# RESTORING MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the biggest global crises that we have encountered in many decades and the fact that we do not quite see an end in sight makes it all the more frightening. It makes sense therefore that a global crisis of a scale such as the coronavirus would have a strong impact on the mental well-being of people around the world. According to Statistics Canada's Health Report "Understanding the perceived mental health of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic", pandemics such as SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, or COVID-19 can lead to a number of mental health issues such as psychological impairment and/or worsening symptoms of pre-existing mental health disorders such as anxiety or PTSD. It is crucial therefore that we take steps towards building resilience against the harmful mental health impact of COVID-19. This newsletter will provide some essential tips on how we can cope with some of the mental health issues that we may be facing due to COVID-19 as well as improve our overall well-being during this challenging time.
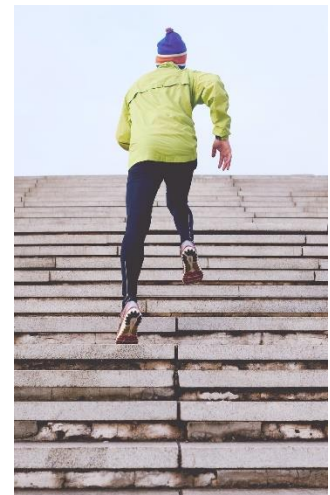
Mental health impacts due to COVID-19

While it may take several years to see the full, long-term impact of COVID-19 on the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of people, researchers around the world have begun studying the early impact of the pandemic on mental health. In Canada, the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1 and 2 showcase how the perceived mental health of Canadians has been impacted during the early stages of the pandemic. In the surveys collected between March 29 and April 3, 54% of Canadians aged 15 and up reported having excellent or very good mental health during COVID-19, however, the percentage dropped by 6% in a later survey taken between May 4 to May 10 in which 48% of Canadians stated having excellent or very good mental health. In addition, 18% of Canadians reported experiencing moderate to severe anxiety due to COVID-19. It appears therefore that the pandemic has indeed taken a toll on the mental health of a significant portion of the population, worsening symptoms of anxiety, stress, and potentially other mental disorders such as depression and PTSD as well.

Building resilience and coping with mental health challenges during COVID-19

1. **Practice acceptance and self-compassion**

One of the first steps towards managing your emotions is to first understand and accept how you are feeling. Many of us mistakenly believe that avoiding our feelings and thoughts will help eliminate our anxiety, and while that may indeed us help us feel better in the short-term, it is not an effective way of resolving or managing our issues in the long-term. COVID-19 has been a challenging time for everyone and it is okay and even normal to feel out of sorts because of it. It is when these feelings overtake us and render it difficult for us to function on a day to day basis that they become problematic.

2. Continue practicing healthy habits

While this piece of advice may sound like a broken record by now, the reason why most doctors and mental health professionals recommend it is because of how crucial it is to building resilience and encouraging good mental (and physical) health. Practicing healthy habits is an especially important reminder at this time when it may be tempting to neglect some of our usual self-care practices as we continue dealing with a new reality. It is important that we keep some degree of normalcy by tending to the basic needs of our mental and physical health. Start with ensuring that you are eating a nutritious diet with a variety of foods, practicing healthy sleep habits so that you can achieve at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night, doing at least a moderate amount of exercise 3 to 5 times of week, reaching out to loved ones to ward off loneliness, as well as taking time to do something fun and relaxing a few times a week.

Doing a range of moderate to intense physical activity several times a week can be especially effective in combatting some of the negative effects of the pandemic on our mental health. It is well-known that exercise helps release the "feel-good" chemicals called endorphins which can boost mood. It can also help us step out of the worry cycle and stay in the present moment, which can aid in reducing stress and anxiety. If you are able to, step outside for a relaxing jaunt in the neighbourhood (while maintaining social distancing), as spending time in nature, which also allows you to take in some essential Vitamin D, can enhance the positive mental health benefits of exercising.

3. Learn self-care techniques such as CBT and mindfulness

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is one of the most popular therapeutic tools used in counselling and can be useful in checking our tendency to engage in negative, obsessive, and irrational thought cycles especially during a time of crisis. At this time, we may find ourselves being stuck in certain types of "thinking traps", such as catastrophizing and fortune telling (for instance, predicting and thinking that the pandemic will never go away) which can increase our anxiety. CBT can help us identify such thought patterns and change the way we think so that we can handle situations differently and more effectively.

In an article for Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Ontario, Dr. Jaonna Mansfield and Dr. Susan Hershkop simplify the CBT process into three steps: catch the initial thought, check the thoughts by considering the facts, and finally modify the thought based on the facts. So, for instance, if your initial thought is that "the pandemic will never go away", think about whether this is a fact or whether it may be a thinking trap. Truth is none of us have the ability to predict what might happen, so once you realize that this thought is a catastrophizing or fortune telling one, consider the facts of the situation. Pandemics that have occurred in the past did eventually end and most countries around the world are working on finding a vaccine and creating safety guidelines, which is helping limit the spread. Once you have considered the facts, modify the thought into a more realistic, fact-based one and repeat the process every time a similar irrational thought pops up.

Mindfulness is another popular and effective tool for calming frayed nerves. Anxiety Canada describes mindfulness as a method that allows us to become attentive to the present moment without judgement. It encourages acceptance of what is and can therefore gently pull us away from our tendency to over-think or worry. While there are a multitude of mindfulness exercises that you can try, some of which can be found on Anxiety Canada's website, there is a simple grounding exercise that you can learn and begin to use immediately. Start with one of your senses, such as sight, and think of three things that you can perceive with that sense in this moment, for instance, think of three things that you can see right now. Do that for all of the senses, slowly listing what you can smell, taste, or feel in this moment and you will find yourself feeling much calmer than you were at the beginning of the exercise.

4. Access professional help

While self-help techniques can be great starting points for anyone experiencing mild anxiety and depression, it does not replace professional help for those undergoing acute distress. If you are having a difficult time managing your thoughts and feelings, speak to your doctor and/or access counselling services such as through EFAP. Most provincial government websites are also a great reference for local mental health resources, such as the Crisis Line (1-800-784-2433) or the Mental Health Line (310-6789) in BC.

For confidential assistance
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