

COVID-19: MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS DURING THESE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q How can one prepare emotionally and mentally for self-isolation if required?

A One can never be prepared enough for incidents such as these. However, it is important to bear in mind that our thoughts, actions and emotions are all interconnected and can influence one another.

Stay calm and use the tips below to help you cope:

- Take it one day at a time – know that this is only temporary.
- Learn and practice simple relaxation techniques like breathing exercises and meditation.
- Employ coping skills that nurture your spirit i.e. praying, exercise and journaling.
- Maintain your normal routine: eat well, stay active, get adequate rest and connect with family and friends (through the use of technology during lockdown or self-isolation periods).
- Embrace the practices that will keep you safe: wash hands with soap for 20 seconds, cough or sneeze into your flexed elbow or into a tissue and discard the tissue in a rubbish bin and wash your hands afterwards, keep a safe social distance of at least two metres from other people if you need to leave your home.
- The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports can cause anyone to feel distressed. Choose how you will receive and consume information by minimising watching, reading or listening to news that causes you to feel anxious or distressed. Only access information from credible sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the South African Government website and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and look for information updates at specific times during the day (once or twice).

Q What can people do to tackle boredom or feelings of being isolated?

A It is important to stay connected to the outside world and your family members that are not around you during this time. You should also stay active and do exercises like yoga and pilates in your home.

Other ways to cope and keep busy can include watching movies, taking a long relaxing bath, reading a good book, finding interesting recipes and different meals to make for your family.

For those with children, engage them and keep them busy with creative activities that are relevant to their ages. These can include reading, drawing and playing games and board games.

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Q When people are encouraged to only travel for essential reasons, interaction physically with the outside world is drastically reduced. What impact does this have on the psyche?

A This is a painful adjustment for most people as they often feel deprived of freedom. People are often dependent on structure and being on lockdown can make one feel confined.

The following feelings or behaviour may arise:

- Dependence on structure: This may cause people to lose the capacity or ability to form their own judgement or to decide for themselves.
- Hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust and suspicion: When you are scared, you find yourself unable to trust anyone.
- Generalised lack of spontaneity: People find it difficult to do things on their own, or to make a decision when a change of circumstance arise.
- Social withdrawal and isolation: This is when people retreat deeply into themselves, virtually trusting no one. Some symptoms of clinical depression, like insomnia and diminished sense, may manifest for some. People may also strike out on others in response to a minimal provocation (anger).
- Diminished sense of self-worth: Some people may feel infantilised.
- Post-traumatic stress: This restriction can produce post-traumatic stress reactions for some people, and it may trigger traumatic early childhood events or previous traumatic experiences.

Q Should you test positive for COVID-19, what steps can be taken to manage your stress?

A Be compliant with the testing and self-isolation guidelines that are currently in place and make sure that you are fully informed about the cause of infection (the duration of isolation and tests to be undertaken). Knowing that there are people who tested positive and have recovered can keep you hopeful. Have a positive attitude by identifying negative thoughts and countering them. **Refer to question one for tips to help you cope during this time.**

Q How can you emotionally support a loved one that tested positive for COVID-19?

A Supporting your loved one and helping them cope is very important. They need to know that you are right behind them and are available to talk. Explore their fears with them. Let them name these fears because when they do that, the symptoms lose their potency.

Let them have more information about the virus. **Statistics suggest that over 80% of people will have mild to moderate symptoms and will recover from the infection.** Help them to remain positive by encouraging them to focus on the positive COVID-19 recovery stories and not on the deaths of those who were critically ill with the virus. They should be encouraged to stay calm and try and practice simple relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and meditation.

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Q What should parents be saying to help their children deal with stress and anxiety of COVID-19?

A Parents can play an important role in helping their children make sense of what they hear from news sources in a way that is honest and accurate. Be discreet about what is being said in front of children. Children need to have some information, but it is important that parents do not overload a sense of worry or anxiety. Parents should help minimise fear and anxiety.

What parents should **not say:**

- How many people have passed away or lost their lives.
- How dangerous this virus is – it is important to tell them about the seriousness of COVID-19 but do not scare them. Give the facts and help them understand how they can protect themselves. Use this as an opportunity to teach them how to wash their hands.
- Do not say things like “we hope that you survive.”

What parents should say:

- There are many documented cases of persons recovering from COVID-19 infection. **Speak about the positive or good news rather than focus on the bad.**
- Educate children every day on the actions that can reduce the spread of infection by teaching them the importance of hand hygiene and self-isolation. Explaining that the self-isolation is in the interest of the country.
- Provide accurate information. Let it be simple.
- Parents should discourage children from watching TV and social media COVID-19 news, too much information may lead to anxiety.

Q What should parents say to their children if one of the parents has tested positive for COVID-19?

A Unpack why physical contact is not advised and the importance of self-isolation during this time. The unaffected parent should reassure the children and give them hope that the parent who tested positive will recover. You can refer to positive statistics where there are more recoveries than deaths.

Q In the unlikely case that your child has COVID-19, what should we remember to do when breaking news to them?

A **Stay calm as you break the news.** Refer to the research which have shown a high probability of recovery. Reassure them and help them to stay hopeful.

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Q What are some of the key signs that your child may become anxious over COVID-19 and the state of the world in general? What should we do as parents to curb this?

A Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. You can, however, look for signs and symptoms such as:

- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Poor sleep or waking up in the night with nightmares
- Changes in eating patterns
- Withdrawal symptoms
- Irritability
- Feeling tense and fidgety
- Using the bathroom frequently
- Constantly presenting with negative thoughts

Q What coping mechanisms can be suggested for people that aren't able to travel home or to loved ones due to travel bans?

A Being away from family can be difficult during this time but it is important to stay calm and take comfort in the fact that this situation will pass and you will be reconnected with your family again. During this time:

- Continue to connect with your family through calls and messages and talk to them about how you are feeling. If you can, try and do video calls.
- During times of stress, pay attention to your own needs and feelings and try and use relaxing techniques to keep calm, i.e taking a long bath, listening to music, breathing exercises, meditation, and journaling.
- Keep regular routines as much as possible or create new ones, including regular exercising, cleaning, daily chores, singing, painting or other activities.
- Comply with the recommendations and legislation that are in place regarding the safety measures.
- Stay informed about the outbreak but only use credible sources i.e. The South African government website, World Health Organization (WHO) and National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD).

The same mechanisms can be used by families who are waiting for their loved ones to come home.

Q How do you balance being cautious and not getting hysterical about COVID-19?

A It is important to stay calm. Get credible information from reliable resources i.e The South African Government website, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD). Stick to the precautions that have been recommended for COVID-19.

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Q How should people be treated if they tested positive for COVID-19? (Breaking the stigma, what you should say and what you shouldn't say)

A It is important to separate a person from having an identity defined by COVID-19, to reduce stigma:

- Do not refer to people with COVID-19 as “COVID-19 cases”, “victims” “COVID-19 families” or “the diseased”
- Treat all people with dignity
- Don't ostracize them
- Let them look on the positive side
- Instill some sense of hope

Q Stress and anxiety can often disturb sleep. What tips can be given for good sleep hygiene?

A If you are struggling with sleep, you can try the following:

- Go to bed at the same time every night
- Find a quiet place to sleep
- Limit your screen time
- Limit naps during the day
- Try and relax before bedtime by reading, meditating, listening to music and doing breathing exercises

Q What are the signs of stress? (Unpacking how to identify if someone is not coping with being sick/self-isolated)

A Stress can affect all aspects of your life including your emotions, behaviours, your ability to think and physical health. People handle stress differently and symptoms of stress can differ. These can include:

- Lack of- or finding it difficult to fall sleep
- Inability or difficulty to concentrate
- Loss of or increased appetite
- Difficulty relaxing or quietening your mind
- Constant worrying or even crying often
- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Low energy levels and finding it difficult to complete chores or work
- Headaches
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

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Q How do I cope with stress at home during the lockdown?

A Family ties, even the strongest ones, can suffer when people are forced to spend weeks together with no breaks. **Try and find some 'me time' by scheduling time where you can be alone**, with a book or a podcast or something else that makes you happy and takes you out of immediate reach of your family.

Parents with young children might want to schedule times when one of them is with the kids, while the other works, and to then switch after a few hours. Sleep is important for emotional regulation, so it's important to maintain your normal sleep habits. If you need to nap or want to take a break, try and do so while your child is napping.

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She has worked at the Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation (CSV). Jabu is passionate about trauma counselling, and she led the project when there were multiple deaths of miners during the protracted strike in Marikana and trained the community on emotional support as well as provided support to the widows.