

A Seat at The Table for Mental Health



Reducing Stress and Social Isolation During Pandemics

During outbreaks of physical disease and pandemics, individuals are at heightened risk for stress, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. We can support one another's mental health and wellness by being cognizant of signs and symptoms of mental distress and promoting self-care.

Key Facts

- The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has disrupted the United States economy and society in unprecedented ways.
- COVID-19 has disrupted our daily activities while introducing uncertainty and fear.
- 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.

Possible Questions for Discussion

- How can I find social connection and outlets while being at home during an outbreak of disease?
- How does the media impact my feelings of stress or anxiety? How can I manage this?
- In what ways am I taking care of my physical and mental health? Are these healthy?
- What mental health resources are available to me? Do I feel comfortable sharing them with others?

What You Can Do to Reduce Stress and Social Isolation during a Pandemic

1. *Know the Signs of Stress and Mental Distress*¹

- An increase or decrease in energy and activity levels;
- An increase in alcohol, tobacco, or drug use;
- An increase in irritability or anger;
- Having trouble relaxing or sleeping;
- Having difficulty communicating or listening;
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help; and/or
- Inability to feel pleasure or have fun.

2. *Employ Strategies for Managing Stress*ⁱ

- Understand that stress and anxiety are natural human responses.
- Know when to ask for help. If you or someone you know shows signs of stress above for several days or weeks, get help by accessing one of the resources at the end of this tip sheet.
- Keep things in perspective. Remember to care for all areas of your life and not just the pandemic. Focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.
- Consume media wisely. Engage with and share validated, accurate information, not rumors. Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media.
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and feelings. Practice compassion and empathy.
- Take care of your body. Eat healthy, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Use practical ways to relax throughout the day. Make time to unwind. Do activities you enjoy.
- Stick to a normal routine that sets boundaries between work, family obligations, and relaxation.

3. *Practice Social Distancing, Not Social Isolation*ⁱⁱ

- Social Distancing does not equal Emotional Distancing.
- Convene regular opportunities to socialize with co-workers and family via Skype, Zoom, Google chat, or another online platform.
- Utilize personalized communication platforms, such as telephone and FaceTime as much as possible instead of relying on social media to stay connected.
- Face-to-face time builds quality relationships, thus enabling trust and speed in communications. Having opportunities to be together, even virtually, is a quality investment.

About The Kennedy Forum

Just as President Kennedy rallied the nation to dream big and set audacious goals 50 years ago, The Kennedy Forum in Illinois is working toward lasting change in the way mental health and addictions are considered and treated. Our mission is to end stigma against mental health and substance use disorders in both attitudes and practice. We believe that strong, bold leadership, strategic collaboration with partners and concerted action, it is possible to build a future with a health system that fully recognizes that the brain is part of the body and all persons are treated with dignity. Join us at www.thekennedyforumillinois.org

RESOURCES

Help Lines:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention help line: 1-800-273-8255
- Crisis Text line: text HOME to 741741

COVID-19 Specific Resources

- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](https://www.afsp.org/)
- [American Psychiatric Association Center for Workplace Mental Health](https://www.psychiatry.org/working-together/center-for-workplace-mental-health)
- [Center for Disease Control COVID-19 Website](https://www.cdc.gov/covid19/)
- [Coronavirus and your Wellbeing](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/about-us/wellbeing/)
- [Mental Health America](https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/)
- [SAMHSA \(Substance Abuse & Mental Health Service Administration\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/)
- [World Health Organization COVID-19](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019)

ⁱ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks." <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4885.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Novotney, Amy. "Social Isolation: It could kill you." American Psychological Association. 3 May 2019. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>