

## **“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Helping Teens Cope with the Impacts of and Restrictions Related to COVID-19**

Adolescents are likely to be strongly affected by public health emergencies such as the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Public health directives to reduce transmission have likely meant cancellations of organized sport teams and recreational activities, missed celebrations, cancelled school trips, reduced or lost employment, loss of opportunities to socially engage with peers, and loss of in-class academic learning – proms, graduations and exams may soon follow. These impacts, combined with indirect exposure to the virus through social and TV media coverage, may challenge their coping skills in very significant ways.

The stressors of COVID-19 come during a period of great physical, social and emotional change for adolescents. At a time when they are forming identities, beliefs and values, they may be more likely than adults to act impulsively, push boundaries and assert their invincibility. These latter behaviours may make them particularly vulnerable to contracting an infectious disease like COVID-19.

### **Some Reactions to Expect**

In general, most teens are strong, sensible and have good social support systems that will help them cope and respond well to distressing events. Nevertheless, a major stressful event or public health emergency can have many effects on teens. Some common reactions include:

- Worries, fears, and anxiety about their safety and the safety of family and friends
- Fear of other major emergencies
- Negative ideas about and mistrust of others, particularly those of different backgrounds
- Increase in disruptive behaviours, for example arguing, defiance, angry outbursts
- Increased crying, sadness or depressed feelings
- More difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Variations in energy levels – either less active and tired, or more active, impatient and agitated
- Problems sleeping – either sleeping too much or not enough
- Problems eating – either eating too much or not enough

### **How to Help**

Teens need the adults in their lives to pay attention to their feelings and reactions. Remember that:

- teens can cope with stressful situations, and you can help them.
- they will express their feelings in different ways, both directly and indirectly.
- teens need your assurances that they are safe and that you will be there for them if they feel upset.
- teens will be impacted by the ways in which they see parents and other adults handle the situation, so it is important to be mindful of your own reactions and engage in good self-care.

This experience of lockdowns, forced closures, and physical distancing is new for most people in today's world. Your teens are likely in the house more during this pandemic than they have been for a long time and will be again after the pandemic has settled; cherish this time with each other.

**Don't over-react.** Many of the reactions that teens may show at this time, including a certain amount of moodiness and arguing, can be normal features of adolescence. You should, however, pay attention to behaviours that are new and to any that are really disturbing to you and show understanding and support. If the behaviours are dangerous or seriously disruptive, or if they don't improve after a few weeks, parents, family members or teachers should help the teen to get help.

On the other hand, teenagers may pretend not to be affected or concerned in an effort to convince themselves they are invincible or to appear "above it all" and "cool." In reality, they may be scared, confused, worried and in need of your help.

Here are some suggestions on how to help your teenagers cope:

**Grief and Loss.** Grief includes shock, denial, anger, numbness, sadness, and confusion; it is a normal response to loss of all kinds, including those associated with the real or feared losses during public health emergencies. Nothing like COVID-19 has ever happened before in most of our lifetimes. Because of the changes to our daily lives as a result of COVID-19, teens are missing once-in-a-lifetime events, such as school trips to Europe, graduations, proms, and there is no way to stop or rewind the clock so that they can have these moments back. While loss of life may trump the loss of a prom, losing out on milestone events is significant and painful for everyone. Let them talk to you about what they are missing; don't dismiss their concerns and distress. Hear them and understand that these are big moments in their lives and *let them grieve the loss of these experiences*. Explain that it can take time to get over a loss and encourage them to be patient with themselves and with others.

**Honest Reassurance.** Offer reassurance based on the real steps that are being taken to address the situation and explain the importance of following public health directives such as physical distancing. Admit that there are things you just don't know, including how long the current situation will last. However, don't hesitate to tell them that many people are working to ensure everyone's safety, and that by following public health directives we decrease the chance that anything will happen to them or you.

**Listen** to what they have to say about the events and how they perceive them. Provide them, as best you can, with factual information and help them distinguish opinion from fact. Try not to lecture or interrupt.

**Humour.** When dealing with difficult circumstances, watching or listening to something humorous can be helpful. However, some teens may crack jokes about tragedies in "an unconscious effort to distance themselves from their fears". Discourage disrespectful jokes while not cutting off lines of communication.

**Anger.** Teens, and people in general, may feel angry about what they have lost. Anger is often based on feelings of threat, fear, helplessness and vulnerability. Turn the conversation to the underlying feelings; tell them how you feel and options to best deal with these feelings.

**Affection.** Be patient with teens and with yourself. Find simple, daily ways to show teens that you love them — hugs, words of praise, fun time together.

**Comforting Friends.** If teens have friends who have been directly affected by COVID-19, help them find ways of comforting them; they may avoid talking to them out of fear of causing more pain. They may need help to know how to offer comfort and support, especially in these times of physical distancing.

**Social Media and TV Coverage.** Both you and your teenager may want to limit exposure to news coverage of the virus. Teens should not be shielded from the facts about the virus but watching too much new coverage can put them, and anyone for that matter, in an emotionally overloaded, anxious state. Watch TV news coverage together and talk about what you are seeing, hearing, and feeling.

**Maintain Family Routines.** Maintain family routines, particularly around sleeping and eating. Schedules help: waking up at a set time, schoolwork, leisure time, outside time when possible.

**For most of us, times of stress may not be good times to make important decisions.** If teens are quite upset by COVID-19 events, encourage them to take the time they need to think through any big decisions.

**Appropriate Adult Behaviour and Responses.** Talk to teens about what you think and feel about the circumstances related to the virus so they can understand them better. They will gain confidence to deal with their own feelings if you show them that you have strong feelings and that you can cope with them in healthy ways.

**Vulnerable Teens.** Stressful events and an ongoing climate of uncertainty and worry can have a greater impact on teens who are vulnerable. This may include teens who have experienced serious bullying, difficult family separations, deaths in the family, family violence, sexual assault, a traumatic refugee experience, clinical depression, an anxiety disorder or other mental illness, a history of drug/alcohol abuse, self-injury or suicide attempts. Some vulnerable teens may experience a return or worsening of mental health problems or unhealthy behaviours, up to and including suicide attempts.

## **Teens, Technology and Physical Distancing**

Disasters and emergencies are often times when people and communities would normally come together in friendship and social support. COVID-19 however is different because we cannot physically come together. While we must keep physically distant from each other to reduce spread of the virus, we don't have to keep our social distance. We just have to engage with others in a different manner; one with which teens are usually more familiar than their parents!

One of the ways to stay connected socially while physically distancing is by staying connected online. In fact, physical distancing requirements may have little impact on the current generation of teens who are used to socializing through their cell phones, tablets and apps like Houseparty and Snapchat. Online contact can help teens stay connected to their peers, especially if teens can videochat with their friends or co-play mobile games with their friends.

Online contact can also allow teens to stay connected with family members and loved ones who are far away and/or may be challenged by the physical distancing requirements. In this case, teens can be a helpful source of connectedness and support for loved ones, particularly those who may be elderly or vulnerable.

During physical distancing, school websites and libraries can make use of technology to help students complete online-based schoolwork; online resources may also be used for virtual extracurricular classes, science projects, and Lego challenges.

## Helpful Activities for Teens

Teens can benefit from participating in activities that can help them feel better while still maintaining physical distancing, such as:

- **Relaxing Activities.** Encourage activities like reading, listening to music, taking a walk, riding bikes, etc.
- **Diaries and Drawing.** Some teens benefit from writing their thoughts and feelings in a diary, or drawing/painting about their feelings.
- **Recreational Activities.** Vigorous physical activities and sports help reduce stress, and make people feel more alert, happy and energetic. While many teens have lost participation in organized sports, they may still be able to practice or play their favourite sport at home, or take up a new physical activity, such as biking or running.

Families can also embrace this time by engaging in activities together such as: tackling household projects previously put on hold, doing chores, painting or re-decorating a teen’s room, trying out new recipes, exercising together, playing board games and doing puzzles, watching movies, and going for family walks.

## When to Seek Help

Some teens may be more at risk for a persistent or strongly negative response, or even for suicidal behaviours. Be watchful and prepared to seek professional help if your teen shows some of the responses listed below and keep communication open by checking in to see how they are doing. They may benefit from talking with a health professional such as a psychologist, social worker, physician, nurse or psychiatrist who can help them understand and deal with how they are feeling.

- Behaviour problems
- Learning problems
- Angry outbursts
- Withdrawal from family and technology-based connectedness to their friends
- Frequent nightmares or other sleep disturbances
- Physical problems such as nausea, headaches, weight gain or loss
- Feeling very anxious or afraid
- Ongoing sadness or depression
- Hopelessness about life or the future
- Increased risk-taking or problems with the law
- Abuse of alcohol, street drugs, medicines or solvents
- Suicidal thinking or behaviour

## Where do I go for more information?

To obtain important and up to date information about COVID-19, visit the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) website at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html> or your local health authority.

Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>

Kids Help Phone: <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

*This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Dr. Lisa Votta-Bleeker, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Psychological Association.*

Date: March 31, 2020

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association  
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3  
Tel: 613-237-2144  
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657