



Open Letter to the Community from the Iroquois Mental Health Center

These are confusing, stressful times for all of us. As the coronavirus pandemic affects all facets of our society, it also impacts each person in different ways. We are all feeling uncertain about what could happen in the coming weeks, as we hope to slow the spread of this pandemic. Feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are completely normal during times like this.

While we are all concerned about the future, for those with anxiety disorders, worry may be all-consuming. For those with schizophrenia, the concern of infections may contribute to paranoia. And for those with depression, lack of social engagement and disruptions in routines could increase symptoms.

This piece of advice is really important for all of us. It is important to realize that social distancing *does not have to mean social isolation*, especially with modern technologies available to many of us. Connecting with our friends and loved ones, whether by high tech means or through simple phone calls, can help us maintain ties during stressful days ahead and will give us strength to weather this difficult passage.

Manage Anxiety and Stress - Stress and Coping

Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Coping with stress will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. How you respond to the outbreak can depend on your background, the things that make you different from other people, and the community you live in.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis include:

- Older people and people with chronic diseases who are at the high risk for COVID-19
- Children and Teens
- People who are helping with the response to COVID-19, like doctors and other health care providers, or first responders
- People who have mental health conditions including problems with substance abuse

Signs of increased stress during an infectious disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

Taking care of yourself, your friends, and your family can help you cope with stress. Helping others cope with their stress can also make your community stronger.

Things you can do to support yourself:

- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media; hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting .
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Make time to unwind. Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.

Reduce stress in yourself and others

Sharing the facts about COVID-19 and understanding the actual risk to yourself and people you care about can make an outlook less stressful.

When you share accurate information about COVID-19 you can help make people feel less stressed and allow you to connect with them.

Learn more about taking care of your emotional health.

For parents

Children and teens react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with this COVID-19 calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. Some common changes to watch for include:

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

There are many things you can do to support your child.

- Take time to talk with your child or teen about the COVID-19 outbreak. Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child or teen can understand
- Reassure your child or teen that they are safe. Let them know how you feel and deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope with you

- Limit your family's exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand
- Try to keep regular routines. As schools are closed, create a schedule for learning activities and relaxing or fun activities
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members
- Learn more about helping children cope

For responders

Responding to COVID-19 can take an emotional toll on you. There are things you can do to reduce secondary traumatic stress (STS) reactions:

- Acknowledge that STS can impact anyone helping families after a traumatic event.
- Learn the symptoms including physical (fatigue, illness) and mental (fear, withdrawal, guilt).
- Allow time for you and your family to recover from responding to the pandemic.
- Create a menu of personal self-care activities that you enjoy, such as spending time with friends and family, exercising, or reading a book.
- Take a break from media coverage of COVID-19.
- *Ask for help* if you feel overwhelmed or concerned that COVID-19 is affecting your ability to care for your family and patients as you did before the outbreak.

Learn more tips for taking care of yourself during emergency responses.

For people who have been released from quarantine.

Being separated from others when a healthcare provider thinks you may have been exposed to COVID-19 can be stressful, even if you do not get sick. Everyone feels differently after coming out of a quarantine. Some feelings include:

- Mixed emotions, including relief after quarantine
- Stress from the experience of monitoring yourself or being monitored by others for signs and symptoms of COVID-19
- Sadness, anger, or frustration because friends or loved ones have unfounded fears of contacting the disease from contact with you, even though you have been determined not to be contagious
- Guilt about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties during quarantine
- Other emotional or parenting duties during quarantine

Children may also feel upset or have other strong emotions if they, or someone they know, has been released from quarantine. You can help your child cope.

Discussion:

People throughout the world are finding themselves in a situation that is unpredictable, seemingly uncontrollable, and with an indeterminate ending. They may react to fear by becoming angry. Remember the underlying emotion of anger is fear. Emotions are contagious. So people everywhere

feel stress, anxiety, and fear. In the US, people have gone through the Great Depression, wars, hurricanes and tornados, and terror attacks. People are resilient. The solution the government is offering attempts to correct a health care pandemic but creates a financial pandemic. Note that it takes the markets in the US an average of 24 months to recover.

The reaction to fear is a fight or flight response. People need reassurance of other people, but instead are forced into isolation. Panic behavior results in compulsive buying (i.e. toilet paper). What is happening is that every aspect of human life is impacted by the pandemic(s). People have been voluntarily engaging in social isolation for years by using their phones. Go to any coffee house and see two or three people sitting at a table looking at their phones and ignoring the people next to them. The difference is that now people are being ordered by their government to isolate making the desire to socialize greater. And we always want to do what we are told we can't do. What we do to relax is to watch sports, shop, go to theatres and restaurants, for example. These activities are no longer available.

For those who may experience paranoid feelings – such as the Covid 19 virus pandemic has been unleashed by the government or other entity as a means to control people's lives, or you believe the whole thing is a hoax, or you may simply feel overwhelmed beyond your ability to cope - I would urge you to call us immediately. As an essential service, our agency remains open and we have very dedicated and highly trained therapists at many convenient locations who can help you through this uncertain time - either in person or over the phone.

Finally, this is not the end of the world. It just feels that way. At some point in the not too distant future (maybe two to three months) the US and the world will be working again. When that happens, will we all appreciate what we may have taken for granted before the pandemic? We'll all come back stronger than ever. It's not the end of the world, Mother Nature just hit the reset button.

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Resources:

NIMH

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