

COVID-19 Resources

Coping With the COVID-19 Crisis: The Importance of Care for Caregivers Tips for Administrators and Crisis Teams

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis unlike any our country has faced before. Unlike other events, the pandemic is affecting every community in some way. The constantly evolving situation may create significant stress and uncertainty—not only for children and youth, but also for those charged with caring for those students at home and in educational and mental health contexts. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of this crisis creates anxiety and a sense of helplessness. Leaders can support themselves and others more effectively by understanding what puts individuals at higher risk for traumatic stress, as well as stress mediation strategies. When administrators, educators, and mental health staff engage in self-care activities that help promote a sense of safety and security, it strengthens the entire educational system and can lead to better outcomes for children and adults alike.

CHRONIC STRESS

Unlike an acute traumatic stressor that has a discrete beginning and end, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing event that has the potential to cause chronic stress. Chronic stress causes the body to stay in a constant state of alertness, despite being in no immediate danger. Prolonged chronic stress can disturb the all major systems in the body (e.g., immune, digestive, cardiovascular, sleep) and can increase risk for psychiatric disorders and some physical disorders such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.

RISKS AND STRESSORS FOR SCHOOL STAFF

As is true for children, adults in the school community will experience varying reactions when experiencing or learning about a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to remember that a variety of factors will influence a person's individual reactions, including characteristics of the person themselves such as preexisting risk factors like mental illness. In addition, certain crisis variables can interact and influence reactions to it. Events that are somewhat predictable and of shorter duration are generally less traumatic than those with a sudden onset and that are long lasting. Consequently, the rapidly evolving and prolonged situation of the pandemic makes this crisis especially tricky in terms of addressing the potential impact.

What to Watch For

The signs and symptoms of chronic stress and secondary trauma can sometimes be observed by others and sometimes are only known to the individual who is affected. Consequently, monitoring both oneself and colleagues is important. Indicators of chronic stress and secondary trauma can come in the form of physical reactions, emotional symptoms and social or interpersonal signs.

- Physical reactions, such as chronic fatigue and exhaustion are the most frequently reported. Difficulty paying attention, confusion, hypervigilance, headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension may also be felt. Sleeping and eating may be difficult.
- Emotional symptoms can include excessive worry or anxiety, disconnection or numbing, feelings of anger, compassion fatigue, demoralization, or resignation. Recurrent crisis thoughts or distressing dreams and even

some confusion and difficulty making everyday decisions can occur. Some people may experience sadness, depression, hopelessness, and/or suicidal thoughts.

- Social or interpersonal signs can include difficulties in relationships at home or work, irritability, outbursts of anger, social withdrawal, or isolation. Excessive use of alcohol and other substances can also be warning signs of stress or secondary trauma.

Ways to Watch From Afar

Requirements for physical distancing make identifying and supporting vulnerable staff and colleagues much more challenging. However, there are some strategies that school leaders might find helpful in this regard.

First, if you are aware of a staff member or colleague who was already struggling with mental health challenges or significant stressors before the pandemic, make a point to reach out to them virtually on a regular basis. This provides an opportunity to check in and ask how they are doing and what they are doing to take care of themselves. This also allows for school leaders to begin to gauge how staff members are doing as well as to share information, such as that related to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Loop in your mental health staff, who can reach out and provide additional support and resources.

Second, offer regular virtual office hours for staff to “drop in” and connect with you and other colleagues. Consider inviting mental health staff to participate; they may pick up on concerns or issues that staff are struggling with.

Third, provide opportunities for virtual social connectedness for all staff. In addition to checking in and reducing social isolation for those who attend, it allows for identifying those who don’t and who may need a direct check-in.

ASSOCIATED GRIEF

The pandemic has resulted in a great deal of loss for school leaders and other educators. Schools are a type of community in and of themselves. Most staff members feel very connected to the school and to work colleagues. The mandates to close schools and engage in distance learning have disrupted those connections. For school leaders who feel responsible for that community, the sense of loss might be especially profound. Grief is a natural response to such a loss, and it is not unusual for educators to feel a sense of sadness, emptiness, guilt, anxiety, and/or anger. It is important that school leaders and other educators allow themselves to grieve and provide a healthy model of mourning for others by talking about the sense of loss and sharing their feelings with others.

COVID-19 has resulted in feelings of grief. Common losses include:

- Social connections, as we no longer may have contact with close friends. Children are not able to play together, no in-person social engagement, no touching or hugging, etc. This can be disruptive to our emotional well-being.
- Losing the way we carry out our daily lives as it is no longer safe to continue as in the past. We can’t engage in many of our familiar routines anymore.
- Questioning our assumptions of safety and security. We may be losing our sense of safety in the environment and question our ability to stay safe. The changing nature of what is known about the virus has contributed to this loss of safety and security.
- Losing trust in our systems. Government leaders and agencies, medical systems, religious bodies, the stock market, and corporations may be perceived as having failed to meet our expectations.
- Even if not directly affected by a specific loss, we tend to feel the grief of others. This compassionate grief can just as painful as a personal loss.
- Anticipatory grief is the feeling we get when the future is uncertain. The current situation is more confusing because the threat is something that cannot be seen, thus compromising our sense of general safety.

CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER

Strategies school leaders can use for creating a climate of support include the following.

- Provide school personnel with access to support from crisis responders and/or mental health professionals in the midst of this crisis to facilitate adaptive coping and recovery. . Such expectations can be explicitly set within the context of a staff meeting.
- Support a culture in which adults feel comfortable asking for help and/or to take a break without being perceived as being unable to do their job.
- Be aware of the potential stigma of school personnel accessing mental health services and EAPs.
- Have mental health staff, crisis team members, and administrators available via regular virtual office hours and/or virtual group or caregiver meetings to process and problem-solve—this is one way to ensure that staff are adequately supported during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Utilize substitute teachers for those educators who have been significantly impacted (e.g., those who have to take care of sick family members or are ill themselves).
- Providing opportunities to reduce feelings of social isolation during times of social distancing by encouraging non-work related virtual social connections.

Strategies school leaders and crisis team members can use for providing direct support include the following.

- Schools can use a virtual classroom buddy system. Giving teachers the option of having a school mental health professional assigned to their classroom to turn to for advice and support can help them get through this difficult time. The buddy could also help facilitate conversations about the crisis during virtual instruction times, offer mini breaks for the teacher, and identify those students—and teachers—who have significant coping challenges and connect them with more intensive support or interventions.
- School leaders and crisis team members can connect with staff daily using platforms that allow for written, visual, and audio connections (email, phone, video, online live meetings, etc.). Ideas for the content of messages include:
 - A desire to check in and connect with others
 - Positive and uplifting messages such as quotes that convey hope, resilience, and thankfulness
 - Funny messages to allow for humor
 - Factual details about what information is known and specific actions that can be taken (i.e., CDC updates or recommendations, strategies for staying safe)
 - Strategies for coping
 - Sharing of videos such as movie clips, YouTube videos, TED Talks, etc.
 - Re-emphasize care-for-caregiver culture (e.g., it is okay and expected you will ask for assistance or breaks).
- School leaders and crisis team members can create feelings of team connections by creating staff videos from individual remote work locations that can be shared via online platforms and social media. These can be shared with students or other schools.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Self-care can come in many forms and each can help address the signs and symptoms mentioned above. School leaders should encourage self-care for staff members, as well as the care of children in the school community. The following strategies can be effective in managing some of the challenges associated with this crisis.

- **Create a structure and routine for the day.** By maintaining a daily routine and building structure into the day, you can foster a sense of control and bring predictability to this unpredictable situation. This will help to reduce stress responses, keep our bodies regulated, and facilitate recovery. For example, continue to get out of bed at the same time, have specific times and deadlines to complete tasks, have a designated work space if you are working from home, exercise at the same time each day, have family meals, and maintain a consistent bedtime.
- **Reduce and limit exposure to media coverage of the pandemic.** The anxiety associated with the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the pandemic makes us crave information as a means of making sense of what is going on and regain control. However, watching media coverage for long periods of time may actually increase anxiety, as this can keep our response systems activated. As a way to reduce stress, get news only from reputable sources, watch or read the news for short periods of time (e.g., no more than 30 minutes), and don't view the news right before bed.
- **Attend to your physical self-care.** This includes getting adequate sleep and taking breaks during the workday. Many people use exercise for stress reduction, even taking walks or bike rides, which can help calm the physical body. Eat healthy foods and limit the use of alcohol or other substances, which can interfere with sleep, and should not be relied upon to help cope or relax. Use stress management techniques such as using yoga, deep breathing, calming self-talk, or soothing music.
- **Care for your emotional health.** Finding a balance between work and home is important, especially during times when crisis demands add to already busy workloads. The use of good time management skills and priority setting can help people focus on something practical to do right now to manage the situation. Keep in mind the difference between things one can change (in the system or the world) and accepting those one cannot. Identifying things to be grateful for in life is a strategy to shift your mindset. School staff should be aware of and watch for the signs of secondary trauma.
- **Maintain social connections and focus on social care.** This can contribute to resilience. We can still talk and listen to each other while maintaining physical distance. Appreciate that family and friends are important and let them know. Practicing your spiritual or religious faith may provide comfort and be calming. Stress can actually be reduced when people turn to action, such as by engaging in acts of kindness, activism, or advocacy work. Engage in hobbies or passions for creativity. Finally, look for some humor and goodness in life during this stressful time.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation that is causing stress and uncertainty. However, there are steps that school leaders can take to foster health and well-being in themselves and their school communities. Keep in mind that recovery from a crisis takes time and may not happen in a linear fashion—especially during a pandemic that does not have a discrete, known end. Awareness, balance, and connection can help! Set and celebrate achievable goals and celebrate the resilience of the great people in your school who go above and beyond as they support and help others in times of crises.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Institute for Disaster Mental Health, SUNY at New Paltz, <https://newpaltz.edu/media/idmh/covid-19/IDMH%20COVID19%20Community%20Stress%20Management%20Tip%20Sheet%202020%20Final.pdf>

NCTSN: Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

University of CA, San Francisco, <http://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/coronavirus>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Emergency Responders: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself.* <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>

Temple Health. (n.d.). *5 Tips for Staying Connected While Social Distancing.*

<https://www.templehealth.org/about/blog/5-tips-staying-connected-while-social-distancing>

- National Alliance on Mental Illness. (n.d.). COVID 19 Resource and Information Guide. <https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, <https://www.nami.org/covid-19>
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak. <C:\Users\kcowan\Downloads> <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). How to Cope with Stress During 2019-nCoV Outbreak. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/coping-with-stress.pdf?sfvrsn=9845bc3a_8

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For more information on care for the caregivers for schools and on COVID-19, visit NASP's COVID-19 Resource Center at www.nasponline.org/COVID-19.

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