

A Caregiver's Toolkit

from the Center for Youth Wellness

Dealing with the stress of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is tough. People are getting sick and we are told to stay home. Our everyday lives have changed so much. So what do we know now?

The good news is you can lessen the negative impacts of this stress. The Center for Youth Wellness has put together a 7 Domains of Wellness Toolkit to help support families experiencing stress. This toolkit will give you free, easy-to-follow ways to help you and those you love get through this together. Here are 7 important things to help manage stress:



Supportive Relationships



Sleeping Well



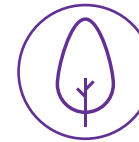
Supporting Mental Health



Eating Healthy



Using Movement



Spending Time with Nature



Practicing Mindfulness



Relationships are important for the health of every family. Right now, you may be spending a lot of time together. This can be stressful. But it can also be a chance to spend quality time with each other. And, even when we are at home, it's important to stay in touch with our friends and family.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Still have fun.

Even when the world feels scary, you can enjoy time with your family and do fun activities. Work on a puzzle together. Do an arts and crafts project. Have a dance party. Play charades. Read your favorite books. Play board or card games. Tell jokes.

Stick with a daily routine.

Some kids are scared by big changes to their lives. When there is a lot of free time, routines can help your child feel safe. Create a family schedule, including pictures. It's not easy to stick to a routine, and it's okay if you don't do it perfectly.

Explain what is happening.

Your child has probably already heard about the virus or seen people wearing face masks. It's OK to talk about the coronavirus. Not talking about something can actually make kids worry more. Reassure your child that this is temporary and that they are safe. Give your child facts. Then, let them ask questions.

Encourage your child to take care of their body.

Encourage your child to wash their hands for 20 seconds, cough and sneeze into their elbows, and help keep their home clean.

Talk to family and friends.

"Physical distancing" does not mean that you can't talk to people. Use text messages, letters, and video chatting to stay connected to family and friends.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

In this situation, it is natural to be scared and overwhelmed. Children will respond based on how the adults around them are behaving. So, make sure you get support too. Take a break away from your child. Connect with your friends and family. Be honest about how you feel. Talk about the bad and the good - the little moments of joy and the things you are doing to care for yourself and your community.



Getting a good night's sleep plays a big role in children's health. In fact, sleep is just as important as healthy food and exercise. It may be tempting to let your child miss their bedtime, especially when they want to stay up later. Keeping good sleep habits helps your child handle stress.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Keep bedtime routines.

Children need routines and love quality time with their caregivers. When you do the same activities with your child at naptime and bedtime, it can help your child go to sleep. Read a book. Sing a quiet song. Talk quietly with your child about their day.

Wake up and go to bed at the same time.

Our bodies and brains work better when we go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day. Even though your schedule may be different, try to wake up and go to bed as if you were doing your normal routine.

Limit TV and screens at bedtime.

Try to not have your child watch TV or look at a screen right before bed. The light from screens keeps them from feeling sleepy. Instead, try other activities, like reading books or telling stories.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

Try not to stay up late watching TV or fall asleep with your phone. Spend some time at night disconnected. Take a bath. Read a book. Make art. Write in a journal. Light a candle. Do whatever helps your body and mind unwind.



Is your family craving junk food and sweets? You're not alone! Our bodies crave sugars and fats during times of stress. Maintaining good nutrition can help bodies and brains operate at their very best.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Check for your school district's options for free meals.

Many school districts have free meals for children 18 and younger. Check your school district's website for how and where to get these meals. Local food pantries provide groceries for low or no charge.

Have regular mealtimes.

Mealtimes are one of the most important daily routines for families. It also helps limit your child from filling up on junk food. Try to eat your meals at the same time each day.

Prepare and eat meals together.

This is a great time to teach your child how to cook or make a snack. Ask your child to help make dinner. Spend time together at the table while eating.

Choose healthy options.

It may be harder to get healthier food options right now. That's okay. When you can, try to choose colorful vegetables and fruits—these can be fresh, frozen, or canned. Try to choose food made from whole grains, like brown rice, whole-wheat bread, or whole-grain pasta. Including muscle-building proteins like fish, eggs, poultry, beans, lentils, peas, and nuts is also important. Eating healthier foods like fruits and vegetables can help our bodies and brains stay energized and alert.

Breathe before you eat.

Have your family do 1-2 minutes of low and slow breathing before you eat your meal. This will help lower stress and allow your body to digest your food without a stomachache or heartburn.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

As a caregiver, you may be focused on making sure your family is fed. But don't forget to feed yourself well too. Try to have healthy snacks available so you don't turn to junk food.



This is a stressful time for everyone. This stress can affect your family's mental health. There are steps you can take to support mental health, even in stressful times. If needed, you can ask for support from mental health professionals.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Remind your child that you are here for them.

With all the changes in your child's life, it can be helpful to tell your child that their feelings matter to you. You can say things like, "We are in this together," "I am here for you," and "It makes sense that you feel this way."

Watch for signs of worry.

Your child may not have the words to express their worries, but you may see signs of it. They may get cranky, be more attached, have trouble sleeping, or seem distracted. Talk to your child about how they are feeling and try to stick to your normal routines.

Talk to your child about their feelings.

During this time, your child may need extra time and attention to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Make time as a family to talk about how everyone is doing. Your child might feel sad to not see their friends, confused about what is going on, scared that things won't go back to normal. For older children, help them recognize how and where they feel these emotions in their bodies, like having a tight chest or a clenched jaw. Labeling and understanding these emotions are important in learning to manage feelings in a healthy way—for both adults and children!

Find mental health support, if needed.

If you are worried about your child's mental health, share your concerns with your health care provider. They can connect you with a mental health specialist.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

- **Make time to unwind.** Your mind and body may be working on overdrive right now, so remember to give it time to rest too. Take breaks from reading or listening to the news. Do the calming activities you enjoy – stretch your body, watch a funny show, have a light-hearted conversation with a friend.
- **Recognize when you are feeling stressed.** When this happens, have an action plan. For instance, you might think about taking an "adult time out" for a few minutes. This will allow you to take a deep breath, refocus, and return to your family in a calmer state of mind. This is important! Because when kids see adults around them manage stress in a healthy way, they learn to do the same thing.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** None of us have ever been through this before. You are doing your best to deal with a hard situation. It is understandable that you may feel anxious. It's OK to take it one step at a time. It's OK to feel overwhelmed. Take a deep breath and do what you can.
- **Reach out for support.** For more information and resources on supporting your mental health, go to [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov) or [nami.org](https://www.nami.org). If you are experiencing domestic violence, reach out to [thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org), call 1-800-799-7233 or text "LOVEIS" to 22522. If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.



When it comes to stress, exercise may be just what the doctor ordered. You may think, “How can we exercise right now?” But there are many fun, free ways to get your heart pumping at home to release stress.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Get creative at home.

Create obstacle courses in your house or backyard. Jump rope. Play games like *Duck, Duck Goose* or *Simon Says*. Make a fort. Encourage your child to make up their own game. Go to a nearby empty parking lot and let your child ride their bikes or scooter. Have a running race. Play tag.

Use online videos.

There are many videos that have kid-friendly workouts and exercise ideas. Search “child friendly exercise videos” to find something your child might like. Even just doing some stretching, jumping jacks, or push-ups is a great way to get your body moving.

Get outside.

While we are supposed to distance ourselves from others, getting outside is still OK and encouraged. Go for a walk in your neighborhood or ride your bike.

Have a dance party.

Dancing is a fun, easy form of exercise. Try doing a Freeze Dance. Have everyone dance to some of their favorite songs until the “DJ” turns off the music. The person who freezes last then becomes the DJ.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

Don't forget to stay active, too! During this time, there are lots of online exercise classes for adults, check out offerings from the YMCA360 and many local gyms. Or, put on your favorite song and dance like no one is watching!



Mindfulness exercises can help turn the stress response down! Doing mindfulness practices can help you and your child manage stress.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Practice deep breathing.

Deep breathing can slow your heartbeat and lower anxiety and stress in the moment. Have your child sit or lay down. Place one of their hands on their belly and the other hand on their chest. Breathe in through the nose and feel the belly rise, then breathe out through the mouth and feel the belly lower. Make it fun by pretending to blow out all the candles on a cake with one long breath, or have your child hold a stuffed animal on their belly and watch it move up and down while they breathe deeply.

Use the “5, 4, 3, 2, 1” technique.

This is a calming activity you and your child can do together. Encourage your child to find 5 things they see (“I see the computer”), 4 things they feel (“I feel the pillow I am sitting on”), 3 sounds they hear (“I hear the sound of the TV”), 2 things they smell (“I smell pizza in the oven”), and 1 thing they taste (“I taste toothpaste”).

Practice gratitude.

Being grateful is especially important during stressful times. Have your child think about what they are grateful for. Try having each family member share what they are grateful for during dinner or at bedtime.

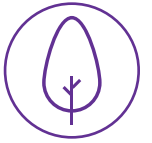
Use mindfulness videos or online programs.

There are many free online mindfulness and guided meditation videos for kids on YouTube. There are also apps like Waking Up or Headspace. Try setting a gentle bell sound on your phone. When the bell sounds, take a moment to stop, breathe, and relax.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

All of the mindfulness activities are also useful for grownups. Throughout the day, choose one of the activities to help you breathe and relax. Keep a gratitude journal. Use meditation apps like Headspace or Calm. Take a break to have a brief moment to yourself to do some deep breathing.



Being in nature, or even looking at nature, lowers stress and fear. Even when we can't spend as much time outside, there are many creative ways to enjoy nature from our home.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

Find nature online.

Many zoos and aquariums now have video cameras so you can see animals from your home. Google “live cam animals” to find some animals your child might like. Find a video with your child’s favorite animal. There are also many beautiful nature shows like Planet Earth, Our Planet, or Oceans. Listen to nature sounds like ocean waves or birds chirping.

Connect with nearby nature.

You don't need to go somewhere fancy to find nature—it is often right in front of you. Ask your child to find new things about nature at home. Look out the window and notice something new. Explore the backyard to find new bugs or flowers. Do some gardening.

Bring nature indoors.

You can grow plants indoors, too. You can plant beans or sunflower seeds in a plastic cup or yogurt carton with some soil. This is a great way for your child to do a science experiment and give them the responsibility of watering their plant. Google “grow a plant with kids” for some ideas.

Go on a scavenger hunt.

While walking in your neighborhood, have your child look for things like bugs, red doors, or animals in windows.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

Being outside and getting fresh air is very important for you too. Open the window and breathe in some fresh air. Take a moment to step outside, even if you don't actually go anywhere. If possible, take a walk around the block by yourself to take the time to connect to nature and your surroundings.



BE HEALTHY AND WELL