

## Managing Psychological Distress during COVID-19 Pandemic

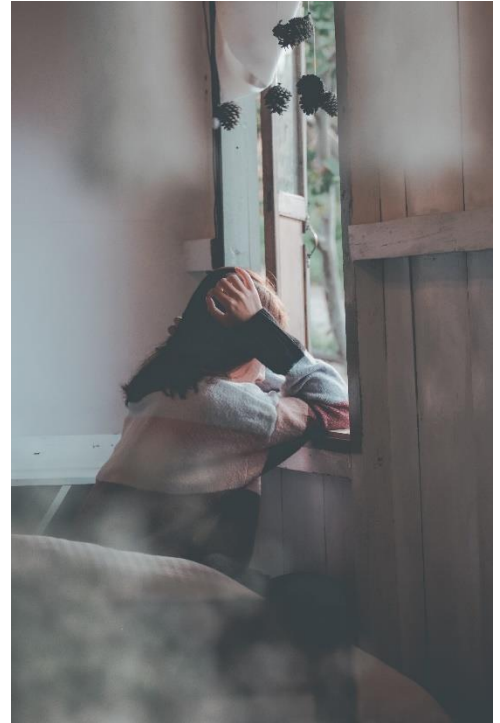
The way we interact in our world has changed drastically over the last several weeks. While many are more aware of their physical health as news of the increasing number of COVID-19 cases and its symptoms come to light, being mindful of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may be having on mental health is equally important. This is especially true for our youth who are experiencing a great deal of change as the result of regulations put in place to slow the spread of the virus.

According to the CDC, on the list for those who may be most susceptible to stress during this crisis include children and teens, as well as those with mental health conditions. Sadness, loneliness, isolation and disappointment are feelings that many of our youth are grappling with. Students who are already struggling with depression may be experiencing enhanced symptoms due to isolation, lack of supports that professionals within the school environment provide, and uncertainty of the future. Likewise, students who may not have previously experienced adverse mental health symptoms may be struggling with new emotions and psychological distress due to

the loss of school, postponement and/or cancellation of important milestones like prom and graduation, social isolation from peers, and the inability to participate in healthy extracurricular activities like spring sports, theater and music programs. The unforeseen future and constant change may make looking forward to those celebrations and events into the future challenging, especially for the developing child and adolescent brain, and exacerbate distress or depressive symptoms. It should also be noted that many parents are experiencing different stressors during this time that may include loss of their job or income, financial hardship and loss of childcare which may impact their own mental and emotional wellbeing. The psychological distress of parents can trickle down and impact children and teenagers, creating an even greater sense of unease and lack of control over the world around them.

So how can we support the mental well-being of our youth as we continue into uncharted territory? Experts agree on a few key strategies:

- 1.) If your child or teenage has a mental health diagnosis such as depression, be aware that changes in their world may trigger symptoms or make it more difficult to manage symptoms. Connect with your child's physician or mental health provider if you have concerns. Many mental health providers are using telehealth and are available to provide support.
- 2.) Take time to talk with your child/teenager. Ask how they are feeling and listen without judgment. Provide validation for the emotions and feelings they are experiencing and talk to them about healthy ways they can cope with difficult feelings like disappointment and fear (i.e. journal, talk to a friend or a therapist, art, music, practice mindfulness, exercise).
- 3.) Encourage healthy habits. Children and teenagers will do better during this stressful time if they get adequate sleep, eat healthy meals and get exercise. According to the



Child Mind Institute, healthy habits such as these are especially important for youth who may be dealing with depression or anxiety.

- 4.) Create new routines. Children and teenagers often thrive on structure and routines and it can feel stressful to lose those routines. Include time for both learning and relaxing in daily schedules.
- 5.) Help your children set age appropriate goals. Focusing on a goal can provide youth with a semblance of something to look forward to. Goals can be as simple as calling grandma or grandpa once a week or having a weekly zoom “party” with friends. Other goals might include a reading or community goal, such as sending artwork or letters to those in our nursing home facilities.
- 6.) Help youth to cope with social isolation by encouraging the safe use of technology to connect with peers. Encourage youth to get creative with new ways to interact with friends socially.

For additional information on how to help support the mental health of youth through COVID-19, please visit our SCIP website at [www.scipnebraska.com](http://www.scipnebraska.com). Connect with your school’s SCIP team if you are concerned about a child’s or teen’s mental health during this time.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; Anxiety and Depression Association of America; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Pew Research Institute; The Child Mind Institute; U.S. News and World Report

## Finding Hope

During this everchanging time, it is easy to get lost in feelings of worry, fear and uncertainty. While these feelings have validation, we must not lose sight of hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Hope is a powerful feeling that can boost mental wellness and provide strength during those moments in life that are challenging. Finding the positive when we are surrounded by news of illness, cancellation of school and activities, the postponement of important milestones and loss of income and employment, is a difficult feat, but one that is possible when we search for the stories that get overshadowed by the powerful headlines.



One such story is that of Kitty O'Meara, a former teacher and chaplain from Wisconsin. Her poem, titled, "And the People Stayed Home", was inspired by the coronavirus pandemic. It has gone viral and is being deemed "the silver lining perspective" of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to an interview in Oprah Magazine, O'Meara wrote the poem as a response to the growing anxiety she was feeling after watching news of the pandemic displayed all over the media. As stated by O'Meara, the poem "offers a story of how it could be, what we could do with this time". The poem serves as a reminder that life will one day resume back to a sense of normalcy, and perhaps, when it does, we will start anew with greater resiliency and appreciation for our lived experiences and the world around us.

### "And the people stayed home" by Kitty O'Meara

*And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.*

*And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.*

References: [www.opramag.com](http://www.opramag.com)

## Alcohol Prevention During COVID-19

As physical distancing measures and stay at home orders have become the norm, states have looked for ways to reduce the economic impact on businesses. Many have classified liquor stores as essential businesses or have loosened alcohol sale restrictions, allowing alcoholic beverages to be sold by restaurants as a carry out item, such as here in Nebraska. Nationally, alcohol sales have risen dramatically, up 55% in March, compared to the same time last year. While some of this may be attributable to stockpiling (think toilet paper), we also know that some people may be turning to alcohol to help cope with the stress and anxiety of our new normal.

Why does this matter? According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, “understanding parental influence on children through conscious and unconscious efforts, as well as when and how to talk with children about alcohol, can help parents have more influence than they might think on a child’s alcohol use.” Increased alcohol use by parents may unconsciously be sending a message to their kids that alcohol is an appropriate coping mechanism.

With so many kids and their parents home and spending more time together than usual, this is great opportunity to have a heart to heart conversation about alcohol and drugs. Studies have shown that talking with kids is one of the most powerful tools parents, educators, coaches, etc. can utilize to prevent kids starting to use or to decrease alcohol and drug use and abuse.

While talking about alcohol and drug use with your kids can be difficult, it doesn’t have to feel like you are reading them the riot act. Remain calm, relaxed and open to their questions and comments. Doing so generally results in them being more receptive to your thoughts, concerns and expectations.

Parents need to be aware of the reasons why kids might choose to use alcohol or drugs:

- **Fitting In/Socializing:** Kids may use alcohol or drugs to deal with their social insecurities or as a way to feel connected with a particular peer group.
- **Life Changes:** A life change, such as moving to a new town, divorce, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend or the death of a family member or friend, can be a time of confusion and struggle, which may lead kids to seek comfort and relief through alcohol or other drugs.
- **Emotional Psychological Wellbeing:** Persistent feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and/or other mental health issues may lead kids to use alcohol and other drugs.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, kids may be feeling extremely anxious, worried about family finances, and missing their social relationships or activities. With that being said, we, as adults, need to remember it is not only important and vital to have these conversations with kids, it is also important that we remember we are their role models.

And once our schedules and daily lives return to a level of normalcy, we still need to remain diligent about talking with our kids.

For more information on alcohol and drug use prevention or to find more information on intervention and treatment services, please visit [www.scipnebraska.com](http://www.scipnebraska.com).

References:

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