



Coping with the Stress of COVID: Survival Tips for Parents and Caregivers



Image credit: Adobe Stock

Summary: COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is stressful enough for adults, let alone parents. On the other hand, although we have gone through a period of relative prosperity, humanity has survived more difficult challenges. The good news is that there are many healthy strategies that we can do to help our kids, as well as survive as parents through this difficult time.

Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been extremely stressful for us as caregivers and parents. We have the responsibility of supporting our children and youth during this time. And we have the stress of having to manage finances and work responsibilities.

The good news is that there are many healthy strategies that we can do to support our kids, and survive as parents during this stressful time.

Looking for Basic Needs?

Do you need a food bank?

- Call 211 (<http://211.ca/>) or Food Banks Canada (<https://www.foodbankscanada.ca/utility-pages/find-a-food-bank.aspx>)

Do you need shelter and housing?

- Call 211 (<http://211.ca/>)

Looking for Financial Support?

CBC has an excellent interactive guide <https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/coronavirusbenefits/>

Professor Jennifer Robson (University of Carleton) has created a list of finances for each province https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lOjn7XS6ETIkbLRodYk681M_2dxkkQsc/view

Are you a parent in Ontario?

- Do you have an eligible child 0-12 who is not currently in school or daycare, or a child 0-21 with special needs?
- Contact <https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-support-families>

Do's

Model calmness for your children.

- If you are feeling stressed out, then it's more likely your kids will be stressed out, which will make them feel less safe and less open to whatever routines, guidance or direction you want to give them.
- Top parent things to do
 - Limit your access to news, as too much news is stressful.
 - Maintain your own sources of connection, purpose, hope and meaning for your own mental health.
 - Remember, physical distancing does not mean you have to be disconnected from other adults. Perhaps 15-30 minutes where you connect via Skype, Facetime, or telephone with a friend or family member. It is natural that there might be things you'll want to complain about. And try to keep it positive by mentioning things you are grateful for and meaningful things that happened.
 - Seek help if you are feeling overwhelmed. Help can be just talking about the hard stuff and voicing the concerns out loud. If you can't find anyone to listen, do self-talk. It is a powerful tool.
- Are you feeling stressed out? Consider this resource:
 - Mental Wellness and Resiliency while Coping with Coronavirus/COVID
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=62192>

Focus on things within your control such as:

"Doing the Five" from the World Health Organization







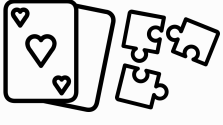

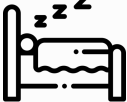
1. Hands. Wash them often
2. Elbow. Cough into it
3. Face. Don't touch it
4. Feet. Stay more than 3 feet (1 m) away from people not in your home.
5. Feel sick? Stay home

Keep regular routines as much as possible.

- Predictability and routines help children and adults feel safe.
- Plan a basic daily schedule with key essentials such as:
 - Wake up times;
 - Self-care routines.
 - Mealtimes.
 - Quiet times for rest, reading, relaxation
 - Consider classical music to help with boredom, as well as for calming the mind.
 - Nature time
 - Ensure plenty of time outdoors. Fresh air and exercise help children expend energy and find a sense of calm.
 - Adults should get outside at least 30-minutes a day, and children at least 60-minutes a day. If need be walk as though on a treadmill and stay in one place. Do dance moves or make up your own dance moves.
 - Ideally go for a walk, otherwise, at least sit outside. If you cannot get outside, consider opening a window.
 - Chores.
 - Consider giving your children **more** chores and responsibilities than usual, in order to occupy

their time, preserve standards of responsibility, and to help you out. It gives your children a sense of security to contribute to the family and be valued.

Example of a schedule, along with visuals:

7-8 AM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wake up • Eat breakfast • Help with cleanup after breakfast • Brush teeth • Get dressed • Make your bed
Morning	 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor time (at least 30-minutes) • Academic time • Reading, math / science / languages, or some other learning activity • Creative Time • Arts/crafts, music, building/construction toys
12-1 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lunch <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Helping with lunch ◦ Helping with clean up after lunch
1-5 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor time • Creative time • Quiet activities • Chores
5-6 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dinner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with dinner • Dinner • Help with clean up
6-8 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-electronic activities such as board games (ideally)
8-8:30 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bedtime routine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screens off • Bath, brush teeth, pajamas
9 PM		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bedtime <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading, quiet activities

- Click here for downloadable templates to make your own schedules
<https://docs.google.com/docume...>

Continue having household limits on recreational screen time.

- Experts recommended the following Pre-COVID:
 - For young children aged 0-2: Ideally no recreational screen time.
 - For age 3-5: Up to ½ hr a day of quality programming, ideally educational.
 - For young children, what is better than screens? Read to your kids, while making sound effects.

- For age 6-17: No more than 2 hours daily of recreational screen time, and ideally on Fri/Sat/Sun if possible.
- During COVID, naturally, because we are simply trying to survive, it is understandable that during this temporary period, we might allow our kids more screen time than usual.
- Nonetheless, it is still important for your child's brain to set limits.
- There will eventually be a post-COVID period, and you don't want your children to become too addicted to recreational screens in the meanwhile.
- If you are going to have recreational screen time, try to save it until later in the day if possible.

Limit everyone's news exposure.

- Limit your children's exposure to the news -- today's 24/7 news coverage is overwhelming for adults, let alone children. After listening to news, check in with the kids to help them process any difficult or scary things.
- Avoid playing news reports in the background.

Get information about Coronavirus/COVID-19 from reliable sources such as:

- Reputable news organizations such as
 - CBC (www.cbc.ca)
- Credible experts such as
 - Health Canada
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>
 - Center for Disease Control (CDC)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Need to have 'the COVID talk' with your children?

- Consider beginning the discussion by welcoming them to share what questions/concerns they have about it.
- You might say, "Things have been so busy, we haven't had a chance to really talk about the coronavirus. Maybe you have some questions about it. What did you want to ask me about it?"
- Once they have shared their thoughts and questions, consider using this situation as a teaching opportunity, (e.g. "Where might we find the answers to your questions?"). Depending upon their developmental level, refer to appropriate, reputable resources of information (e.g. Health Canada, CBC news, etc.). Ask your children what they have heard, and what they understand. This is an opportunity to teach your children about dishonest reporting and propaganda and why it is a global concern.
- Key messages to reinforce with your children:
 - The adults in their lives are doing the best they can to keep them safe.
 - There are things they (your children) can do to increase feelings of control and safety, such as the World Health Organization's "Do the Five"
 - See "How to Talk to Your Kids about COVID-19" below for more information.

Is your child asking you a specific COVID related question?

- Before you answer the question, first...
 - Validate the feelings behind the question: "That's a good question."
 - Then, find out the specific concern: "What makes you ask?" or "Is there something you are worried about?" or "What bugs you the most about this situation?"
 - Find out what your child knows: "What do you know so far? What do you think?"
- Then you can give them an answer that is age appropriate.

Are you trying to work from home while looking after your kids at home?

- Many schools are shut down due to coronavirus, and as a result, many parents are faced with having to keep their kids home for an extended period of time.
- Create a work schedule with the collaboration of your family.
- Accept that the plan will change and need to be flexible.

- Are there periods you need to be left alone to get work done? Try to have those earlier in the day, or have your working periods coincide with their “quiet times”.
- Share your work schedule with your family, so as to limit distractions and set an example of work ethic for your children.
- Experiment to find the ideal schedule. With some children, you will need to invest more time with them earlier in the day before you start working. With other children (such as teens), you may be able to spend time with them later in the morning, etc. Your children will guide you through the success of the schedule and if necessary go back to the drawing board.
- Limit personal distraction by turning off certain notifications on your mobile devices, or, turn on “Do Not Disturb” mode for a designated period of time.
- Are your children interrupting you in the middle of a virtual meeting? It’s okay. Introduce the kids to your co-workers. Other parents are working from home with their new ‘co-workers’ (i.e. children) too.
- Let your children know that by being responsible and independent, they can contribute to the wellbeing of the family by letting their parents work.
- Are you having troubles staying focused? Watch your own screen habits. Consider turning on the Screen Time (iOS) or Digital Wellbeing (Android) features in your Settings to help you track your screen time.

Are you having to homeschool your kids, now that school is suspended?

- Ensure that your children eat breakfast.
- Consider having the more intense subjects and learning activities (e.g. math) as the first subjects in the morning.
- After a break, you can then do more creative activities (e.g. drawing, music) in the afternoon.
- Intersperse academic periods with physical movement and/or time outside.
 - Some studies show after 20-minutes of intense focus, a break is required.
 - Optometrists recommended the 20-20-20 rule -- every 20-minutes, look at least 20-feet away, for at least 20-minutes.
 - Optometrists also recommend at least 1-hr outside daily, in order to get enough light that keeps children’s eyes from becoming near sighted.
- Contact your child’s teachers. Ask what resources they have available for students throughout this time. Inquire whether teachers are hosting regular, daily group chats with their classes. In the least, your child’s teacher(s) can hopefully email you appropriate learning assignments. And best case, many teachers are having regular, daily group chats with their classes.
- Remember that every moment is a teaching opportunity. Take time to include your children in regular household tasks, such as cooking, doing laundry, etc. Children learn about their surrounding environment through vocalized interactions with others.

Self-regulation

- For children: Consider having a self-regulation toolkit with preferred activities and items to help them self-regulate. Think about each sense, and see if there is something that is soothing for each of them. For example:
 - Visual: Photos such as of family that are comforting. Materials to draw with or pictures to colour.
 - Smells: Scented candle or essential oils such as lavender or vanilla.
 - Movement: A rocking chair, or mini-trampoline to jump on. Turn on the music and dance around the house.
 - Repetitive movements are soothing such as
 - Fine motor: Knitting, coloring, painting, sculpting, scrapbooking, crafts, etc.
 - Gross motor: Jumping rope, drumming (on a nice quiet drumming pad), rocking, etc.
 - Deep pressure: Cuddling in a heavy blanket or comforter, using an actual weighted blanket.
 - Oral: Bubble gum, chewing on ice, etc.
- Have quiet periods in the schedule: This allows everyone to have a break from each other, especially if you have children who are introverted.
- Try to follow your children’s lead on self-regulation routines, but if they do not have the ability to self-regulate, then provide your expertise as an adult.

Self-compassion

- Be easy on yourself during this unprecedented time. Some days, either you and/or the kids might end up in pajamas all day in front of a screen. It's okay. Some days, it's just about survival. Tomorrow is a new day.

Compassion for others

- Try to find ways to help others in your family or community, and involve your children. E.g. making cards, gifts or crafts for a neighbor; getting groceries for a neighbour; singing songs outside their window; donating to the local food bank or shelter, etc.

Finding hope, meaning and positive energy

- Share positive stories with your children about how people are coping.
 - E.g. For every person who is selfish during a crisis, there are numerous more who are helping others.
- When you see your children doing something positive, thank them for those specific positives, and give them a nice hug.
- Help your children find meaning from these hard times, e.g. a chance to help others; a chance to grow closer as a family; etc.

Don't focus on things outside your control such as:

- What other people are doing;
- Whether or not other people are following the 'rules';
- Whether or not there is toilet paper or hand sanitizer at the store;
- How long this pandemic will last.

Red Flags for Different Ages

Preschoolers and Toddlers

Signs of Stress

- Regression, e.g. acting like a younger child
- Increased fears of being separated from parents, being more clingy
- Bed wetting
- Temper tantrums

Do's and Don'ts

- Do validate any frustration
- Do ensure regular routines
- Accept they may need to co-sleep with parents temporarily to feel more secure

School Aged Children (Aged 6-12)

Signs of Stress

- Anger, irritability, sadness
- Physical complaints such as sore stomach, headaches
- Sleep problems including nightmares
- Behaviour problems

Do's and Don'ts

- Is your child sad, angry or frustrated?
- Notice the frustration, "You seem sad, upset."
 - Give validation, empathy, e.g. "Thank you for letting me know you are feeling sad. It's good if you need to have a cry and let the feelings out."
 - Give them a hug, kleenex, and encourage tears -- tears help with self-regulating strong feelings.
 - Is your child calm enough to say what the stress is? If so, ask, "What's making you feel upset?"
 - If they can't tell you, try to guess what might be the stress
 - Don't start with giving them instructions or commands if they are upset, because their logical brain may not be ready.
 - Give them space, or help them co-regulate until they are able to be more rational and reasonable.

Adolescents (aged 12-17)

Signs of Stress	Do's and Don'ts
<p>May have all the similar signs as with school-aged children, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignoring physical distancing recommendations • Oppositional, reckless behaviors 	<p>Use all the same strategies as with school-aged children (such as empathy, validation, acceptance, problem-solving), plus: Treat them like allies and competent young adults. It's important for them to learn that as an adult you are experiencing the same feelings and fears. Explain to them how their help is valuable and required more than ever right now in order to contribute meaningfully, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Doing the Five" as recommended by public health; • Contributing to the family via chores, responsibilities, keeping the younger siblings occupied, giving parents space to work • Use coaching language as opposed to directive, controlling language that can create even more stress. • Example: If your child has homework for school, you can ask, "I'm here to support you with your school. What's your plan for schoolwork today? Anything I can do to help with that?" <p>Accept that teens may have stronger needs for social connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage connection through alternate means, e.g. outdoor contact (if allowed) <p>Give them responsibility for their feelings, fears, and the need to ask for help.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your teen doesn't, or isn't able to talk? Just leave it. However, you can say, "I'm here whenever you want to talk."

For More Information: For Adults

Are you struggling yourself in coping with this whole situation?

- Mental Wellness and Resiliency while Coping with Coronavirus/COVID
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=62192>

For More Information: For Parents

COVID with Kids is a website by a group of child psychiatrists in Toronto. Helpful tips, as well as downloadable templates.

<https://www.covidwithkids.org/>

10 Solutions To Save Your Sanity During the Coronavirus Pandemic School Closures

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/family-life/lockdown-kids-busy-corona>

Mommyhood101 has some examples of schedules including downloadable templates.

<https://mommyhood101.com/daily-schedule-for-kids>

Keeping Siblings from Each Other's Throats During Quarantine Forced Togetherness

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/keeping-siblings-from-each-others-throats-during-quarantine-forced-togetherness-home-with-kids-coronavirus>

Are you parenting as a separated / divorced parent?

- Shared custody / parenting during COVID-19
<https://afcontario.ca/wp-content/home/ementalhealth/ementalhealth.ca/frontend/uploads/2020/03/COVID-A-FCC-O-Parent-Time-Shared-Custody.pdf>

[More...](#)

How to Talk to Your Kids about COVID-19

- How to talk to your children about COVID-19
 - **Children's Mental Health Ontario**
[Talking to your anxious child about Covid-19](#)
 - **KidsHealth**

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): How to Talk to Your Child](#)

- **Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health**
[COVID-19: Supporting a discussion with children and youth](#) (includes a list of websites and print resources)
- **Whole-Brain Child** approach to talking about Coronavirus with children
<https://www.tinabryson.com/news/coronavirus-talking-points-for-parents-amp-teachers-with-the-whole-brain-child-approach>
- AHA Parenting
[What to Say To Your Child About the Coronavirus -- and How To Cope As a Parent](#)

Parenting Children/Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The New ASD "At Home" World - 10 Ways to Cope with Changes During COVID-19

<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/the-new-asd-at-home-world-10-ways-to-cope-with-changes-during-covid-19/>

Information from the University of Missouri Health on COVID and ASD

<https://echoautism.org/parent-resources-during-covid-19/>

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities

<https://www.hcarddcovid.com/info>

Resources for Families of Children/Young Adults with ASD from University of North Carolina: Supporting Individuals with ASD through Uncertain Times

<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>

Autism Ontario: List of Resources to help Us through Covid-19

<https://www.autismontario.com/list-resources-help-us-through-covid-19>

Autism Speaks- Covid-19 information and resources for families

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/covid-19-information-and-resources-families>

For Children and Youth

COVID Information

- COVID comic strip for kids (NPR)
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>
- Social distancing: Explanation for young people (CBC)
<https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/watch-what-is-social-distancing>
- Coronavirus info for young kids
<https://afccontario.ca/wp-content/home/ementalhealth/ementalhealth.ca/frontend/uploads/2020/03/Corona-Virus-Info-for-Young-Children.pdf>

Coping and Resiliency in General

For Children

- Websites
 - Mind Masters 2
<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/professionals-and-partners/iecmh.aspx#Mindmasters-2>
 - Mighty Moe
 - GoNoodle
Various videos and activities, including dancing, moving and mindfulness.
<https://family.gonoodle.com>
- Apps
 - Moshi Twilight App (bedtime meditation app)

Soothing stories and meditations to help kids fall asleep. Some parents also report that as their young kids are getting upset, they find it helpful to show to breathing animations to help their kids calm down

<https://www.makebedtimeadream.com>

- Books
 - Sitting Still Like a Frog by Eline Snel
 - What To Do When You Dread Your Bed by Dawn Huebner
 - What To Do When You Worry Too Much by Dawn Huebner
 - What To Do When Your Temper Flares by Dawn Huber

For Teens

- Websites
 - Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens
[Self-Compassion for Teens \(MFY\) Meditations](#)
- Apps
 - Headspace (meditation app)
App for mindfulness
<https://www.headspace.com>
 - Simple Habit (meditation app)
A 5-minute app to help busy people with meditation.
<https://www.simplehabit.com>
 - Down Dog (Yoga)
Provides a yoga studio like experience of doing yoga, but from the comfort of your home using the website or app.
<https://www.downdogapp.com/>
- Books
 - Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills for Helping You Manage Mood Swings, Control Angry Outbursts, and Get Along with Others by Sherry Van Dijk
 - My Anxious Mind: A Teen's Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic by Michael Tompkins & Katherine Martinez

Online / Virtual Mental Health Resources in Ontario

Is your child/youth struggling with stress, anxiety or depression?

- Call
 - Telehealth Ontario
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-medical-advice-telehealth-ontario> , or
 - See your primary care provider.

For youth:

- The following online resources may also be helpful for youth
 - AnxietyCanada (<https://www.anxietycanada.com>)
 - Online support
 - Bounce Back (<https://bouncebackontario.ca>)
 - Big White Wall (<https://www.bigwhitewall.com/?lang=en-ca&from=ca/>)
 - Apps
 - Mindshift (<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>)
 - Be Safe (<https://besafeapp.ca>)

For child/youth

- KidsHelpPhone (<https://kidshelpphone.ca>)

About this Workbook

Written by the health professionals at CHEO, many of whom are parents themselves Special thanks to Konstantinos Zaphiropoulos, M.Ed. in Educational and Counselling Psychology; Melodie Dupuis, Clinical Counsellor. No conflicts of interest or competing interests declared. All of this is unprecedented. Please feel free to give us comments and suggestions on how to improve this article.

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Disclaimer

Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to you. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your health.











Addendum: Our Weekday Schedule



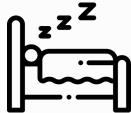
Example of a Daily Schedule, that you can cut/paste.

7-8 AM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wake up • Eat breakfast • Help with cleanup after breakfast • Brush teeth • Get dressed • Make your bed
Morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor time • Academic time • Reading, math / science / languages, or some other learning activity • Creative Time • Arts/crafts, music, building/construction toys
12-1 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lunch <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Helping with lunch ◦ Helping with clean up after lunch
1-5 PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor time • Quiet activities • Chores
5-6 PM	Dinner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with dinner • Dinner • Help with clean up
6-8 PM	Free time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-electronic activities such as board games (ideally) • Recreational screen time (if permitted)
8-8:30 PM	Bedtime routine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screens off • Bath, brush teeth, pajamas

9 PM Bedtime
 • Reading, quiet activities

Does your child prefer visuals? Here is a daily schedule with visuals that you can copy/paste.

8:30 AM		Morning / Wake up Routine
9 AM		Outdoor time
10 AM		Learning activity or school work
12 PM		Lunch
		Creative time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being creative, and creating things, e.g. Writing, drawing, art, music
		Outdoor time
		Free time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading, music, LEGO, etc.
6 PM		Dinner
		Free time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screen time • Card games • Puzzles
8 PM		Bedtime routine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bath or Shower • Pajamas • Medications • Snack (Cereal)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brush teeth
<p>9 PM</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In bedroom with low blue lights (i.e. red / orange) • Reading, drawing, listening to music or other soothing activity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final cuddle with parents, saying goodnight • Sleep

All icons courtesy of www.flaticon.com

Addendum: Our Weekly Schedule

Use this schedule to indicate any activities that happen weekly. Pre-COVID, this was for activities such as hockey, music, though with COVID, there will be less of such activities.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Morn							
Afternoon							
Evening							