

Managing Psychological Distress during COVID-19 Pandemic

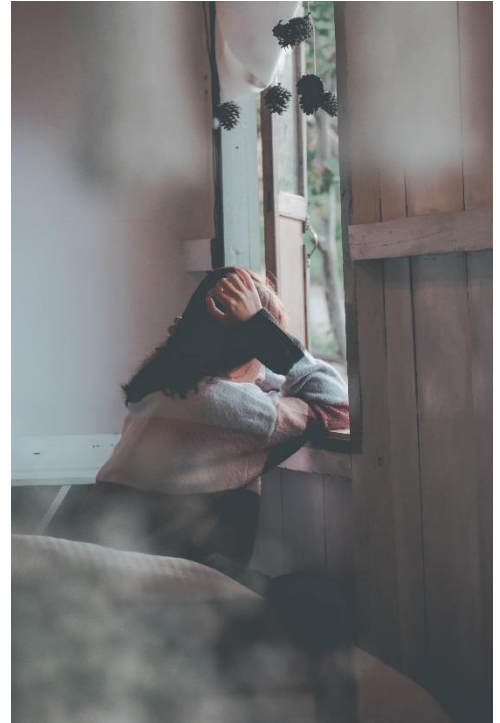
The way we interact in our world has changed drastically over the last several weeks. While many are more aware of their physical health as news of the increasing number of COVID-19 cases and its symptoms come to light, being mindful of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may be having on mental health 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. 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