



NORTH  
**Dakota** | Behavioral Health  
Be Legendary.™ HUMAN SERVICES

# Employer Toolkit

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH RESOURCES  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Dear Employer,

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a mental and emotional toll on Americans across the country. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect employees well beyond the immediacy of the initial crisis. Poor mental health and stress can negatively affect employees through job performance and productivity, engagement with one's work, communication with coworkers and physical capability and daily functioning.

As an employer, you have a unique ability and responsibility to support the behavioral health of your employees as they navigate this challenging time. Having your workers know you are here to support them through these difficult times can make a world of difference for their mental and physical health.

This toolkit is a resource for you to support the behavioral health of your employees during this time. Additional resources are available at [behavioralhealth.nd.gov](http://behavioralhealth.nd.gov) and [parentslead.org](http://parentslead.org).

For more information on North Dakota's COVID-19 response, visit [ndresponse.gov/covid-19-resources](http://ndresponse.gov/covid-19-resources).

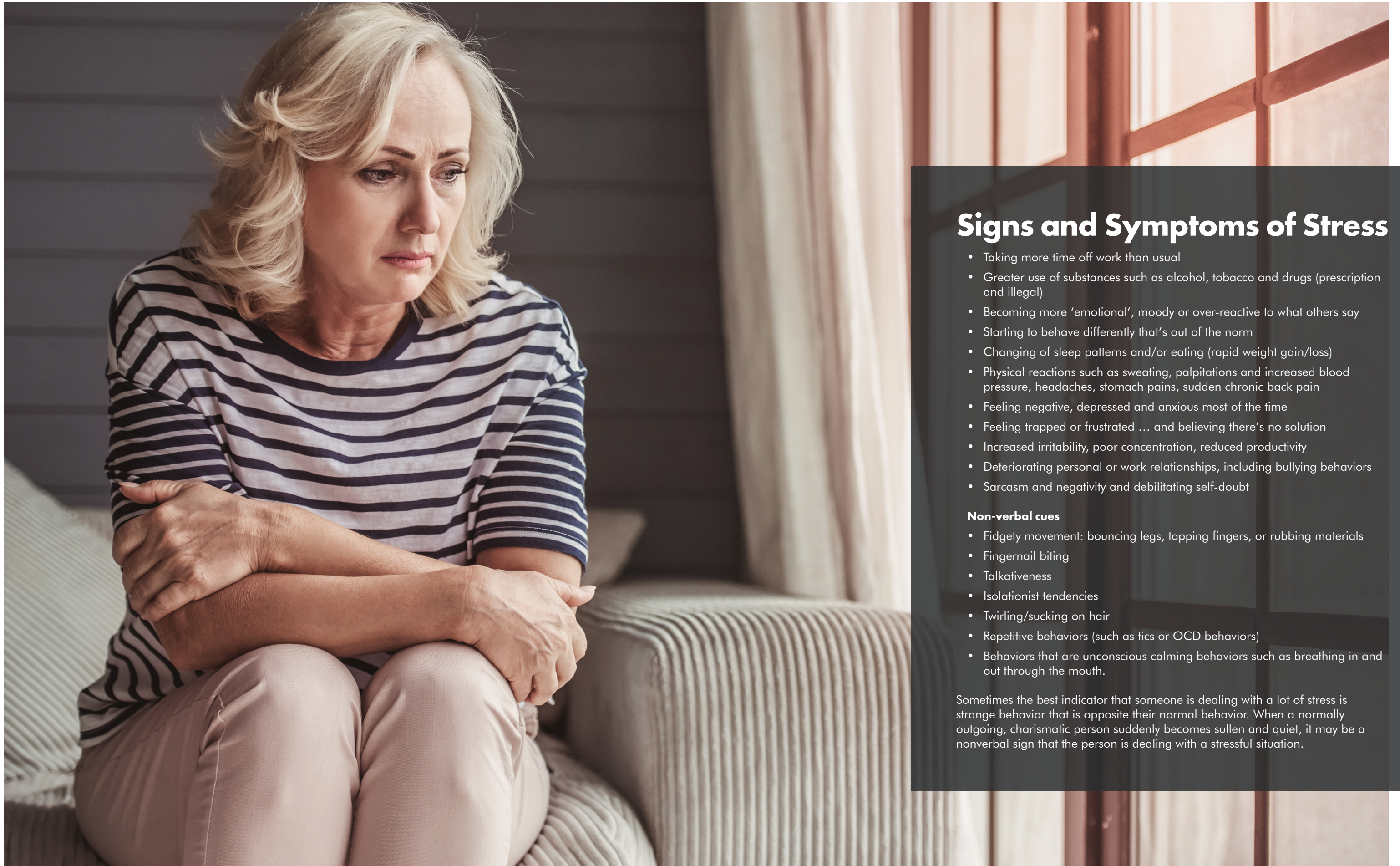
Thank you for supporting the behavioral health of your employees.



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## Signs and Symptoms of Stress

- Taking more time off work than usual
- Greater use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs (prescription and illegal)
- Becoming more 'emotional', moody or over-reactive to what others say
- Starting to behave differently that's out of the norm
- Changing of sleep patterns and/or eating (rapid weight gain/loss)
- Physical reactions such as sweating, palpitations and increased blood pressure, headaches, stomach pains, sudden chronic back pain
- Feeling negative, depressed and anxious most of the time
- Feeling trapped or frustrated ... and believing there's no solution
- Increased irritability, poor concentration, reduced productivity
- Deteriorating personal or work relationships, including bullying behaviors
- Sarcasm and negativity and debilitating self-doubt

### Non-verbal cues

- Fidgety movement: bouncing legs, tapping fingers, or rubbing materials
- Fingernail biting
- Talkativeness
- Isolationist tendencies
- Twirling/sucking on hair
- Repetitive behaviors (such as tics or OCD behaviors)
- Behaviors that are unconscious calming behaviors such as breathing in and out through the mouth.

Sometimes the best indicator that someone is dealing with a lot of stress is strange behavior that is opposite their normal behavior. When a normally outgoing, charismatic person suddenly becomes sullen and quiet, it may be a nonverbal sign that the person is dealing with a stressful situation.



# EMPLOYERS CAN PROMOTE AWARENESS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

## Here are some other steps you can take to support the behavioral health of employees:

- Check in with staff frequently during this time; set an expectation for managers to reach out once a week. (Occasional emails, texts, chat are fine but don't make that the only means of communication!) Human beings need personal communication i.e.; familiar voice/face in order to feel safe. For employees who are working remotely, supervisors should call or, when possible, videoconference/video chat at least once a week. Video communication will give the supervisor a better opportunity to identify non-verbal cues for indicators of possible stress.
- Make mental health self-assessment tools available to all employees.
- Offer health insurance with no or low out-of-pocket costs for depression medications and mental health counseling. If you have an Employee Assistance Program, make sure staff know how to get in touch and what it is for.
- Provide free or subsidized lifestyle coaching, counseling, or self-management programs.
- Provide electronic materials, such as brochures, fliers, and videos, to all employees about the signs and symptoms of poor mental health and opportunities for treatment.
- Host seminars or workshops that address depression and stress management techniques, like mindfulness, breathing exercises, and meditation, to help employees reduce anxiety and stress and improve focus and motivation.
- Create and maintain dedicated, quiet spaces for relaxation activities.
- Provide managers with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and depression in team members and encourage them to seek help from qualified mental health professionals.
- Give employees opportunities to participate in decisions about issues that affect job stress.
- Ensure staff can access food and other essentials. Many staff are working and don't have time to get supplies, and also may not have the means to stock up as so many Americans are doing right now. This can cause anxiety and stress. Work with local food pantries to see if they can possibly deliver to your building or provide snacks or meals so that staff have something nutritious to eat during their shift.
- Connect staff with resources for childcare. Many staff are dealing with school and childcare closures across the country and may not have or be aware of resources to provide care for younger children.
- Work with your employees to establish clear expectations for productivity and communication when working from home. Employees who are new to working in a remote environment may worry about how their work is perceived when it is not seen. It is important for employees to know they have their supervisor's trust, and to understand what is expected, in order to help reduce unnecessary anxiety.
- Even during this time of crisis, it's important to recognize and engage staff. Find ways to acknowledge them – treats in the break room, appreciation from leadership.

SOURCE: <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/index.html>;



## Tips for Supervisors

Supervisors will likely see the impacts of stress on employee wellbeing and mental health firsthand. Employees may come to their supervisors when they do not know how to cope with their current situation or circumstances.

### Some actions supervisors can take to help in these situations include:

- Understanding the actions Human Resources is taking to provide support to employees.
- Giving explicit permission to take mental health breaks, take walks and engage in other acts of self-care.
- Understanding and accommodating the need for flexible scheduling, when possible.
- Acknowledging the challenges with shared space at home to complete school and work.
- Increase communication and check-ins.
- Ask staff how they are doing and feeling, and how their families are doing - make sure they feel heard and understood.
- Many people are worried about their loved ones during this time and feel the need to connect often. Allowing them time to call family during shifts if needed to check on them.
- Asking staff who their support network is and how they access it during times of social isolation.
- Practicing good listening skills with your employees when they are stressed or in distress (being an active listener, being patient, asking how you can help, etc.).

We are all in a very stressful time right now. Being there for workers and making sure they know their wellbeing is of the utmost importance will help us all get through this together.





## EXAMPLES OF EMPLOYERS SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

### Culligan Water

Culligan is offering the following at no cost to employees:

- Weekly self-care videos
- 1:1 health coaching for employees and their spouses
- Manager well-being calls
- Weekly well-being communications
- Live meditation sessions and activity breaks
- Resiliency and stress management activities
- Morale boosting activities

“In addition, one of the company’s owners spoke personally to mental well-being in an all-employee video communication. He shared his mental health activities while encouraging employees to practice self-care and utilize resources. Culligan is utilizing leadership testimonials to inspire, engage and empower Culligan employees on a personal level to take care of their mental health.”

Culligan Water is a professional water treatment and bottled water company, utilizing its resources to be a valued partner in their communities. They provide education and solutions to water issues with an emphasis on customer satisfaction.

### Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E)

“Recognizing the potential psychological toll of this health crisis, the company has addressed this issue in multiple ways:

- Executive messages: In videos, emails and weekly all-employee calls, the company’s CEO and President, Andrew Vesey, has reiterated the importance of employees not ignoring their mental health, and reaching out for support when needed.
- Companywide communications: Through newsletters, webinars, and podcasts, the company has tackled the issue head-on, exploring related topics like stigma, relationships, anxiety, balancing work and life, homeschooling, and staying connected while physical distancing.
- User-generated content: Employees have shared their stories on caring for a child with special needs during the pandemic and accessing drug and alcohol recovery services virtually.
- Website: The company established an intranet page—and later built an entire website—dedicated to the topic, giving employees an easy and confidential way to access health information. On the intranet, the company posted a virtual gratitude board where employees can share what they are grateful for.
- Person-to-person assistance: PG&E set up a dedicated branch of its HR phone line to assist employees looking for answers on topics such as medical, compensation, and benefits. PG&E also provided resources on domestic abuse for employees who may be in a more precarious situation due to the pandemic. Counseling has gone virtual through the Employee Assistance Program’s on site and community-based counselors.”

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), incorporated in California in 1905, is one of the largest combined natural gas and electric energy companies in the United States. Based in San Francisco, the company is a subsidiary of PG&E Corporation. There are approximately 24,000 employees who carry out Pacific Gas and Electric Company’s primary business—the transmission and delivery of energy.

### TIAA

TIAA offers a range of communications forums and benefits to support the mental and emotional health of associates and ensure they have the information, resources, and support during COVID-19. Executive committee members to frontline managers are engaged in helping associates during this challenging time. TIAA’s Employee Assistance Program and wellness web portal also provide a variety of resources for associates and their family members. Included below are some examples of ongoing activities:

- All-Associate calls with CEO Roger Ferguson and other executive committee members, which contain business updates and Q&A sessions.
- All-Associate calls with TIAA senior leaders and mental health professionals to discuss the available resources, support and answer questions.
- Presentations on COVID-19 related stress and mental health resources during business area and individual team calls across the company as well as a video and one-pager on the mental health resources available to associates on the TIAA intranet.
- Monthly Healthy Habits challenges related to COVID-19 and mental health for associates in April and planned for May.
- Mindful Moment meditation sessions for associates three days a week.
- Increased daily and weekly postings of virtual challenges and wellness content to engage associates on the web portal and Yammer, such as a Work from Home photo contest.
- Creating a piece for associates and their family members on mental health resources that will be mailed to their homes.
- COVID-19 Central, an intranet resource page with information, insights and a special section, Working Effectively in Today’s Environment, where associates will find new events, tools, guides and articles each week to help them to stay connected and engaged with others across the organization.

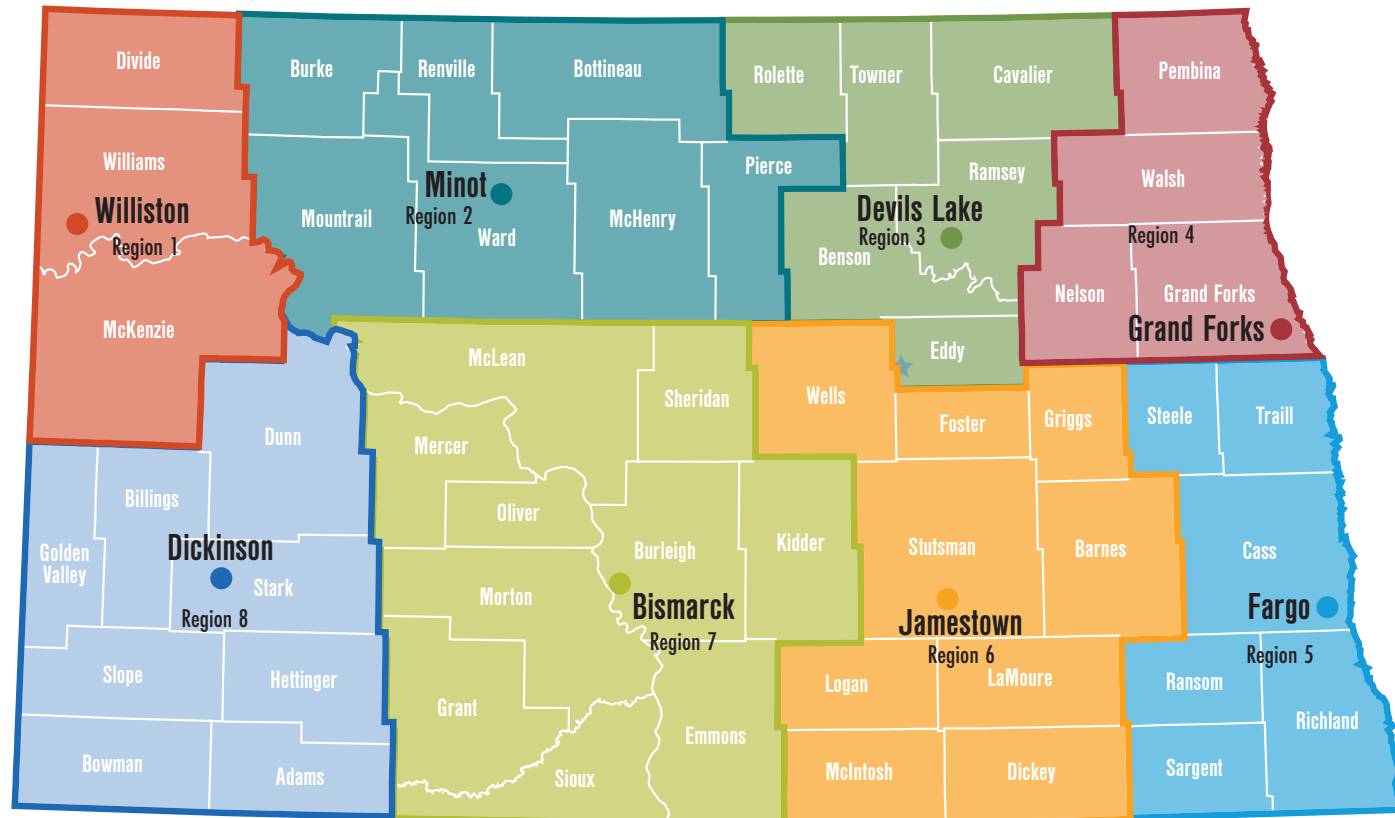
Founded more than 100 years ago by one of history’s great philanthropists, Andrew Carnegie, TIAA is committed to helping institutions and individuals pursue positive outcomes through an array of global, diversified financial services and a long-term investment perspective.

Source: Mental Health America: <https://mhanational.org/blog/7-employers-supporting-employee-mental-health-during-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR2luXcsVbEfweAv3GI3gELhiQHK6lVGAYO7Dl9itcRWf3sSqQcJyCFnSWo>



# Behavioral Health Services: North Dakota Human Service Centers

The North Dakota Department of Human Services Field Services Area, which includes the eight regional human service centers and the North Dakota State Hospital, provides an array of behavioral health care for individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders.



## Northwest Human Service Center: **Region 1**

316 2nd Avenue West  
Williston, ND 58802

**Crisis Line:** 701-572-9111 or toll-free 800-231-7724

## North Central Human Service Center: **Region 2**

1015 S. Broadway, Suite 18  
Minot, ND 58701

**Crisis Line:** 701-857-8500 or toll-free 1-888-470-6968

## Lake Region Human Service Center: **Region 3**

200 Hwy 2 W.  
Devils Lake, ND

**Crisis Line:** 701-662-5050 (collect calls accepted) or toll-free 888-607-8610

## Northeast Human Service Center: **Region 4**

151 S. Fourth St., Suite 401  
Grand Forks, ND 58201-4735

**Crisis Line:** 701-775-0525 or toll-free 800-845-3731

## Southeast Human Service Center: **Region 5**

2624 9th Avenue South  
Fargo, N.D. 58103-2350

**Crisis Line:** 701-298-4500 or 888-342-4900 or 2-1-1 Helpline

## South Central Human Service Center: **Region 6**

520 3rd Street, NW  
Jamestown, N.D. 58401

**Crisis Line:** 701-253-6304

## West Central Human Service Center: **Region 7**

1237 W. Divide Ave., Suite 5  
Bismarck, ND 58501-1208

**Crisis Line:** 701-328-8899 or toll-free 1-888-328-2112

## Badlands Human Service Center: **Region 8**

300 13th Ave. W., Suite 1  
Dickinson, ND 58601

**Crisis Line:** 701-290-5719

## OTHER SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

### Project Renew

[projectrenew.nd.gov](http://projectrenew.nd.gov) | 701.223.1510  
Provides crisis help in your community.

### Recovery Talk

1-844-44TALK2  
Talk with a trained peer support specialist in North Dakota with lived experience in addiction to chat and receive support.

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

### Disaster Distress Helpline

1-800-985-5990  
Provides crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters.

### FirstLink 211

Confidential service available to anyone for listening and support, referrals to resources/help and crisis intervention.

### Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>  
Search for providers by address, city or ZIP code.



# COVID COACH APP

## SUPPORT SELF-CARE AND OVERALL MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

The COVID Coach app can be used as a stand-alone education and self-care tool, or as a supplement to professional mental health care. You can mark your favorite coping tools and track your mental health over time. Set reminders to visit the app each day and work toward your goals. The app can also help you create your own personal support network.

Use the app to walk you through exercises like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, mindful walking, and tools to assist with sleeping. Learn the signs of suicide and access quick links to chat with a crisis counselor by phone or text.

### Features include:

- Education about coping during the pandemic
- Tools for self-care and to improve emotional well-being
- Trackers to check your mood and measure your growth toward personal goals
- Graphs to visualize progress over time







Utilizing your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or other similar programs, and working with your health insurance vendors will be crucial to helping your workers get through these hard times. The tips on the next pages will help navigate this.





## Working With Benefits Providers: Mental Health Issues Checklist

The COVID-19 pandemic is occurring everywhere. COVID-19 affects the mental health and wellbeing of your employees, including increased stress, uncertainty and anxiety. Higher stress levels are associated with increased substance use and an increased risk for relapse.

During these times, traditional treatment and support mechanisms may be shut down, overwhelmed or otherwise not available for people with mental health and/or substance use issues. This can increase the risk of relapse. These issues will impact employers and employees alike during the peak of COVID-19 and after the initial crisis has passed.

Utilizing your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or other similar programs, and working with your health insurance vendors will be crucial to helping your workers get through these hard times. The National Safety Council provides the following checklist of what you can ask your EAP and health insurance vendors to do that will help your employees and their families navigate stressful situations safely.

- Ask your EAP to be very active in promoting their telephone and online counseling services. Your EAP should push out information and assure employees that they can get help for any kind of problem. The EAP should be visible and active throughout the crisis.
- Ask your health plans to actively promote mental health and substance use services. Your providers should be proactive with encouraging utilization of their services through frequent and creative formats.
- Check with your EAP to see if your plan requires full time status for eligibility. If so, ask for your plan to be amended to be free for laid off or furloughed workers.
- Ask how your EAP is prepared to respond to a major increase in calls.
- Inform managers that they can get help from the EAP in dealing with stressful issues within their work teams as well as support from HR.



- Make sure your EAP and health plans provide telehealth options, such as crisis and mental health counseling by phone and other forms of electronic communication. These services should be available 24/7 and should be repeatedly publicized to your workers.
- Check to see that your EAP and health plans offer online support groups for employees concerned about the virus or who have other behavioral health concerns. Online [substance use](#) and [mental health support groups](#) should be easily accessible and their availability frequently publicized.
- Medications to treat mental and substance use problems must be [accessible](#). Ask your health plans to confirm that drugs to treat substance use and mental illness are available at the same levels as other illnesses.
- Be sure your EAP and health plans publicize the availability of online guidance on self-care to reduce stress and distress e.g., walks, gardening, meditation, yoga, Zoom meetings, checking in on friends and neighbors by phone, email, etc.
- Work with your EAP and health plans to make sure they report back to you weekly on the number and types of presenting problems they are seeing, especially depression, alcohol and drug use, family violence and suicide.
- Track weekly the volume of telehealth, telephone, email or video services provided. Usage rates will be higher than usual levels. EAP direct service rates are usually in the 3% to 5% range annually. During the crisis, they should be many times higher.
- Ask your EAP and health plans to provide the number of low-touch services provided, such as views of online materials and downloads of materials.

We understand that not all employers have these options, and that not all EAPs provide these services. Remember, any action you take helps you and your employees. You are an essential link in helping your workers access the support they need during this time. Please reference *The Employer Role: Mental Health During COVID-19* for more ideas beyond EAPs.

### Communicate frequently

Once you find the answers to the items above, remember to communicate the available services to your workers and their families often, and how they can access them. Effective public health messaging can be summed up in 11 words: [A simple message, repeated often, by a variety of trusted voices.](#)

It is not enough to post benefit information on your company website or the websites of your health plans or EAP. There is a barrage of information hitting people about the virus, their health risk, their jobs and the economy. Employees may have a lot on their mind and may be experiencing high levels of stress – they may be more distracted, which is typical. That is why you and your benefit providers should reinforce messaging several times, when appropriate, about how to get help for the stress they are feeling.

Acknowledging that your organization understands the stress your workers are going through will make a world of difference. Providing them with free services can help lessen the mental health effects of this crisis, reduce risk for increased substance use and prevent relapse in those with current issues.





Many employees are teleworking full-time for the first time, isolated from co-workers, friends and family. Our daily living routines are disrupted, causing added anxiety, stress and strain physically, mentally, and financially. The information on the following pages offers tips and resources to support your employees in this different way of working.



AMERICAN  
PSYCHIATRIC  
ASSOCIATION  
FOUNDATION



CENTER FOR  
**WORKPLACE  
MENTAL HEALTH**

## Working Remotely During COVID-19: Your Mental Health & Well-Being

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is presenting new and unique major challenges. We are navigating uncharted waters with this virus making it important to find new ways to work and interact while also taking care of our mental health and well-being.

Many are teleworking full-time for the first time, isolated from co-workers, friends and family. Our daily living routines are disrupted causing added anxiety, stress and strain physically, mentally, and financially. It is completely natural for this disruption and uncertainty to lead to anxiety and stress. Now more than ever, we all must take care of our mental health and well-being. As we protect ourselves against potential exposure to the Coronavirus, keep in mind that social distancing does not mean social isolation. This resource provides practical tips on taking care of our mental health and well-being.

### How do I maintain my health & wellness?

- **Keep a regular schedule:** Create and maintain a routine and schedule. Set up a designated space for you and each family member to work and learn. Don't forget to include periodic breaks for recharging in your schedule. Although everyone's schedule will be different, here is a sample:

Time	Activity
7:00am	Wake up, stretch (take care of kids/animals)
7:30am	Breakfast and family time (technology free!)
8:30am-12:00pm	Work and check on updates with small breaks every 30 minutes or so
12:00pm - 1:00pm	Lunch break, get fresh air, stretch & exercise
1:00pm - 5:00pm	Work with breaks every 30 minutes, check in with co-workers
5:00pm - 7:00pm	Dinner and screen break! Call a friend, family, or loved one
7:00pm - 9:00pm	Self-care time



- ▶ **Stay connected:** Stay connected with family, friends, and support systems using technology like Facetime, Skype, Google Hangout and other video-based options. Talk about your fears and concerns with people you trust. Chances are they are feeling the same way.
- ▶ **Keep your immune system strong:** Make a commitment to staying strong by:
  - » Washing your hands with soap for 20 seconds (or 2 happy birthdays!)
  - » Getting enough sleep
  - » Eating well and staying hydrated
  - » Taking vitamins
- ▶ **Prioritize personal hygiene & limit contact with others:** This is imperative to avoid spreading the virus. Here's what should be done:
  - » Again, worth repeating, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds and use hand sanitizer regularly.
  - » Use a tissue to cover your sneeze or cough, or when unavailable, cough or sneeze into your elbow.
  - » Disinfect with anti-bacterial wipes areas and objects that are heavily trafficked or are touched regularly where you live and work.
  - » Avoid contact with those who are sick and avoid touching your face - eyes, nose, and mouth.
  - » Stay home when you are sick.
- ▶ **Exercise & stay active:** This is not only good for your physical health, but your mental health too. Periodically, get up and move around your home. Walking, stretching, planks or jumping jacks, whatever works best for you to reduce or alleviate stress and increase endorphins. While our favorite gyms and fitness centers are closed during this time, many are offering free livestreams or app-based workouts for members and the general public, so check online to see what's available.
- ▶ **Get fresh air:** If circumstances allow, go outside for a brisk walk and fresh air, but avoid crowds and close contact with others.

- ▶ **Stay informed:** Knowledge is power and it's good to stay updated on progress being made in combatting the virus. Stay informed on the latest updates from reliable sources like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO).
- ▶ **Limit media consumption:** Avoid continuous exposure to news, media, and social media that may trigger or elevate anxiety, stress or panic. Stay informed but limit media consumption.
- ▶ **Set boundaries on work schedule:** When working from home, be sure that you are working reasonable hours. It can be tempting to work more while you have your work at home, however it can also be taxing on your health and well-being, so stick to a schedule with healthy boundaries.
- ▶ **Distract & redirect:** Engage in activities that benefit your well-being, bring you joy and distract you from existing challenges. This might include meditation and yoga, often offered free online. You may also enjoy journaling, reading, art projects, cooking with new recipes, breathing exercises, or listening to a calming podcast or music.
- ▶ **Get creative:** share tips with co-workers and friends on what's working well for you and encourage them to do the same. Come up with new ideas like planning a Google Hangout at a mutually agreed upon time to exercise together - like 1-minute planks, 10 jumping jacks, whatever you decide, but keep it simple. Share photos of pets on how they are enjoying the new routine. The sky's the limit on creative ways to stay connected.

## How do I manage my mental health condition during this challenging time?

The information included above applies to everyone whether you experience a mental health condition or not. Here are additional tips for those diagnosed with mental health conditions:

- ▶ **Continue treatment & medication:**
  - » Despite changes in routine, it is extremely important to follow your treatment plan.
  - » If your symptoms change or you need reassurance during this difficult time, call your treating provider's office to see if they are offering virtual visits. Tele-mental health visits are growing and an important way to connect with care.

- » Be sure that medication refills are up to date. If you are concerned about running low, request that your treating health care provider approves a 60-or -90-day supply of medication.
- » Cold and flu medications may interact with antidepressants and/or anti-psychotics so consult with your health care provider or pharmacist if you are using over the counter medications.

- ▶ **Responding to symptoms of COVID-19:** If you are feeling symptoms that may be associated with the COVID-19 virus, call your primary care provider first to talk about next steps in care. This virus continues to strain hospital resources so it's best to get directions from your primary care provider on what to do rather than going to an emergency room.
- ▶ **Recognize warning signs & triggers:** Continue to monitor new or worsening symptoms you may be experiencing with either your mental health or overall health and well-being. Do your best to keep your stress level low and engage in activities, like those listed above, that help you manage your stress levels during this disruptive time.
- ▶ **Engage your support network:** Just as you would during other major life changes, stay connected with family and trusted friends and let them know if you need extra support during this challenging time. That might include regular phone calls, check-ins, and related support. Be clear about what you need during this time.

## What can managers and HR professionals do to support employees?

With many organizations requiring employees to stay out of the office, it's more important than ever to encourage and facilitate regular communication with employees. Here are tips for managers and human resource professionals in supporting employees in staying connected to the workplace and each other:

- ▶ **Show empathy & be available:** Understand that employees are likely feeling overwhelmed and anxious about circumstances related to the virus. Make yourself available to your staff to talk about fears, to answer questions and to reassure them about work and other issues that might come up.

- ▶ **Stay connected with communication & meeting tools:** Use virtual meeting options with video, like Zoom and JoinMe, for regular check-ins and to allow teams to connect with one another "face-to-face."
- ▶ **Recognize the impact of isolation & loneliness:** Working remotely can cause people to feel isolated, making it more important to routinely check in with your team, not only about their work product, but also to see how they are doing. Loneliness can lead to depression and other mental health issues. Be aware of significant changes you may see in your team member's personality or work product, because it may be a sign that a person is struggling.
- ▶ **Encourage online training:** This is a great time to encourage employees to sharpen their skills with online training. It is also a good distraction to focus on learning rather than worrying about other issues. Find online trainings and new learning opportunities to recommend to employees.
- ▶ **Check in with your EAP & Health Plan:** Check in with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to confirm their availability and to coordinate support for employees. Remind the staff that the EAP is there if they need support and can connect employees with behavioral health support if it's needed. Also, connect with the organization's health plan(s) to learn what they are offering to support plan members and pass that information onto employees. Be sure to include all relevant weblinks and phone numbers for both the EAP and health plan in communicating with employees.



Include this in an employee newsletter or an email sent to employees.



## Working From Home DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

Working from home and supervising children during a pandemic can create stress and conflict within the family. The best route forward is to maintain structure and principles of self-care while accepting this is a novel situation to which everyone is adjusting. Keep in mind that self-care is not self-indulgent, it ensures you are mentally, emotionally, and physically capable of successfully fulfilling your duties as a parent and employee.

### **COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR EMPLOYER**

Start with communicating about expectations with your employer. If work can be done outside of normal business hours, consider spending time working when the kids are in bed. Create a clear space for your work and make sure the kids understand that this space is for that only. If you have a partner to help you, it might be beneficial to create a schedule of rotating work/childcare time.

When shifting into your family's new normal, it is important to first be factual and give clear explanations of the situation. Don't overload information or bring up issues your kids don't ask about, a good rule of thumb is to be direct, honest, and brief. Explain to children that you will have work to do just like you do when they are at school or daycare and most days won't look like the usual days at home together. This situation will seem strange at first but implementing routine and setting expectations of each member of the family will help the transition.

### **BE FLEXIBLE WHILE DEVELOPING NEW ROUTINES**

Each day will be different; the most important thing is to try to keep basic stabilities. Continue with normal waking hours and leave pajama days for the weekends. Getting ready in the morning will set the tone for the rest of the day. Have a good breakfast and adhere to normal mealtimes. Consider creating an age appropriate chore list for each member of the family, daily tasks, and set times for physical exercise and relaxation. Keeping the kids busy will allow you to complete work and keep them from going stir crazy but being overly strict on routine may set you up for failure. Remember to be flexible with everyone, including yourself.

For kids who might require more attention, set aside short periods of time in which you're engaged in play. When you need to do another task, stay nearby but let them know that you're there if they need help. Sometimes being near your child while they play is enough.

### **CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Without your supervisor being around it might be easy to lose momentum and take longer to complete what you must do. Create a list of daily or weekly goals, when you complete something take a few minutes to reward yourself or as an opportunity to check in with the children. Call, email, or video chat with colleagues not only to check in on work but to also maintain support and contact with people outside of the home. Staying in touch will help you feel more comfortable and directed and can provide a sense of normalcy.

Cut yourself some slack and keep calm as possible; kids are perceptive to their parents' emotions and if they sense anxiety, stress, and fear, they will feel anxious, stressed out, and afraid as well. Remember we are all in this together, and we will all get through this together.





The ND Department of Human Services' Behavioral Health Division has a variety of resources and information available. The resources on the following pages (and more!) are available at [behavioralhealth.nd.gov/covid-19](https://behavioralhealth.nd.gov/covid-19).



# IMPORTANCE OF STAYING SOCIALLY CONNECTED DURING COVID-19



Humans are social beings. Our social groups provide us with an important part of our identity and teach us a set of skills that help us to thrive. During this disease pandemic, feeling socially connected is more important than ever. The benefits of social connectedness shouldn't be overlooked.

## BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS



### Improve your quality of life

One study showed that social connection is a greater determinant to health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure. And social connection doesn't necessarily mean physically being present with people in a literal sense, but someone's subjective experience of feeling understood and connected to others.



### Help you live longer

Research has shown that social connections not only impact your mental health, but your physical health as well. A review of 148 studies (308,849 participants) indicated that the individuals with stronger social relationships had a 50% increased likelihood of survival. This remained true across a number of factors, including age, sex, initial health status, and cause of death.



### Boost your mental health

Friendships offer a number of mental health benefits, such as increased feelings of belonging, purpose, increased levels of happiness, reduced levels of stress, improved self-worth and confidence. A study conducted at a free health clinic in Buffalo, New York found that respondents with insufficient perceived social support were the most likely to suffer from mental health disorders like anxiety and depression.



### Decrease your risk of suicide

There are a number of factors that put people at higher or lower risk for suicide. One of these factors is connectedness, which the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines as "The degree to which a person or group is socially close, interrelated or shares resources with other persons or groups." Relationships can play a crucial role in protecting a person against suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

It is still possible to form social connections during times of social (physical) distancing. We can be grateful to live in a time of technology whether connecting through virtual means, like hosting a virtual dinner party to celebrate birthdays or have an after work virtual get together to stay connected. Or we can also connect with more traditional means like using the telephone, sending a letter or leaving a neighbor a written note.

# GRATITUDE: A TOOL TO REDUCE STRESS

## CULTIVATING GRATITUDE IS ONE OF THE SIMPLER ROUTES TO A GREATER SENSE OF EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING.

When we express gratitude, our brain releases dopamine and serotonin, the two crucial neurotransmitters responsible for our emotions, and they make us feel 'good'. They enhance our mood immediately, making us feel happy from the inside. By consciously practicing gratitude every day, we can help these neural pathways to strengthen and ultimately create a permanent grateful and positive nature within ourselves which builds our inner strength to combat stress.

**WHAT IS GRATITUDE?**  
In its simplest form, gratitude refers to a 'state of thankfulness' or a 'state of being grateful'.

### Gratitude builds emotional resilience by:

- Helping us to see the positive things in life
- Fighting the negative ruminations and rebuilding pessimistic thoughts with optimistic ones
- Staying grounded and accepting the present situation, even if that is a harsh reality
- Identifying and focusing only on solutions
- Maintaining good health by regulating our metabolic functioning and by controlling the hormonal imbalances
- Sustaining relationships and appreciating people who are there for us. As a result, we feel more loved, cared for, and more hopeful.

### Gratitude takes practice like any other skill. Here are some ways to cultivate gratitude on a regular basis.

- **Write a thank-you note.** You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a thank-you letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that person's impact on your life. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. Once in a while, write one to yourself.
- **Thank someone mentally.** No time to write? It may help just to think about someone who has done something nice for you, and mentally thank the individual.
- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Make it a habit to write down or share with a loved one your thoughts about the gifts you've received each day.
- **Count your blessings.** Pick a time every week to sit down and write about your blessings — reflecting on what went right or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number — such as three to five things — that you will identify each week. As you write, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.
- **Meditate.** Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as "peace"), it is also possible to focus on what you're grateful for (the warmth of the sun, a pleasant sound, etc.).





# COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE STRESS RESPONSE: FEELINGS AND BREATHING TECHNIQUES

The COVID-19 pandemic causes so many of us to cycle through the stress response designed to protect us from threat. To survive, your brain's limbic system, including the amygdala, shuts down the thinking part of your brain and automatically responds in the moment. It chooses a fight, flight, freeze or fawn response based on what helped you survive in the past. Because a pandemic is not a stress recognized by the survival system, we cycle through the different responses, bringing about a variety of feelings and reactions.

## Some feelings you may be experiencing:



FEAR AND ANXIETY



SADNESS OR GRIEF



HOPELESSNESS OR DEPRESSION



DENIAL



SHAME



APATHY OR NUMBNESS



ANGER



CALM



EXHAUSTION



GRATITUDE

No matter what you're feeling right now, your feelings are valid and serve a purpose. The COVID-19 pandemic is not business as usual, so be gentle with yourself.

## BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Take a deep breath in. Now let it out. You may notice a difference in how you feel already. Your breath is a powerful tool to ease stress and make you feel less anxious.

If we can control our breathing and take a moment to notice the sounds around us, our brain will receive the message we are safe in this moment and begin to come out of survival mode and back into connection/thinking mode. The more we do this, the stronger this reaction will be and more grounded we can feel through this pandemic.

## Try the following techniques:

### DEEP BREATHING

Most people take short, shallow breaths into their chest. It can make you feel anxious and zap your energy. With this technique, you'll learn how to take bigger breaths, all the way into your belly.

1. Get comfortable. You can lie on your back in bed or on the floor with a pillow under your head and knees. Or you can sit in a chair with your shoulders, head, and neck supported against the back of the chair.
2. Breathe in through your nose. Let your belly fill with air.
3. Breathe out through your nose.
4. Place one hand on your belly. Place the other hand on your chest.
5. As you breathe in, feel your belly rise. As you breathe out, feel your belly lower. The hand on your belly should move more than the one that's on your chest.
6. Take three more full, deep breaths. Breathe fully into your belly as it rises and falls with your breath.

### EQUAL TIME FOR BREATHING IN AND BREATHING OUT

In this exercise, you'll match how long you breathe in with how long you breathe out. Over time, you'll increase how long you're able to breathe in and out at a time.

1. Sit comfortably on the floor or in a chair.
2. Breathe in through your nose. As you do it, count to five.
3. Breathe out through your nose to the count of five.
4. Repeat several times.

Once you feel comfortable with breaths that last five counts, increase how long you breathe in and breathe out. You can work up to breaths that last up to 10 counts.

### MODIFIED LION'S BREATH

As you do this exercise, imagine that you're a lion. Let all of your breath out with a big, open mouth.

1. Sit comfortably on the floor or in a chair.
2. Breathe in through your nose. Fill your belly all the way up with air.
3. When you can't breathe in any more, open your mouth as wide as you can. Breathe out with a "HA" sound.
4. Repeat several times.





Parents, family members, and other trusted adults play an important role in helping children make sense of what they hear in a way that is honest, accurate, and minimizes anxiety or fear.

Learn more at  
[parentslead.org/COVID-19](https://parentslead.org/COVID-19)

## Talking to Your Child about COVID-19

The World Health Organization officially declared coronavirus a pandemic. Health experts predict that the virus and its impact on our communities are just beginning.



### Early Childhood

You play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what's happening and help them manage their own related worries or anxiety.

#### Here are some tips that can help:

Even though babies and toddlers may not know what is going on, they may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense."

- ✓ Try to stay calm around babies and toddlers.
- ✓ Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Routines are reassuring for babies.
- ✓ Shield babies and toddlers from media coverage as much as possible.
- ✓ Look for non-verbal signs that your toddler may be anxious. This might include being scared to go outside or to daycare, extra weepy, clingy, or irritable. Provide extra reassurance and time together.
- ✓ Take the lead from your toddler. Don't talk about it unless they show signs of distress or ask questions.



## Preschool

You play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what's happening and help them manage their own related worries or anxiety.

### Here are some tips that can help:

Preschoolers may be more tuned in to what is happening. They may have questions about germs, doctors, and even death.

- ✓ Safety is a primary concern for this age group. Reassure them that adults are in charge and working to keep people safe, healthy, and secure.
- ✓ Preschoolers are also concerned about the health of parents, relatives, and friends. Reassure them that everyone is doing what they can to stay healthy and take care of others. Remind them that they can stay healthy by washing hands and make hand-washing fun with songs.
- ✓ Preschoolers are not always able to distinguish fantasy and reality. Limit media exposure.
- ✓ Look for non-verbal signs that your preschooler may be anxious. This might include being scared to go to preschool, extra weepy, clingy, or irritable.
- ✓ Bedtimes are very important. Stories, books, and tuck-ins are crucial.
- ✓ Try to maintain your children's normal routines and rituals when possible. If school, daycare or events are canceled, try to create and stick to other routines when you can.
- ✓ Give them lots of hugs and physical reassurance and limit media coverage.
- ✓ Take the lead from your preschooler. Don't insist on talking about it a lot unless they show signs of distress or ask questions.



## Elementary School

You play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what's happening and help them manage their own related worries or anxiety.

### Here are some tips that can help:

School-age children will be more aware of what is going on. They have probably had discussions at school and with friends.

- ✓ Talk to your elementary age children. Explain what happened while reassuring them that you and your child's teachers will do everything to keep them healthy and safe.
- ✓ Children this age are also concerned about their own health, as well as that of family and friends. For example, they may have heard that kids aren't impacted by coronavirus but that older people are, triggering fears about grandparents. They may be worried about money if they know adults are off of work. Try to spend extra time together. This will provide extra reassurance.
- ✓ Don't be surprised if they are more irritable and touchy. Be extra patient.
- ✓ Limit media coverage.
- ✓ Try to continue normal home routines, especially at bedtime. If routines are disrupted due to school or after school activity closures, explain that this is part of the precautions grown-ups are taking to prevent people from getting sick. It doesn't mean that all of their teachers and friends are sick.
- ✓ If fear persists, point out all the things adults are doing to help and to prevent the virus from spreading. Children like to be helpful and feel like they can do something from hand washing to writing letters to nursing homes.
- ✓ Ask them if they have any questions. If they do, stick to the facts and tell them what you know without exaggerating or overreacting. Use these resources to help them learn more about the virus:
  - *"Understanding Corona Virus and How Germs Spread" – Brains On Podcast (plus a kid-centered series on news literacy called "Prove It.")*
  - *"Just for kids: A comic exploring the new coronavirus" – Minnesota Public Radio*



## Middle School

You play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what's happening and help them manage their own related worries or anxiety.

### Here are some tips that can help:

Children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They have probably seen news coverage and discussed the virus at school or with friends.

- ✔ Talk to your middle school children and answer any questions. This will help you determine how much they know and may help you correct any misinformation they might have.
- ✔ Acknowledge any feelings of anxiety, worry, or panic.
- ✔ Children this age will be more interested in what might happen in the future. Stick to the facts and don't burden them with your own anxiety about uncertain dystopian scenarios.
- ✔ Some children may act out scary feelings through misbehavior. Others may become more withdrawn. Pay attention to these cues and ask them to tell you about their feelings.
- ✔ Talk to your kids about what they see on TV or read online and help them understand which sources are reliable and which aren't when it comes to information about the virus.
- ✔ Talk about how events like this can surface harmful stereotypes and discrimination against certain people and populations. In this case, talk about the importance of disrupting anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia in coverage of and response to the coronavirus.
- ✔ Seek out positive media. Watch, read, and share stories about ways people are responding to the virus in collaborative ways to keep communities safe.
- ✔ Help guide your child's worry into things they can do – like learning more about how to prevent the spread of the virus including washing hands and getting enough sleep. Use these resources to spark conversations
  - *"Understanding Corona Virus and How Germs Spread": Brains On Podcast (plus a kid-centered series on news literacy called "Prove It.")*
  - *"Just for kids: A comic exploring the new coronavirus": Minnesota Public Radio*



## High School

You play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what's happening and help them manage their own related worries or anxiety.

### Here are some tips that can help:

High school students have probably had conversations with their peers and teachers. They might have fears about what this will mean for their own health, schooling, schedule or safety.

- ✔ Questions about health, the economy, and public policy are all legitimate issues for this age group. It is important to discuss these topics with them if they are interested.
- ✔ Acknowledge any worry, anxiety or fear they have and remind them that these feelings are normal.
- ✔ Help guide your teen's worry into things they can do – like learning more about how to prevent the spread of the virus including washing hands, getting lots of sleep, or making concrete plans of what you will do if work or school schedules are disrupted.
- ✔ Some teens may want to block out the whole thing. It may appear that they do not care. This might be masking real worries. Ask questions and be ready to listen. Some teens may make jokes. Humor can be a way to help them cope but discourage them from using humor as the only way to talk about the virus.
- ✔ Stick to the facts in your conversations and talk to your teens about what they see on TV or read online. Point them towards reliable sources of information like the CDC website, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).
- ✔ Talk through the difference between going online to get informed versus media over-use that can fuel anxiety. Enforce a tech curfew at night and encourage them to take media breaks.
- ✔ Some teens may be very interested in discussing the political or economic implications of the pandemic. Engage them in learning and critical thinking about the coronavirus.
- ✔ Talk about how events like this can surface harmful stereotypes and discrimination against certain people and populations. In this case, talk about the importance of disrupting anti-Asian and xenophobic sentiment in coverage of and response to the coronavirus.
- ✔ Don't use your teen to process your own anxiety. Reach out to other adults to process your fears about the virus or the economic disruptions that it is causing.



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