



## **Simple strategies can help you and your family cope during Covid-19 pandemic**

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As we respond to the state of emergency from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important to have some practical and personal strategies for managing the "new normal" we find ourselves in. Specifically, as a mental health professional, I hope to provide some insights to help you cope during this crisis and manage your reaction to the "cost" of confinement, especially the typical routines, events and interactions of daily living you may now be doing without – and missing.

In providing mental health treatment to individuals at our agency, something we always prioritize as an essential part of recovery is connection and meaningful relationships. It's the opposite, unfortunately, of what I expect will be a lasting and defining phrase of this event –social distancing.

In an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19 – to "flatten the curve" (another new phrase) – health officials are advocating isolation. While this is good infection control practice, we also know social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression. Such feelings may encourage some to resort to familiar but negative coping patterns – over-eating, gambling, substance use – a vicious circle that can further exacerbate loneliness and lead to greater depression and anxiety.

But as we work to treat individuals with behavioral health challenges, one of the most important questions we ask is, what can you do to take care of yourself, instead of resorting to coping strategies that are no longer productive? In this pandemic – a situation that can cause mental distress for anyone – we should all ask ourselves this question. And I'd like to offer a few tips to help you find answers that will work for you.

First, understand the feelings you are having – that we are all likely experiencing – are absolutely normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Feelings of anxiety are not unusual now, for everyone, because there is a threat to something we all care deeply about: our health. But for positive coping, it is important to distinguish our emotional reaction from the external reality.

One of the best ways to do this is to limit your exposure to COVID-19 updates to once or twice daily, and for no more than 30 minutes at a time. Along with limiting information that might be distressing for you, there are other strategies we recommend to individuals working to maintain good mental health that can help foster feelings of being in control of your circumstances:

- Identify the things you do have control over and make constructive decisions about what you will include – and exclude – in your daily routine. Having a schedule helps to maintain a feeling of normalcy in the home, so think about simple daily routines such as wake time, meal times, bed times and goal-setting.
- Ideally, this can create an opportunity to do things you normally don't have time for if you are a busy family, such as planned meal times. Let everyone in the family help with meal preparation and create some family social time around shared tasks
- Set aside time in the evening for enjoyment (and that shouldn't mean watching hours' worth of COVID-19 news updates). Identify family games – dominos, cards or board games – that everyone can join.

- Practice good sleep hygiene along with increased personal hygiene. Go to bed at the same time each night, and reduce (or stop altogether) the use of electronics two to three hours prior to bedtime. Give your mind and body time to relax.
- While reducing caffeine consumption may be really difficult now, at least don't increase it. When we are under stress our body releases more adrenaline, and caffeine just exacerbates this (and can make sleeping more difficult). It also helps to eat a balanced diet – even though stress can make us crave comfort food.
- Increase activities that can help induce calm and relaxation – exercise, meditation, prayer or mindfulness. Breathing is a critical component to activating the body's natural calming ability, so aerobic exercise or yoga are excellent stress-reducing activities.
- Reduce screen time for all family members – especially video and online games. Instead, there are dozens of apps you can use to manage daily schedules that include tips for relaxation, physical activity, meals, recreation and more. Find these at your app store and use your screen time to engage in productive activities. Use social media sparingly, focusing on messaging apps to support and maintain positive social connections.

If you have children and youth in your home, there are some specific things that can help them navigate this event too:

- When speaking with children, only share age-appropriate information they need to know. Transparency, without placing them in a role to be your comforter, is key. You can let them know you feel stressed, but also that you have a plan for how to manage this.
- Begin each day with a family plan that includes family meetings. Schedule dedicated time to check-in and update everyone on new information or developments – and then focus on something else. Do not let COVID-19 information invade your life beyond the time that you schedule for brief updates.
- Listen to children and allow them to process their feelings about this, without feeling the need to alter or fix how they are responding. Support them in knowing their feelings, whatever they are, are valid and that as a family you are all in this together.
- Share with children that they are one of the safest groups, as very few children are being impacted by this virus, but that they too must do their part – frequent handwashing, an increased focus on personal hygiene and reducing behaviors that spread germs.
- For youth who are missing key life events or experiences – spring break, sports, prom, graduation – let them know you too are disappointed for them. Don't minimize the priority they place on these events, but help them to understand everyone is losing something during this time and that supporting each other as a family is what is important.

You may find by approaching this openly and honestly, but not letting it overwhelm your day, you and your family have the opportunity to create some wonderful memories and reset your priorities around what is truly important – the connections and relationships that nurture us all.

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