find new ways to cope in order to stay mentally healthy.

Here are some things to consider:

Create a routine:

Everyone's routines have changed. It is known that we tend to thrive best with routine. Try to establish and maintain a routine as much as possible. Wake up at a similar time every day. Stick to usual mealtimes. Break the day down into chunks of time and schedule activities or tasks within them. Allow evenings and weekends to feel as much as possible as they did pre-COVID.

Healthy eating:

Our brains function better when we fuel our bodies with healthy foods thus allowing us to cope with the additional anxieties and stressors presented by COVID-19. Eat healthy, balanced, and reasonable portioned meals. Otherwise we may be a few pounds heavier at the end of COVID-19 isolation. Boredom, stocked pantries and fridges and extra time all contribute to make it easier to turn to food as a means of coping or falling back on a deeply rooted survival instinct. Instead, use this time to plan and prepare healthy meals and snacks.

Monitor use of alcohol and other substances:

Although we may talk lightheartedly about how substances help us cope, it can become a serious problem. While it is reasonable to occasionally indulge, daily or binge use of substances contributes to a decline in mental health. Pay attention to when and how much of a substance you are using. If using increased amounts, it may be a sign that you may need to establish other, more positive, coping strategies. If substance use was a problem pre-COVID, it's likely to become more problematic in times like these. Challenge yourself to reduce consumption.

Stay active - and go outdoors:

We know that getting exercise is one of the best ways to reduce and manage stress. Plan to be physically active several times each day: morning yoga, afternoon hike, evening stroll, etc. When outside in your neighbourhood, remember to keep your distance, however difficult that may be

when you see someone you know. This is temporary and we will be our close-knit community once again.

Durham Region offers many beautiful conservation areas and hiking trails to contribute to our efforts to keep our distance, with the advantage of nature grounding us and reducing overall stress.

Be aware of possible changes to relationship and family dynamics:

We are not typically used to spending 24/7 with our family members; we could find ourselves experiencing a significant change to our relationships with spouses and children. Create spaces within your home allowing for alone time. Self-monitor for increased agitation with family members to limit damage to these important relationships. At an extreme, situations like these can give rise to increased rates of domestic violence and child abuse.

If you are living with someone who is having difficulty managing their anger and stress, create a plan to keep yourself safe. But, if you fear you cannot keep yourself safe, call 911.

Socialize:

Human beings are wired for connection. We need it to survive and thrive. We feel a sense of loss not seeing friends, extended family or coworkers. Our kids miss their peers, teachers and coaches.

We can socially survive a time of extended isolation like this. The virtual possibilities are endless and we see creative solutions to this everywhere right now: a virtual playdate for your kids, an online dinner party, or a chat with a friend over coffee.

Limit exposure to media:

Although we need to stay informed to keep our families safe, be careful not to read story after story about just how bad it is out there. This hyperfocus on the negative can create increased anxiety states that can be hard to unwind from.

Give yourself a designated time of the day and set a time limit – minutes, not hours. Remember to also seek amazing stories of how we are coming together to help others who are struggling or who are on the front lines. Or look for stories about the creative ways others are finding to stay connected.

Be mindful:

How do we tell ourselves and our loved ones that everything will be okay when dealing with great uncertainty where there are no answers? In the absence of answers, the best we can do is focus on the moment. Letting ourselves focus too far into the future right now will do little but increase our fears, worries and stress.

Engage fully and be present in your routine and daily activities. The only thing you can control is how you feel in this moment. Develop a deep breathing practice or daily meditation. These things take minutes, but help to ground us in the moment.

Watch out for the needs of the most vulnerable:

Individuals will vary in terms of how they respond to a crisis like COVID-19. We need to pay particular attention to the stress responses of those who are at risk mentally and physically: older

people, children, teens, people with pre-existing mental health issues, first responders (doctors, nurses, paramedics, police officers, firefighters and 911 communicators) and those at higher risk for contracting the virus. These people need our support more than ever.

COVID-19 presents as a seemingly impossible challenge, but there are incredible stories of resilience everywhere. In my work, I see evidence of this resilience every day, witnessing people overcome, learn from, and better themselves through some of the most difficult situations possible. It's one of many reasons why I love my work so much.

If you or someone you know needs help managing their psychological response to the COVID-19 crisis, please be sure to reach out to one of the many mental health service providers in our community.

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