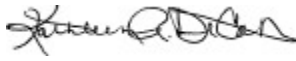




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March 26, 2020

To: BOCES District Superintendents  
Superintendents of Public School Districts  
Principals of Public Schools  
Charter School Leaders  
Principals of Private Schools

From: Kathleen R. DeCataldo 

Subject: Resources for Mental Health and Talking to Young People About COVID-19

Feeling anxiety amid a global pandemic is normal and natural for everyone. As the adults, it's critical that we take care for our own mental and physical health, and that will help us to better support our young people. The following resources offer guidance for self-care as well as strategies for talking about COVID-19 honestly and effectively with young people.

**[Feeling Stressed About Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)? Managing Anxiety in an Anxiety-Provoking Situation](#)**  
**New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH)**

The outbreak of COVID-19 around the world has led to the spread of fear and panic for individuals and communities. In addition to following physical precautions guidelines, individuals should be taking care of their psychological well-being.

This guide includes tips for the following populations:

- For Everyone
- For Individuals Receiving Mental Health Services
- For Parents, Including Parents of Children with Pre-Existing Anxiety Disorders
- For Caregivers of Older Adults
- For Mental Health Providers

The guide is also available in the following languages.

- [Bengali](#)
- [Chinese \(Simplified\)](#)
- [Haitian-Creole](#)
- [Korean](#)
- [Russian](#)
- [Spanish](#)

OMH has also created the New York State Emotional Support Line staffed by specially trained volunteers who can help you. Call **1-844-863-9314**.

### **[Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#)**

#### **National Association of School Psychologists**

- The publication, **[Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource, from the National Association of School Psychologists](#)**, offers suggestions for remaining calm and assuring, making yourself available to young people, keeping explanations age appropriate, avoiding excessive blaming, monitoring television and social media exposure, maintaining a normal routine to the extent possible, being honest and accurate, knowing the symptoms of COVID-19, reviewing and modeling basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection, and discussing new rules or practices for school.

### **[Care for Caregivers: Tips for Families and Educators](#)**

#### **National Association of School Psychologists**

- The **National Association of School Psychologists** also offers guidance for caregivers, called **[Care for Caregivers: Tips for Families and Educators](#)**. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers play a critical role in helping children cope with crises, often ignoring their own needs in the process. However, caregivers must take good care of themselves, so they are able to take good care of the children in their charge.

### **[Addressing Grief](#)**

#### **National Association of School Psychologists**

- The **National Association of School Psychologists** also offers brief facts and tips for addressing grief for young people.

### **[Coping with a Crisis Webinar: March 26, 2020, 12:30-1pm](#)**

#### **Mental Health Association in New York State - School Mental Health Resource and Training Center**

(<https://mhanys.org/registration/>)

- Most families will experience a crisis (illness, loss, natural disaster, etc.) at some point. Whether it's family-specific or community-wide, families are impacted differently.
- Created specifically for families and caregivers, the Mental Health Association in New York State is offering a webinar, Coping with a Crisis, to provide knowledge and tools to promote whole family wellness during a time of crisis: recognition of stress indicators, the development of coping strategies and positive communication.
- **[Registration will be available soon on the MHANYS's website](#)**. In addition, the webinar will be archived for viewing at a later time.
- The **[School Mental Health Resource and Training Center](#)** is a project of Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc. with funding from the New York State Legislature and

Executive. School Districts and families are encourage to check out the many mental health trainings and resources on its [website](#).

### **[Helping Children After Tragic Events: Stop Watching, Start Talking](#)**

#### **New York State Department of Health**

- Watching and listening to very bad news reports can upset children. Parents, caregivers, teachers, and healthcare providers can do a lot to help children feel safer and less stressed. Turning off the TV and other screens is a good start. News coverage of tragic events is not healthy for kids. Here's why.
  - The constant news of tragic events can be intense and hard to avoid.
  - When an event is on the news around the clock, it doesn't go away for a child.
  - The constant news of the event can hurt a child's mental and physical health. They can feel less secure and safe.
  - Even when an event takes place far away from a child's home, seeing the event on TV can make the child feel like it's a threat to them and the people they love.
  - Mental stress from a disaster can be harder on children than on adults.
  - Children feel less of a sense of control.
  - Children understand less about the situation.
  - Children have fewer experiences bouncing back from hard situations.
  - You can help kids after these events. Here's how.
  - Ask them: What have you already heard about the event? Do you have any questions?
  - Share basic information, not the details.
  - For younger children: turn off the TV, the radio, and the computer or tablet.
  - For older children: watch a news report with them and help them to understand it.
  - Parents, teachers, doctors, and others can make a difference.
- The New York State Department of Health offers further [information for helping children after tragic events on its website](#).

### **[Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)**

#### **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

- The fact sheet [Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) from the **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** provides parents, caregivers, and teachers with strategies for helping children manage their stress during an infectious disease outbreak. It describes potential reactions among youth and the support adults can provide to help them.

### **[Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)**

#### **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network**

- At this time, information about COVID-19 is rapidly evolving as new details are confirmed and new questions emerge. In the event of an outbreak in your community, as a parent/caregiver, your first concern is about how to protect and take care of your children and family. Knowing important information about the outbreak and learning how to be prepared can reduce your stress and help calm likely anxieties.
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's** guide [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#) will help you think about how an infectious disease outbreak might affect your family—both physically and emotionally—and what you can do to help your family cope.

### [Coronavirus School Response Resources](#)

#### **New York State School Social Workers' Association**

- **The New York State School Social Workers' Association** offers a compilation of [Coronavirus School Response Resources](#) specific to school social workers, resources specific to New York, resources for children and parents, articles and websites.

#### **New York State Office of Mental Health Crisis Counselors - Call 1-800-273- TALK or text GOT5 to 741741.**

- Are you struggling in the midst of COVID-19? Crisis counselors are still just a phone call or text away.

#### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**

- If you or someone you know is suicidal or in emotional distress, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Trained crisis workers are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Your confidential and toll free call goes to the nearest crisis center in the Lifeline national network. These centers provide crisis counseling and mental health referrals.

#### **SAMHSA's National Helpline – 1-800-662-HELP (4357)/ 1-800-487-4889 (TDD)**

- Free and confidential information in English and Spanish for individuals and family members facing substance abuse and mental health issues. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Utilize the Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator.

# Feeling Stressed About Coronavirus (COVID-19)?

## Managing Anxiety in an Anxiety-Provoking Situation

The outbreak of COVID-19 around the world has led to the spread of fear and panic for individuals and communities. In addition to following physical precautions guidelines, individuals should be taking care of their psychological well-being.

### This guide includes tips for the following populations:

- For Everyone
- For Individuals Receiving Mental Health Services
- For Parents, Including Parents of Children with Pre-Existing Anxiety Disorders
- For Caregivers of Older Adults
- For Mental Health Providers

### For Everyone:

- **Reduce anxiety by reducing risk.** Ways to reduce risk include practicing good hygiene (e.g. sneezing and coughing into your elbow, sneezing into a tissue and immediately throwing the tissue away, wash hands regularly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, etc.) In addition, create a plan in case your regular routine is disrupted, such as setting up remote work and alternative childcare arrangements. Setting out a plan can help reduce anxiety by taking charge of the things you can control.
- **Manage your information flow by choosing reliable sources and establish boundaries on checking for updates.** Getting regular, factual information is important. However, continuously scrolling through social media or constantly refreshing the news is likely to lead to increased anxiety. Pick a few trusted news outlets – such as the state and local health authorities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or World Health Organization – and commit to checking once or twice a day for updates.

- **Monitor your anxiety levels.** Anxiety is a normal response to a stressful situation and can provide adaptive benefits in many situations. However, when faced with mounting uncertainty, your brain can go into an anxiety spiral that is no longer helpful. Knowing the difference between typical and atypical stress is important. Monitoring your stress level will let you know when you need to seek additional help.
  - ✓ **A typical stress reaction may include:** temporary difficulty concentrating; irritability and anger; fatigue; stomachache; and, difficulty sleeping.
  - ✓ **An atypical stress reaction may include:** a persistent and/or excessive worry that doesn't lift and keeps you from carrying out your daily tasks. If you experience significant changes in your energy level, eating patterns, or sleeping patterns, difficulty concentrating on normal tasks, prolonged and overwhelming worry and hopelessness, or thoughts of self-injury or suicide, seek out immediate help at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text Got5 to 741741.
- **Practice good self-care, including exercise, eating healthy foods, and sleeping an adequate amount at night.** If possible, spend some time outside. Avoid staying up late to monitor the news.
- **Virtually reach out to different types of support networks,** such as family, friends, colleagues, faith-based communities, and social organizations to strengthen your overall feeling of connection. Isolation and loneliness feeds anxiety.
- **Find meaningful tasks and roles within your support network to channel your anxiety,** such as coordinating deliveries of groceries to those unable to leave home, curating kids' activity ideas for parents working from home, or video calling or calling those who might feel socially isolated. Supporting others is beneficial to the supporter as well.
- **Find or create spaces that are not focused on COVID-19.** Start a social media thread about other topics, ask friends to discuss other topics, or watch your favorite TV or movie.
- **Savor small positive moments, amplify positive stories, and stay optimistic.** Try to cultivate a mental wellness practice, such as writing in a gratitude journal, or talking nightly with your family about moments during the day that were fun or enjoyable.
- **Take an opportunity to practice mindfulness when managing anxiety.** Mindfulness tools like grounding exercises, sensory modulation, and deep breathing may be helpful.

## For Individuals Receiving Mental Health Services:

- **As soon as possible, work with your mental health provider on a coping plan.** Think about helpful coping skills you can practice daily and be mindful to those coping skills that you may turn to that are otherwise harmful to your safety and well-being. For example, if you know that music, walking outside, reframing your thoughts, and connecting with others are helpful, think about ways you can incorporate those into your daily life. If you know that you might struggle with ruminating, self-injury, substance use, or other strategies that might be harmful to your safety and well-being, identify alternative coping methods with your provider. Write out a plan to help prepare you for heightened anxiety.
- **Work with your mental health providers on specifically managing anxiety and ask them to help you come up with practical skills that you can rehearse.**

- **Work with your mental health providers on alternative options if your routine services are disrupted.** These might include using telemental health services, getting prescription medication, or engaging in supplemental mental wellness activities.
- **Seek positive peer support.** Connect yourself to others who understand your experiences and can assist in problem-solving. If social distancing increases feelings of isolation, look into online peer supports or peer hotlines.

## **For Parents, Including Parents of Children with Pre-Existing Anxiety Disorders:**

- **Think about and rehearse scripts for talking with your kids about COVID-19.** Kids take cues from caregivers about how anxious they need to be about a topic. Seek out resources and media to assist in your preparation.
- **Talk about the situation openly.** Most kids elementary-aged and up have heard about COVID-19 or coronavirus. Avoiding the topic or providing blanket reassurances is more likely to feed anxiety. If kids bring up the topic, let them know you are glad they brought it up. This increased the likelihood that they will come to you with further anxieties or questions.
- **Don't give more information than is requested.** Part of a developmentally appropriate approach is to answer the question your child asks, but not necessarily more than that. Check to make sure they understood your response by asking them to repeat back what they heard, and let them know you are open to more questions. Reassure your child that it is normal to feel scared or anxious.
- **Help your school-aged child and adolescent set boundaries on their information flow in the same way you are setting your own boundaries.** Help them identify factual sources of information and set appropriate intervals to check in. Encourage them to use their media literacy skills to question the messages they are getting from various information channels. Consider limiting media exposure or consuming media with your child so that you can be available to interpret and explain information.
- **Keep as many routines intact as possible.** For kids who may be out of school and/or have extra-curricular activities cancelled, it is helpful to keep other routines, like mealtimes and bedtimes. To the extent possible, for kids who are at home for longer periods of time, set up a structure. Collaborate with your child to come up with a loose schedule, such as an outdoor activity and lunch prep in the morning, and a movie and homework time in the afternoon.
- **Find fun ways to maintain contact with individuals your child is separated from,** such as grandparents or classmates at school. Set up opportunities to maintain and even grow connections, such as reading a book to grandparents on video call or sending postcards to friends.
- **Encourage physical activity and time outside, where possible.** Both staying active and having opportunities to be in nature are helpful with mitigating anxiety and building resilience.
- **Use this as an opportunity to teach distress tolerance skills that will be helpful to your kids in any situation.** This is a great time to learn about purposeful breathing, guided imagery, distraction, and other skills.



## For Caregivers of Older Adults:

- **Facilitate ways for older people to maintain social connections.** As older adults have been told to isolate as much as possible, it is likely that social isolation and loneliness may take a toll on physical and mental health. Set up and provide technological assistance for family and friends to stay connected to the individual. Consider coordinating a group of people to check in on a rotation so that the individual feels the support of a network.
- **Encourage them to stay as active as possible,** for both physical and psychological well-being.
- **Help older adults find ways where they can help others,** such as calling others to check in on them or entertaining grandchildren on FaceTime. Having a purpose and role can reduce anxiety.
- **Consider practical ways you can relieve an older person's anxiety,** such as volunteering to order their groceries online or offering to walk the individual's dog(s).
- **In a time of high anxiety, it may be hard for older people to select reliable sources to get information and updates on COVID-19.** Curate a list of reputable media and write them down.
- **Practice self-care and be compassionate to yourself.** While caregiving is a demanding and rewarding role at the best of times, being a caregiver during a time of heightened concern is particularly stressful. If possible, find a way to take small breaks, rotate responsibilities with others, and practice your own mental health strategies.

## For Mental Health Providers:

- **Place a priority on self-care,** including getting adequate rest and exercise, eating healthy food, maintaining social connections, and taking time away from service provision as possible.
- **Prepare for heightened anxiety in the individuals in your care and prepare your own toolkit on skills and scripts that might be helpful.**
- **Work with your colleagues to prepare back-up plans for crisis management,** such as telemental health or alternate therapeutic arrangements, so that you are prepared if there is a disruption in services. Work with your supervisor and colleagues to rotate functions and cross-train as much as possible.
- **Set up peer supports,** such as peer supervision and consultation, to connect with others who are in a similar situation. Setting up spaces to discuss the toll of vicarious trauma and anxiety is an important part of self-care.
- **Seek out professional help as needed.** Remember that provision of mental health care during a crisis is challenging and it is critical that you address your own stress and anxiety.