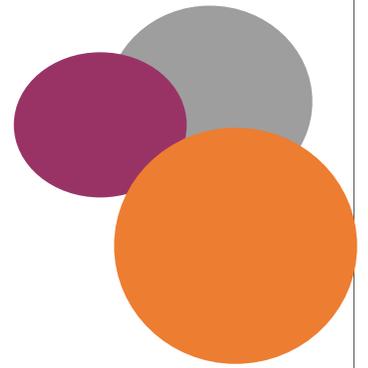


Family Mental Health Toolkit for COVID-19

A Guide for Teens

Created for you by your friends at  Dickinson Center, Inc.
COMPASSION • EXCELLENCE • HOPE SINCE 1958



Hey Parents! Feeling Weird? That's Because You're Normal!

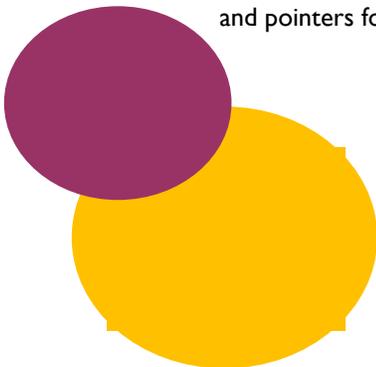
Everyone has had their lives turned upside down in the last 2-3 months and we are all living in a time of uncertainty. Things change often day to day, and sometimes hour to hour! The pandemic has brought changes to how you live your life, it has altered daily routines, caused financial pressures, made homeschooling a necessity, and has forced us into social isolation. You may worry about getting sick, how long the pandemic will last, or what the future will bring. Information overload, rumors, misinformation, and the rapid changes can make your life feel out of control. In addition, just when everything and everyone seemed to be adjusted to a new "normal" things are changing again! During this pandemic, you may experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and loneliness; that's a typical reaction to a traumatic event, which is exactly what this pandemic is. But you aren't alone. The good news is, there are things you can do to help yourself and make it through this. And we are here to help YOU and your family during these trying times. We hope that you find this to be a useful resource for you and your family. And if you still have questions, or need more information or help, please don't hesitate to reach out to one of the providers listed on the back of this pamphlet. Mental health providers specialize in working with individuals experiencing stress and trauma!

Impact on Teens

Teens are undoubtedly having a difficult time with the changes and precautions that have been put into place by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially during all of this, your teenager was likely delighted with the changes. They likely saw it as an early summer vacation, or a prolonged spring break. When the expectations of school resumed, the cancellation of school and community events occurred, and the reality of not seeing his/her friends set in, their entire demeanor likely changed too. Don't be surprised if you start seeing MORE emotional outbursts or MORE argumentative actions from your once occasionally moody teenager.

Another beautiful thing about teenagers is that they have the ability to form their own thoughts and opinions on matters. They understand more than a younger child, so their views of the pandemic are likely much different than a younger version of themselves. They may go back and forth between thinking "this is all just a hoax" and "we must follow everything the government says." That's normal! They are trying out their opinions and voicing them with those that they feel the safest with: their caregivers!

All normally developing teenagers want independence, yearn to be with their peers and look ahead to the future. How do we care for young people whose wings have been clipped, who aren't supposed to hang out with their friends and whose plans have been upended by coronavirus? We empathize with them. That means we tell them that we understand their frustrations and genuinely see their point of view. Check out the next page for some tips and pointers for working with (not against) your teen during these difficult times.



*"Step with care and great tact,
and remember that life's a great balancing act."*

- Dr. Seuss; Oh the Places You Will Go

Quaranteenagers: Strategies for Parenting in Close Quarters

Information adapted from The New York Times article: *Quaranteenagers: Strategies for Parenting in Close Quarters* (online article by Lisa Damour published 3/19/2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/well/family/coronavirus-covid-teenagers-teens-parents-kids-family-advice.html>)

Here are some strategies that might help to address these unforeseen parenting challenges, especially at a time when many adults are struggling to hold it all together and may not have easy access to their usual reserves.

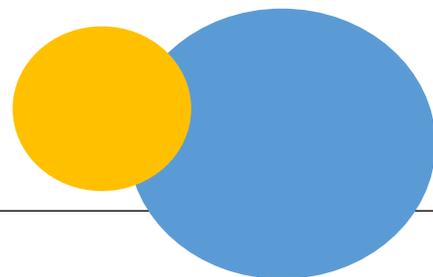
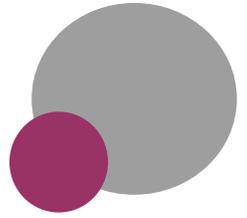
Make Space for Disappointment and Sadness: Teenagers everywhere are facing stunning losses. Once-in-a-lifetime events and rites of passage such as graduations, proms and springtime on college campuses have been canceled. Performances, conferences and competitions for which teenagers have been preparing for months, if not years, have disappeared overnight. Gone are the clubs, teams, hallway flirtations and other interactions that leaven most students' days. Though we can't replace what's been lost, adults should not underestimate the power of offering outright empathy to disheartened adolescents. In addition to experiencing anxiety about Covid-19, teenagers also have every right to be sad, angry and intensely frustrated about what has become of their year. Adults should not hesitate to say, "I hate that you have lost so much so fast and I am sorry it has happened. You'll get through this, but that doesn't make it any less miserable right now." When it comes to navigating painful feelings, the only way out is through, and offering our teenagers the compassion they deserve paves their way toward feeling better.

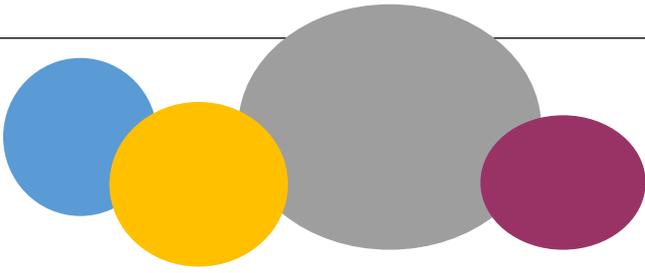
Make Space for Relief and Joy: The same teenagers who feel deeply upset about missing school and their peers in one moment may express delight and deliverance in the next. As much as they are grieving their losses, they may also be relieved at getting out of some commitments they never wanted to keep, or being spared ongoing daily interaction with classmates, teachers or coaches they dislike. Let's not begrudge adolescents their welcome feelings. They did not ask for or cause the current situation and should not be made to feel bad about enjoying some aspects of it. We might say, "It's OK to feel relief now too," while reassuring teenagers that embracing the upsides of the disruption does not minimize what they've lost or their worries about the impact of the virus.

Expect Friction Regarding Their Social Lives: If you're a parent who is sticking to the social distancing guidelines, your teenager is probably already frustrated with you, as some parents are still allowing their kids to hang out as usual. To address this we might say, "I know that other parents are still having kids over, but we can't support that choice because it doesn't fit with what experts are recommending." From there, we can let our teenagers know that when turning down invites they are free to blame us, and that if local safety guidelines allow, we're open to their suggestions about how they might get together with friends outdoors, six feet apart. When adolescents can't see their peers in person, it seems only fair to loosen the rules on how much time they spend connecting online. Now, as always, rules are still in order to keep digital technology from undermining essential elements of healthy development. Sleep, productive learning, physical activity and face-to-face interactions (even if only with family members for now) should not be crowded out by life online.

Allow Privacy and Time Alone: Of course, few adolescents will want to spend all of their new at-home time with their parents or guardians. Teenagers who are practicing social distancing will need and deserve privacy and time alone. Make it clear that you welcome your teenagers' company, but don't take it personally if they want you nearby but quiet (like a potted plant), or if they want to spend time holed up in their rooms or in some other private space in your home. While you are free to request or require your teenager's presence, think about approaching your teenager with an extra measure of consideration when making requests. For example, saying, "We're going to need you to supervise your sister for a couple of hours, but we know that you have plans too. How should we do this?" might be a good place to start.

Treat Teenagers as Problem-Solving Partners: As we scramble to figure out new rules, systems and routines for daily living, let's remember that adolescents are usually *at least* as creative as adults, and will appreciate being treated as such. Don't hesitate to recruit teenagers' help. Instead of presenting them with a suggested daily program, we could say, "We're all having to invent new ways to arrange our days. Can you show me what you have in mind so that I can get a feel for your regular schedule and make sure you're covering all your bases?" Similarly, we might ask persistently grumpy teenagers how they themselves would like to balance their own right to be upset with our reasonable expectation that they not make life in close quarters miserable for everyone else.





Pro Tip: Taking deep breathes has all kinds of great benefits! When you take a deep breath, try to breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold it in your belly for 7 seconds, and breathe out through your mouth for 8 seconds. Practice with bubbles! How big can you make a bubble while practicing this type of breathing?

That's a Coping Skill?

What's a coping skill? It's something that you can do to help you feel better if you are feeling negative emotions. If you or your teenagers are feeling cooped up, or your resources are depleted, here's a list of some coping skills to try. These activities can be done by the teen individually, or you can do them together!

- Share your favorite songs and talk about why they are your favorite
- Take a walk
- Play a board/card game
- Snuggle with a pet
- Talk to a parent or a friend
- Write in a journal
- Make slime
- Clean your room
- Watch funny YouTube videos
- Go on a picnic
- Practice yoga
- Read a book
- Make/squeeze a stress ball
- Paint a picture
- Take some deep breathes
- Write a story or poem
- Do a random act of kindness
- Take a bath or a shower
- Create an arts and crafts project
- Color a picture
- Ride a bike
- Make a list of places you want to visit
- Take a nap
- Make a collage of your favorite photos
- Watch TV
- Watch a funny movie
- Do a puzzle
- Make a card for a family member
- Check out social media
- Say a prayer
- Play a musical instrument
- Dance
- Knit, crochet, or sew
- Write a letter
- Make a list of your positive qualities
- Play a sport
- Go birdwatching
- Learn a new skill (blowing a bubble, whistling, snapping fingers)
- Swing on a swing set
- Write down your favorite song lyrics
- Bake or cook
- Do a science experiment
- Make a time capsule
- Try a "grounding" exercise (see back)
- Visit with a loved one
- Exercise
- Go swimming
- Read the newspaper

Pro Tip: Make a worry stone! Pick out a pebble and decorate it with paints, stickers, and designs. When you are worried or nervous, rub your pebble in your hands and send all the bad thoughts into the pebble to stay.

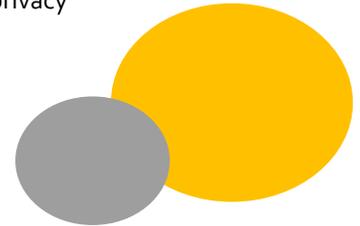
Pro Tip: "Grounding" techniques are a great way to re-center yourself. Take a moment and try to sit in silence. Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Pause and focus on each one for a moment.

Signs and Symptoms to Look For

Anxiety looks different in every individual, but here are some common signs. Keep in mind that this list is not exclusive; teenagers express anxiety in all sorts of different ways, and some disguise it very well. The key is to not let your teen bottle it up. Anxiety is worsened by avoidance, so it's important to talk to them about their concerns and seek help if they need it. Here are some of the most common indicators of anxiety in teenagers:

- Avoidance or dismissal of all discussions about the feared topic
- Hiding out in his/her room for extended periods of time in excess of just needing privacy
- Reluctance to separate from caregivers
- Withdrawing from peers and avoiding social media
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches
- Excessive moodiness, crying, and irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Reluctance or refusal of previously enjoyed activities when offered (i.e. hanging out with friends, going to the park)
- Experimenting with drugs or alcohol use
- Engaging in risky behaviors to divert attention away from the situation that is causing anxiety

While these behaviors do not necessarily indicate anxiety, it may be helpful to have a conversation with your teen if you notice any of these things. Saying something like, "I've noticed that you haven't been on TikTok lately, is everything okay?" or "I'm wondering about how you are coping right now with all these changes, it's a lot and I know a lot of people are struggling" are good starters to have these types of difficult conversations. While you might not be able to "fix" this problem, letting your teen know that you understand and care for them is often enough to help them deal with the situation better.



Need More Help?

We are living in difficult times right now and sometimes it helps just to have someone to talk to. If you feel that you or your child would benefit from talking with a professional, here are some local resources! Help is only a phone call away.

Resource created by:

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Ridgway, St. Mary's and
Coudersport locations
814-776-2145

Cen-Clear Child Services

St. Mary's (and other locations
within the state)
814-834-9283

CAPSEA

Ridgway
814-772-3838

Elk County Crisis Hotline

1-800-652-0562