

PARENTING AND COPING: NAVIGATING THE SECOND WAVE OF COVID-19



Being a parent is hard enough, let alone trying to be a parent during the pandemic. Many children, youth and adults are feeling increased stress as the pandemic drags on, and as we enter new phases of restrictions and/or openings.

The good news is that there are many things that we can do as parents and caregivers to support our children, youth (and ourselves) and help them cope with all the uncertainty during this unprecedented time.

Understanding stress and anxiety

Faced with stress, children, youth and adults can respond in many ways to stress.

- Unhealthy behaviours like staying up late, spending more time on unhealthy pleasurable activities such as screens (e.g. social media, video games, watching videos).
- Mood changes, such as anxiety, depression or irritability.
- Regression and behaving like a younger child like being more clingy or needing to sleep in parent's beds.
- Denial like refusing to follow pandemic precautions or refusing to go to school.



Some healthy ways to respond to pandemic stresses include:

- getting outside in nature
- connecting with others in a deep fashion, such as sharing emotions; listening and being supportive of others
- helping others
- distractions such as listening to music, hobbies, or reading
- having a sense of humor about the current situation
- making “lemonade out of lemons” and trying to make the most of our time at home

How to cope with challenges during the second phase

Returning to in-person school

For many children and youth, especially with those with existing stresses at school (such as peers, bullying and academics), school closures and restrictions of activities were actually a bit of a relief, as it gave a break from their usual stresses.

However, now that students are facing return to school, many of them are now reporting stresses again with school.



Coping tips

- Give empathy. For example, you might say: "Yes, this is very upsetting that ..." or "I can't imagine how hard that must be."
- Give validation / acceptance. For example, you might say: "It's okay to feel upset. It's okay to cry."
- Offer support. For example, you might say: "I'm here. Let me give you a hug." or "Want to just cuddle and listen to some music? How about some hot chocolate?"

Having to wear a mask

Now that many kids are back in the classroom, they are having troubles understanding teachers. Some students, such as those with auditory processing problems, may find it particularly hard to understand others such as their teachers if they are wearing masks.



Coping tips

- Explain to your child the reasons for wearing a mask – that it helps to keep them and everyone else safe.
- Explore strategies with your child's teacher to help reduce your child's stress around wearing a mask.
 - Give your child a sense of control. For example, if they don't want to wear a boring mask, let them pick one or allow your child to decorate a medical mask with a marker. Your child doesn't want to wear a boring medical mask?
 - Does your child seem scared of wearing a mask? If so, then try wearing the mask yourself to show them how normal it is. You can also show them how to put the mask on a stuffed animal or doll and practice wearing the mask in the house before going out in public with it on.
- Teach distraction strategies like distracting with music, listening to an audio book, etc. to help pass the time while wearing a mask.
- Practice calming strategies like deep breathing, going outside, going for a walk, etc.
- Consider motivating kids to get used to wearing a mask by pairing it with something they enjoy, like allowing video game time (within your limits) while wearing their mask.



Lack of socialization

Another challenge kids are facing is the lack of socialization due to lockdown restrictions and physical distancing. For many children and youth, they are not able to see their friends in the same way they did before, which can be very hard for children to cope with.

Coping tips:

- Get outside
- In order to connect through as many sensory means as possible (e.g. sight, sound), use

technology such as: Telephone call; Skype, Facetime, Zoom, or other real-time interactions.

- Try to avoid using asynchronous communication such as texting, email -- there is no eye contact, there is no hearing one's tone of voice, etc.



Virtual schooling stresses

For some parents and caregivers, virtual schooling works well because their children/youth have the discipline it takes to sit in front of a school and learn. For many parents however, virtual schooling is a challenge as their children/youth may have challenges being able to sit in front of a screen and be engaged with the teacher.

Stay calm with your kids, and accept they may need time to adjust to virtual learning. Despite everyone's best efforts, virtual learning can be a challenge. Many learners (and parents alike) struggle with staring at a screen for several hours, as well as navigating the new online platforms. For some parents, virtual learning is simply not possible, and they have made other arrangements during this time.

Coping tips

- Make sure your child has an ergonomic set up for virtual learning. They should have comfortable seating (or standing desk for learners that need to move) and the screen should be at a height where your child can look forward without slouching.
- Follow the 20/20/20 rule to reduce eye strain. Every 20 minutes, look at least 20 feet away, for 20 seconds.
- Limit recreational screen time during school hours. Consider parental screen time controls built into iOS or Android, or third party apps to limit leisure screen activity during the school day. You may wish to go even farther and limit screen time during school days, only allowing it on weekends.



Loss of the usual routines activities

Despite the return to school, there still exist many pandemic restrictions. This means kids no longer have usual activities that existed before the pandemic like sports teams, extracurricular activities, etc.

Coping tips

- Identify what was the activity lost and try to figure out what was so important about that activity. For example, was it for social interaction, physical activity or intellectual challenge?
- Try to replace whatever was lost with an alternate option that helps fill the void

Challenges following guidelines

Following physical distancing is not easy. We are social creatures, and it is natural to want to gather with others, even if that risks spreading COVID. Following physical distancing requires giving up one's wish to be physically close to others; in a way, it is like grieving a loss.



Coping tips:

- Validate how frustrating, and ultimately sad it is that we have to follow new rules
- Encourage tears of grieving, and let them know that it's okay, and in fact, important to let out our tears about all these losses. After a good cry, our brains can process the loss (or trauma), and hopefully it helps your child be closer to acceptance.
- Show your child or youth how they can connect to others in other ways, like listening to others, being empathetic to others or doing outdoors activities, such as going for walks, bike rides, skateboarding, etc.

When to get help

Is your child struggling despite your best efforts? Is your child having problems with moods or behaviours to the point that it causes problems with school, family and/or work?

If so, here are some possible next steps:

- see a health professional such as your primary care provider
- visit a walk-in mental health clinic, most of which now provide virtual walk-in appointments
- contact a local Information and referral service

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