

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.



SERVICE CORRECTIONNEL CANADA

TRANSFORMONS DES VIES. PROTÉGEONS LES CANADIENS.

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COVID-19 Clinical Corner

What are the potential effects of stress?

These are unprecedented stressful times, and stress is unavoidable for all of us and those we care for. Stress occurs when our mind perceives a threat, real or imagined, and it can have both positive and negative effects. With acute danger, stress can mobilize us to act to protect ourselves from imminent threat (e.g. fight, flight or freeze response). When the stress is imperceptible or chronic, it can still motivate us into action, but it can also be more prone to have deleterious effects – cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural. These may include:

Cognitive:

- difficulty concentrating or thinking
- memory problems
- negativity or lack of self-confidence
- constant worrying
- difficulty making decisions

Emotional:

- moodiness or irritability
- anxiety or nervousness
- depression, sadness or guilt
- low morale, hopelessness or helplessness
- feeling agitated or unable to relax

Physical:

- headaches
- muscle tension or other physical pain or discomfort
- stomach problems, nausea, diarrhea or vomiting
- loss of appetite or sex drive
- rapid heart rate, high blood pressure
- insomnia
- fatigue

Behavioural:

- changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- social withdrawal
- nervous habits such as nail biting, teeth grinding or foot tapping
- increased use of caffeine, alcohol, drugs or cigarettes
- neglect of family or work responsibilities
- decline in performance or productivity.

Who is most vulnerable to the deleterious effects of stress?

All of us are vulnerable to the deleterious effects of stress, but some of us are more vulnerable than others. Factors

that may make a person more vulnerable include:

- limited social support
- multiple stressors
- uncertainty
- pre-existing mental or physical illness
- difficulty regulating or balancing emotions
- lack self-confidence
- sense of helplessness or powerlessness

What can we do to manage stress during a crisis?

Know that stress is normal under these extraordinary circumstances, but we can all play a role to manage our stress so it can more likely be channelled constructively to promote mental health – our own mental health and that of our family, friends, co-workers and patients. In order to do this, a key to keep in mind is to stay focussed on what is in our control vs what isn't, that is to live by the Serenity Prayer:

*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to
know the difference.*

What is in our control are our actions and words, not our automatic thoughts, feelings and urges, nor the actions, words thoughts or feelings of others. When we focus on what's in our control, we can then feel empowered and be more effective to influence some of these other things in a positive direction.

What we can do for our own health?

First and foremost, it is essential that we look after ourselves if we are going to be of help to others. We can do this by following any and all precautions and advice from public health authorities to stay healthy, minimize our risk of contracting COVID-19 or spreading the disease. Prioritizing our own health will not only improve our own safety but also the safety and health of others. It will also improve our resilience, lessen our anxiety and allow us to better support and care for others (see Keep Informed under Resources for links to various public health agencies).

What can we do for our own mental health?

In addition to protecting our physical health, we can do additional things to promote our mental health and resilience. These include:

- **Connect with others:** It has become more important than ever to stay connected during this time of physical social distancing and isolation. Understanding, compassion and kindness go a long way to mitigating one another's stress. Reach out to family, friends, co-



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workers or your social or spiritual community, and support one another without judgement. Use the telephone, social media and messenger apps. Don't be afraid to tell others how you are feeling, and don't be afraid to ask for help, including professional help if you are really struggling.

- **Take time for yourself:** Set aside 20-30 minutes at least once and preferably twice a day to care for yourself. Do some mindful breathing, meditate, stretch, or take a warm bath. Do some activities you usually enjoy – listen to music, watch a movie, play games, or go for a walk. Be patient with yourself, and know that your stress can be channeled to keep yourself safe and to help others.
- **Honour and respect your feelings:** Know that stress and distress are normal at this difficult time, and are a testament to caring for yourself and for others. Be patient with yourself. Avoid blaming yourself if something unfortunate happens. Know that guilt is commonplace, and is not indicative of having done something wrong, but rather is a testament to wishing things were different. And if you did make a mistake, forgive yourself and allow it to promote learning. Talk to select others about your feelings, and consider journalling or using some other art form to express your feelings to avoid things from building up.
- **Live with intention by actively managing your own wellbeing:** Maintain routines where possible: eat regular nutritious meals, drink plenty of fluids, stay physically active and allow adequate time for sleep. Continue with any treatment for pre-existing physical or mental health conditions. Make a list of priorities and try to focus on one thing at a time.
- **Be grateful for good things:** Make it a point to take special note of those people and things in the world that you are grateful for. If it helps, you can write these down in a journal, say them out loud before a meal or post one thing each day on a gratitude tree. You can also invite others in your home or place of work to do same to build a small community of awareness of what there is to be grateful for.
- **Practise good sleep hygiene:** Go to bed and wake up at a regular time and allow yourself enough sleep to be rested (8 hours for most of us); avoid sleeping in and curtail time in bed during the day and if you must take a nap, limit these to no more than 20-30 minutes; exercise daily, but not right before bed; avoid caffeine within 6 hours of bedtime; have a winddown pre-bedtime ritual (e.g. light reading, music, a light bedtime snack but avoid excess fluids before going to bed); insulate your room from excess light or noise; make sure you have comfortable pillows, set a comfortable temperature on the thermostat; void before retiring; and only use a sleep aid if these other things don't work (consult with your doctor as to which one)
- **Stay informed while managing exposure to media:** News is everywhere 24 hours a day. Too much exposure in such uncertain times can increase our fear and anxiety. To minimize its potential adverse impact, we can read, watch or listen to the news at a specific time each day to receive the updates we need while avoiding being inundated with sensationalistic stories.

Use only reputable/reliable sources like the local, provincial or national agency of public health, the CDC or WHO.

- **Help others:** Helping others contributes to our own mental health by giving us a sense of purpose, meaning, value and self-worth (see below for how)

What can we do to help others?

Whether its at home or at work, there is lot's we can do to help others, most of all by being a role model ourselves. Be aware that even small gestures can go a long way: a kind word, gentle encouragement, respecting social distancing, disinfecting a surface, or offering soap or a hand sanitizer. Be aware too that we help others by respecting those in need of physical isolation such as the elderly, sick or other people at increased risk, but do reach out to them to offer social support with a text message, phone call or facetime. Reach out to those known to be vulnerable to stress or who are struggling (e.g. those with mental illness or who are socially isolated). Ask others what they need, and offer support while respecting all precautions. Offer those in isolation to deliver food, medicine or other essentials leaving these 6 meters outside their door. And offer your kindness, patience and social support.

At home or at work, we can work with others to designate chairs, work stations, dishes, utensils, computers, telephones and bathrooms for use by a specific person, and assign particular responsibilities to those who are able (e.g. to disinfect high touch surfaces, clean the dishes, take out the garbage, prepare meals, do essential shopping). We can help by respecting any direction to work from or stay at home, and all directions in the work place to stay safe (social distancing, handwashing, use of PPE when indicated).

With our family, friends, co-workers and patients, we can also help by educating them about stress, and reminding them of the message of the serenity prayer to focus on those things that are in their control, such as the things listed in this Clinical Corner, to look after themselves and others.

You can also contact Employee Assistance Services at 1-800-268-7708, which is a 24/7 number. The TTY number is 1-800-567-5803.

Please send any other clinical questions, suggestions or resources related to COVID-19 to the following email account: GEN-NHQ Pharmacy (gen-nhq-pharmacy@csc-scc.gc.ca).

*Information presented in this Clinical Corner has been sourced from the websites of the Public Health Agency of Canada, Canadian Mental Health Association, Centers for Disease Control and World Health Organization

*See the following page for resources on keeping informed and managing stress

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Resources:

Keep informed:

Public Health Agency of Canada (1 844-280-5020)
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>

Newfoundland and Labrador (811)
<https://www.gov.nl.ca/covid-19/>

Prince Edward Island (811)
<https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/topic/covid-19>

Nova Scotia (811)
<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>

New Brunswick (811)
https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/ocmoh/cdc/content/respiratory_diseases/coronavirus.html

Quebec (1 877 644-4545)
<https://www.inspq.qc.ca/>

Ontario (1 866 797-0000)
<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/>

Manitoba (1 888 315-9257)
<https://www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/index.html>

Saskatchewan (811)
<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/~link.aspx?id=6C6BF971659346E0B8E9DE4AE3B2AFF9&z=z>

Alberta (811)
<https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>

British Columbia (811)
<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19>

Nunavut (1 877 975-5772)
<https://gov.nu.ca/health/information/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>

Northwest Territories (911)
<https://www.hss.gov.nt.ca/en/services/coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

Yukon (811)
<https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/health-concerns-diseases-and-conditions/find-information-about-coronavirus-covid>

Centers for Disease Control
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

World Health Organization
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Stress and how to manage it:

Canadian Mental Health Association
<https://cmha.ca/documents/stress>

Heart and Stroke Canada
<https://www.heartandstroke.ca/get-healthy/reduce-stress/manage-your-stress>

My Health Alberta
<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/youth-addiction-mental-health/stress/stress-self-care-resources>

Healthlink BC
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/rfxsk>

WebMD
<https://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/tips-to-control-stress#1>

Mayo Clinic
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858>

Positive Psychology
<https://positivepsychology.com/stress-management-techniques-tips-burn-out/>

Centre for Addiction and Mental health
<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19>

Finding Help
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/>

Guided relaxation and anti-stress meditations:

English

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS_iqfGjL78

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DTmGtznab4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFSc7Ck0Ao0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlr3RsUWrdo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdbzDMSGsyg>

Français

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DczdzpTrMFQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCxHCJLSvrw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCdhqhYWfM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9cZbUiaO1g>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTvbiv-u_O8