



How to Support your Child's Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Material adapted from School Mental Health Ontario)

With our new opportunity to engage with our children and help them explore learning while we all stay home to reduce the spread of COVID-19, it is likely that for some this will lead to parents/guardians/caregivers sharing our working and learning spaces throughout our days together. This information is intended for consideration to support families as parents, guardians and caregivers balance protecting their health and wellness and that of their loved ones, setting up and managing working and learning environments at home while also caring for your children, connecting with family members and peers, managing household chores and fulfilling many other important responsibilities.

As parents/guardians and family members, the best thing you can do is maintain communication with your children and teens and to be patient and understanding.

We've prepared the following tips to give you some ideas to keep in mind. Of course, you know yourself and your child best, so consider these tips based on your own family situation.

How can I keep myself mentally well during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The most important thing we can do as parents/guardians and caregivers while we adjust in these uncertain times is to pay attention to your own mental health. Do the things that maintain your own positive mental health and restores your energy reserves. What this looks like will vary from person to person. Connecting with supportive friends, family members or neighbours, whether online or by phone is important reduce feelings of isolation and increase positive social connections. We are all in this together. Try your best to get enough sleep, make healthy food choices, stretch and be physically active, and find ways to go outside with your family. Many people find deep breathing, guided relaxation, prayer and Christian meditation can be very beneficial and supportive of your own mental health.

Stay focused on your family's health and wellbeing first and foremost and, where and when you can, build in opportunities for learning and fun.

How can I keep my child or teen mentally well during the COVID-19 pandemic?

During these challenging times, you may be worried about your child(ren)'s mental health and well-being. You may notice that they are anxious or unsettled, and perhaps have told you that they are worried about someone in the family getting the virus. They may be confused about why usual activities are disrupted or may be disappointed to miss something that they were looking forward to. All of these things are very natural at this uncertain time.

How can I keep my child or teen mentally well continued...

Children

- **Stay calm.** Children look to you for how to respond to stressful situations. Remember you being calm, helps your child to remain calm. Think about ways to manage the stress you might be carrying (talking with a friend, going for a walk, focusing on gratitude, etc.) so that you can be at your best in supporting your children. If you are feeling overwhelmed or extremely worried, pause and take a breath before speaking with your child.
- **Keep it simple.** The COVID-19 situation can feel overwhelming and complex. There is a lot of information coming at us at once. You can help your child by breaking it down into more manageable parts and focusing on the things that are most important to them. For example, reminding them that they are safe, explaining that cancellations are happening to help keep them and others in the community safe, telling them that by washing their hands regularly they are helping everyone, etc. Having some language to help them to understand the situation, that you can repeat in calm ways, can help.
- **Listen.** Let your child talk through how they're feeling. Acknowledge their emotions and help to label them. You can say, "Yes, I can see you're feeling worried" or "it is okay to feel angry that you can't see grandma right now." Some children may not easily talk about their feelings or have the vocabulary to identify and label different feelings. If you're noticing different behaviour, you can say, "I wonder if you might be feeling worried, or sad?" and, "what might help you feel better?"
- **Keep information age-appropriate.** Answer their questions as factually as possible but keep responses age-appropriate. Balance the facts with reassurance. Your child needs to know that they, and you, are safe.
- **Limit exposure.** Avoid listening to or watching news coverage about the pandemic with young children around. Avoid having adult conversations about

your own worries in front of children. Encourage older children to be aware of their social media use and to take breaks from this. Help them to think critically about what they are reading on-line, sorting myths from facts.

- **Try to establish a flexible routine for your child.** This might include a regular, but relaxed, time for waking and sleeping, and perhaps for meals and snacks. Some parents will be working from home and may have new opportunities to connect with their child during the day. Playing and talking together can help everyone to feel more relaxed. This can take some planning at first while new schedules are being worked out. Watch for those natural moments when you can just be together and follow your child's lead.
- **Be patient and understanding.** You may notice behaviour changes in your child. Children react differently to changes in routine and stress. They may become frustrated more easily, or more emotional, or engage in things they did at a much younger age. Try to be understanding with your child, as they may just need more reassurance and calm during this time.

Teens

- **Be patient and understanding.** Think back to when you were a teen and how important your social connections were (and likely still are!). Teens are dealing with less social contact and cancelled events. This can be upsetting. Try to be patient and understanding – try not to minimize their feelings. Instead, listen and express compassion.
- **Encourage balance.** Some teens may turn to Netflix, social media or gaming as a distraction from the day-to-day reality of social distancing—this is to be expected and you may also find you're looking for distractions yourself. Taking breaks from screen time is helpful. Plus, too much social media exposure can have a negative impact on mental health. It's a good idea for all of us to prioritize wellness as much as possible at this time. Try to encourage regular sleep habits. You could invite your teen to get outside for daily walks with you, or to do some cooking together.
- **Pause before talking.** With so much news coverage and talk about COVID-19, over exposure is very possible. You can provide a break for your teen by not discussing the situation in front of them unless they want to talk about it.
- **Listen and provide reassurance when you can.** Some teens may be worried about the health of their friends and family members, about the size of the pandemic locally and globally, or about lost class time and their ability to complete courses. If they express concerns to you, listen to their concerns

and try to provide reassurance. You can talk about how measures are in place to keep people safe, how you've prepared as a family and how life will return to normal. For teens who are concerned about lost class time and completing online courses work, reassure them that school staff understand and appreciate their concern. Tell them their educators and other school staff are here to help them navigate this emergency remote learning and you'll work through it together.

Remember, you're doing your best!

There's a good chance you're juggling a lot right now, plus dealing with your own thoughts and emotions. Try to treat yourself with compassion and gentleness, as you would a dear friend. These activities are suggestions—but sometimes you might have so many things on the go, that you don't feel like you can do an activity and that's okay.

Have reasonable expectations for your children and for yourselves. This can reduce self-induced frustrations. Practice self-compassion. You are doing the best we can in any given moment. Please know you aren't alone in this journey. Your circle of support includes loved ones, family and friends, neighbours, your children's school team and community, and community helpers including mental health professionals is here to support. Focus on the essentials. Prioritizing showing love to your children, plan to connect with them, enjoying some quality time, playing or doing activities together and having fun with children and teens before and after periods of time where you are working on adult tasks.

How do I support my child with their mental health?

If you're concerned about your child's mental health, the first step is to talk with your child or teen. Here are some tips on [how to talk to your child or teen when you feel concerned they may be struggling with a mental health problem](#).

If they tell you anything that makes you worried (e.g., thoughts of suicide, overwhelming anxiety, self-injurious behaviour like cutting) reassure your child that you are glad they told you and you will help them find the right professional to talk to, and you will be there for them throughout the journey.

How Can I access Help for my Child or Teen's Mental Health?

Your child or teen and family are not alone. There are Mental Health Supports available to support you and your family

If you or your child or teen is experiencing a mental health emergency, call 9-1-1 or go to the emergency room in your local hospital.

You can contact your child's school if you'd like help to access any of our local resources. ALCDSB also has a Mental Health Leader who could also help you access local supports and services. Here are some other suggestions.

- Children and teens can speak with a counsellor 24/7 by calling Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or texting CONNECT to 686868.
- Check your school to find out if mental health services are being offered through the school board during this time.
- Contact your family doctor to ask about local services you may be able to access.
- Look for a [Children's Mental Health Ontario centre in your community](#). Across our ALCDSB community these centres are: [The Maltby Centre](#) serves KFLA area, [Children's Mental Health Services](#) (ages 0-18) and [Youthab](#) (ages 16-24) services HPE area, [Phoenix Centre for Children & Families](#) (ages 0-18) in Renfrew, and [Hands - The Family Help Network.ca](#) serves Nipissing. These agencies are open and providing support virtually and by phone.
- [The Hope for Wellness Help Line](#) offers mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada.
- Use [Ontario 211 to look up the services available in your area](#).
- Try the [Kids' Help Phone Resources Around Me](#).

You will find additional information in this package about local services that are available to you and your family.

Additional Resources:

School Mental Health Ontario

- [12 easy and fun mental health practices to try with your children at home](#)
- [First Peoples Wellness Circle](#) has put together [a resource with tips for First Nations parents and families](#) on supporting mental wellness of children and young people
- [Self-Care 101 for Students](#)
- [Youth-focused mental health resources hub](#)

An online hub of COVID-19 youth-focused mental health resources from Jack.org, Kids Help Phone and School Mental Health Ontario

Children's Mental Health Ontario

- The March Break That Never Ends Supporting Your Families Mental Wellness <https://www.cmho.org/blog/blog-news/6519925-the-march-break-that-never-ends-supporting-your-family-s-mental-wellness>

[Canadian Psychological Association](#)

- [“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Student Wellness and COVID-19](#)
- [“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Working from Home During COVID-19, With and Without Children](#)

Practical Mental Health Infographics for Families by @BelievePHQ

- How families can support each other’s mental health during self-isolation
- How families can keep essential mental health habits going during self-isolation
- How to look after your mental health during a time of uncertainty
- 9 Mental Health Activities to do with your children
- How to have a healthy relationship with social media



HOW FAMILIES CAN SUPPORT EACH OTHER'S MENTAL HEALTH DURING SELF ISOLATION

01



Check in with each other on a regular basis. How are you feeling today? Is there anything I can do to help?

02



Engage in some physical activity together. Doing this in a group can increase connectedness and is great for reducing stress

03



Get some really simple healthy rules in place that you can all follow (E.g. We will make sure to sit down and eat dinner with each other every night)

04



Set a challenge to learn a new coping skill each week. Spend 5-10 minutes each day to practise using it

05



Organise and plan your week together. Make sure everyone understands what work or school related activities are coming up over the next 7 days

07



Schedule in time during your week where you can all engage in some activities that provide you with a sense of pleasure and achievement

08



Work together as a team. Be a strong unit that supports, cares and encourages

06



Spend 5 minutes each morning when you wake up to engage in some breathing exercises as a family

10



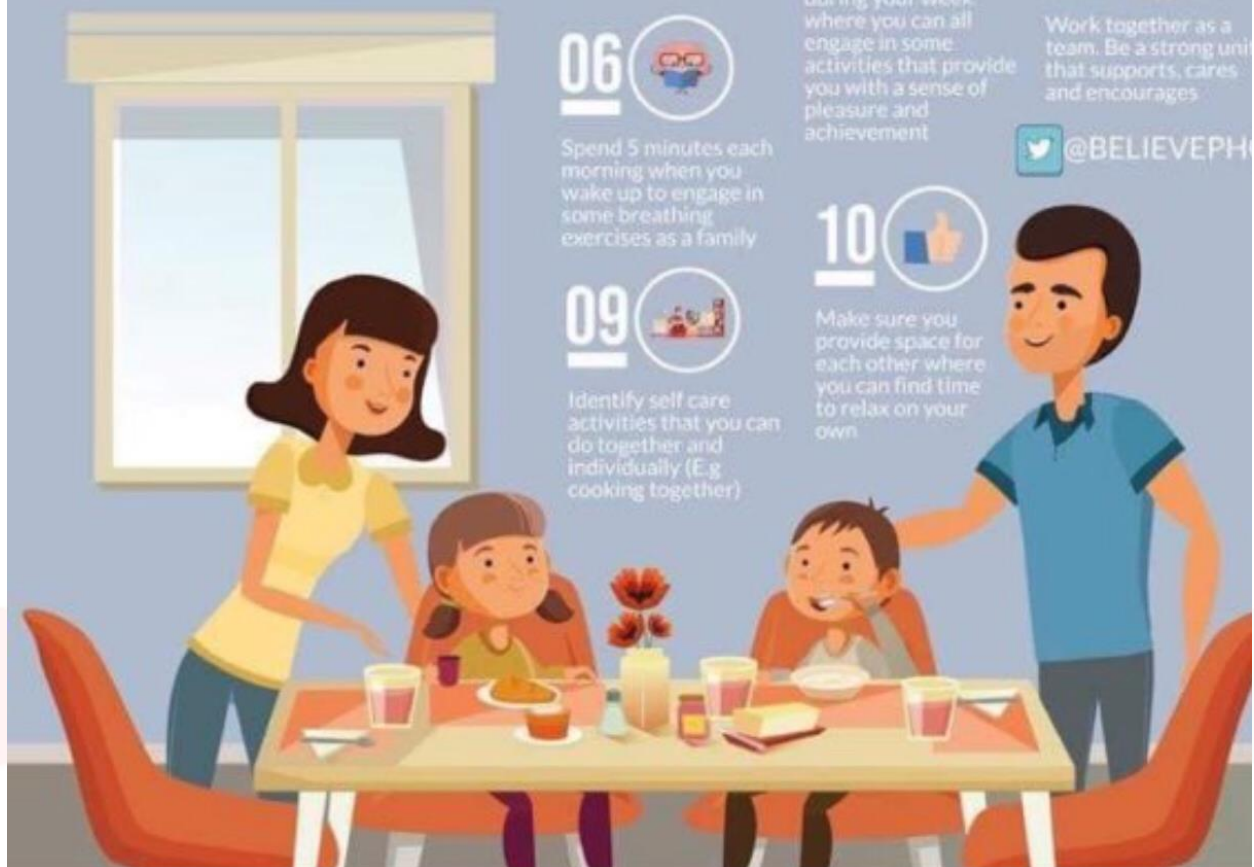
Make sure you provide space for each other where you can find time to relax on your own

09



Identify self care activities that you can do together and individually (E.g. cooking together)

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HOW FAMILIES CAN KEEP ESSENTIAL MENTAL HEALTH HABITS GOING DURING SELF ISOLATION

01



Regularly check in with each other. How are you feeling today? Is there anything I can do to help you?

02



Focus on staying connected to friends and family through using a range of applications

03



Schedule time into your week where you can all do something together that provides you with a sense of achievement

04



Encourage and support each other to stay active. Walk around the garden or get active indoors with some group activities

05



Schedule in routine and necessary things that you would like to achieve from your week. This helps reduce disruption and increase control

06



Give each other time and space. Respect each other's down time

07



With your family identify things that provide each of you a sense of pleasure and schedule into your week

08



Set some guidelines that you can all work towards (E.g we will make sure to sit down and eat dinner with each other every night)



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09



Identify some self care activities you can do together (family meditation) and individually to provide a sense of relaxation



HOW TO LOOK AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

You're likely to be in a period where the amount of worry you experience is going to be higher. Anticipate this and be ready to find out how well you can tolerate this level of worry

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1 Speak to friends or family and ask how they cope with uncertainty. Could you learn anything from them?



2 Think back to past experiences where you have coped well with uncertainty and and pick out what really helped you feel better back then



3 Take each day one step at a time. Focus on the present moment. A routine can help give you some structure



4 In times like this, increase your focus on self care and kindness. Take time to slow down, to breathe, to connect and to relax



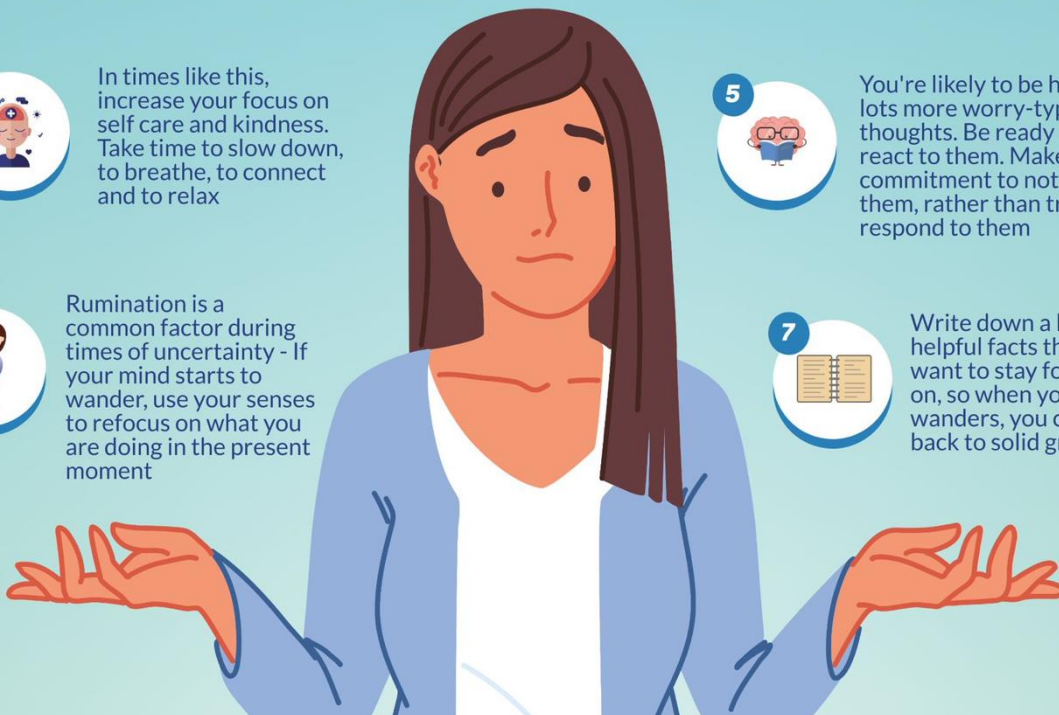
5 You're likely to be having lots more worry-type thoughts. Be ready not to react to them. Make a commitment to noticing them, rather than trying to respond to them



6 Rumination is a common factor during times of uncertainty - If your mind starts to wander, use your senses to refocus on what you are doing in the present moment



7 Write down a list of helpful facts that you want to stay focused on, so when your mind wanders, you come back to solid ground



9 MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITIES TO DO WITH YOUR CHILDREN

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WORRY TIME

- Set aside a time each day for your child worry. Discuss with your child how long the worry time will be for. In this time your child can write down their worries, discuss them with your or problem solve to overcome them

THOUGHT CHALLENGING

- Help your child to write down any unhelpful thoughts they that experience. Try to challenge them with your child and come up with more realistic and helpful ones

BEING PRESENT

- Help your child to be present and live in the moment. Go for a walk and see how many different things you can both take in with all your senses

ACTIVITY PLANNING

- Create an activity diary with your child and help them to schedule in some pleasurable and achievement related activities

TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS

- Why not create a time each week where your child can speak to you about their thoughts and feelings

3 GOOD THINGS

- Before bed spend some time with your child to identify and write down three good things they achieved from the day

WELLBEING

- Support your child to look after their wellbeing. Cook healthy meals with them, exercise or play sport with them and make sure they are getting enough sleep

IMAGERY

- Work with your child to imagine themselves in an imaginary future where everything has turned out in a positive way

THOUGHT TESTING

- Try setting out some simple activities to help your child test out the validity of a thought.



HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

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03
Stay in the moment with life experiences. Rather than posting about events or occasions on social media try and enjoy the experience



04
When with friends or family try and turn your phone to silent mode and engage in some phone down time.



05
Be selective about who your follow. Unfollow accounts which cause you to experience negative emotions or thoughts



06
Work on reducing your screen time each day. Try and connect face to face with people



07
Monitor and be aware of the impact it has on your mental health. If you are struggling to fall asleep without checking social media then maybe it is a good time to take a break



02
Try not to compare your life to other people's social media accounts.



01
Have a break day. Try taking a day or even week off from using social media



08
Create a healthy balance between when you use social media and when you should have a break

