



Navigating Uncertainty Together

Strengthening Families with Children
and Teens During COVID-19



A note about wording, individual and cultural differences and limits of this booklet...



This resource was created at the beginning of the “social distancing” phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vancouver. We want to be supportive and constructive and hope our ideas and suggestions will be helpful for you and your family.

Each person has different strengths, challenges and needs. Some children, teens, parents and families have extensive challenges and special needs. Each person and/or community also has their own cultural context and ways of understanding many of the topics we discuss. It’s possible that some of our ideas and suggestions will not be appropriate for your specific situation and family. It’s also possible that we’ve left out information or a cultural perspective that would be helpful for you. We warmly invite you to let us know about these problems. We look forward to changing and improving this resource. Even more, we encourage you to modify the ideas and suggestions to make them relevant and useful for you, your family and your communities.



You’ll see that we talk to and about “parents.” When we say parent, we mean primary caregiver. This includes grandparents, foster parents, aunts and uncles...any adults who are primary caregivers to children and teens. We often say “you.” Families have varying numbers of primary caregivers. When we say you, parent or parents, we are including all of the primary caregivers in a family. We hope all primary caregivers feel included.

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Overview

Everyone is trying to understand and somehow manage tremendous change, loss and uncertainty. Most people are experiencing strong thoughts, feelings and body sensations related to the pandemic. We hope to support and inspire you to strengthen yourself, your family and your communities by tending to emotional and relationship needs, nurturing the positive, actively addressing the challenges and weaving a family fabric that is colourful and strong.

Many families are experiencing significant financial, social and work-related challenges that are profoundly stressful. If this is true for you, we hope you are able to access practical and financial supports from government programs, social agencies and/or your employer (if you have one) as well as kindness from friends, neighbors and family. We have a list of websites that offer information and support on pages 41 to 43.



Keep In Mind:

It's a time for you and your family to follow public health recommendations to promote the safety and well-being of everyone. We encourage you to check reliable sites and follow the most current public health recommendations. Here are two reliable sites:

<http://www.vch.ca/about-us/news/vancouver-coastal-health-statement-on-coronavirus>
<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19>

It's also a time when parents' thoughts, feelings and choices are especially important.

- You are navigating your family through tough waters!
- There are enormous social and financial challenges that are outside of anyone's individual control. At the same time, the small and large choices you make every day have a big impact on you, your children and teens and your family.
- Focusing on supporting everyone's emotional security, well-being and adaptability can help weather the storm and lead to increased family connection and capacity in the future.





Tips:



As much as possible, maintain (more or less) regular expectations and routines including cultural and spiritual practices.

- In times of uncertainty and rapid change, children and youth often feel unstable and insecure.
- Maintaining daily structure, expectations and routines helps everyone feel secure.
- Some families have cultural, traditional and/or or spiritual practices that support stability for the children and family.
- Maintaining these things helps everyone meet current challenges with more resilience and flexibility.

“Follow your child’s lead” when providing information, support and validation.

- Children and youth require more information, validation and support during times of uncertainty and stress.
- Provide information, support and validation when your children and youth “signal” that they want or need information, support and/or validation (rather than in response to your own worries and stress).
- We’ll talk about this more on page 10.

Focus on the choices that you and your children can make.

- In times of uncertainty, many people focus on the things they cannot control and feel overwhelmed.
- Whenever possible, focus on the choices you and your children **can** make.
- Notice and affirm times when you and your children actively make choices that support yourselves, your family and your extended communities.
- Validate your children and teens when they make choices that help them feel more confident and effective.

Recognize emotions and develop everyone’s ability to express them constructively.

- We talk about this a lot below.



Think about ways your behaviour and choices are affecting your children.

- Children and teens learn a lot from watching how their parents handle their thoughts, feelings, needs and challenges.
- Children and youth also learn a lot from watching how their parents “frame and manage” problems.
- We focus on these topics in detail.

Support your children to feel productive, helpful and effective.



- Most people feel happier, more capable and less worried when they help others and contribute to their communities.
- We're all helping others when we follow public health recommendations.
- There may be other things your children and teens would like to do to help others such as contacting friends or elders who are physically isolated or contributing to online support communities.



Try not to burden your children and youth with responsibility. Instead, support them to make choices and experience themselves as productive, effective and helpful. This is called having a sense of “agency.”



“Tolerate uncertainty.”



- There are many things that are uncertain and not possible to control with individual choices or actions.
- Some people react to uncertainty by feeling overwhelmed or distressed. Others respond by trying to control everything and everyone. Some do both! These responses are understandable but they take a lot of energy and don't lead to effective change. Children and youth usually feel less secure when their parents react in these ways.
- “Tolerating uncertainty” involves being willing to experience or “know” (with our thoughts and often our hearts and body sensations) that some things are not known and/or not in our individual control.
- Tolerating uncertainty supports everyone to be less fearful/avoidant and more flexible and resilient.
- It's important for children and youth to develop this capacity in small, graduated steps that are appropriate for their developmental stage and within their “window of tolerance.” Very young children need more reassurance. There is information about these ideas throughout this booklet.
- It's important that parents communicate that they are leading and “emotionally containing” the family when they model “tolerating uncertainty” for their children and youth.
- We're not saying this is easy but we think it's worth considering and trying.





Notice moments of pleasure and connection.

- Everyone copes more effectively when they have moments of relaxation, connection and pleasure.
- Try to create and notice moments of satisfaction and connection whenever possible. Here are some examples:
 - Help children notice that spring flowers are blooming all around us.
 - Highlight “acts of kindness.”
 - Notice times when you or your children feel content, satisfied and/or have “enough.”
 - Maybe say out loud when you’re enjoying being with your children and teens or having fun as a family.
- We are not suggesting that you tell children everything is okay or dismiss their emotions and worries. As well as providing truthful accurate information and supporting children’s feelings and needs, ALSO notice moments when things are okay or even pleasurable.



Remember to have realistic expectations and be kind to yourself.

- Parents are responsible for so many things, especially when kids are not going to daycare and school.
- We provide a lot of ideas and suggestions. It’s probably most helpful if you choose one or two specific ways to strengthen yourself and your family during this time. It helps to create small realistic plans so that you experience success.
- Try to notice things you do well (or “good-enough”) and things that make you feel better as often as possible.
- We strongly encourage you to be kind to yourself. Most people develop skills and capacities when they are treated with kindness rather than criticism. Intense self-criticism results in less effective parenting.
- Treat yourself kindly the way you would treat an important friend.



Parental Well Being

Keep in Mind:

It's important for parents to focus on their own well-being and recognize and manage their worry and stress as much as possible.

- This provides important security and role modelling for children and teens.
- This may be the most important thing you can do at this time to support your children's and youth's long term growth, development and well-being.
- Many parents are experiencing a lot of thoughts, feelings and body sensations related to worry, anger, fear and uncertainty. Families tend to "share emotions." Emotions are often "contagious."



Tips:

Actively choose to support your overall well-being and emotional and physical stability.

- There are many things that can help:
 - Getting information from reliable sources
 - Limiting the amount of time listening to worrying information
 - Getting emotional and practical help from family and friends
 - Having a way to recognize and "manage" feelings (more on this below)
 - Getting regular exercise
 - Maintaining a regular sleep/wake cycle
 - Eating relatively well
 - Reducing the use of alcohol and/or drugs
 - Taking time to "ground" and "stay present"
 - Practicing mindfulness and/or self-compassion
 - Maintaining traditional, cultural and/or spiritual practices that support you
- Of course, it's not possible to change a lot of things at once.
- Choose one or two things that help you feel more stable and emotionally capable and make them a top priority.





 **Actively choose specific strategies that help you cope with stress more effectively and integrate them into your daily life.**

- It helps to be as specific and practical as possible.
- Think about things that are important to you and/or that you like to do. This will make it easier to follow through. Reducing stress doesn't have to be unpleasant!
- Most people find it easier to practice stress-reduction (or self-regulation) strategies when they plan specific times and/or link the strategies to things they already do. For example, *slow down, relax my shoulders and breathe each time I walk into the kitchen.*
- We talk about recognizing and managing stress throughout this booklet.
- There are many possible strategies. Here's one way of thinking about options.



FOUR CORE STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY

1. ATTENTION - CENTERING TECHNIQUES

To neutralize anxiety, it can often help to use techniques designed to focus attention beyond anxious thoughts.



MEDITATION



BREATHING



VISUALIZATION

2. EXPRESSIVE, CREATIVE STRATEGIES

To channel anxious thoughts or feelings in more productive ways, we might identify specific outlets to express creativity, such as working on a project, drawing, and athletics.



WORKING ON A PROJECT



ARTS



PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

3. REFLECTION EXPLORATION STRATEGIES

To monitor where anxiety arises, become more aware of anxiety triggers, and reflect on anxious thoughts and feelings, we might try strategies that foster self-observation.



JOURNALING



SELF-MONITORING



COMMUNICATION

4. HEALTHY LIFESTYLE VALUES

To reduce residual feelings of anxiety, it could help to turn attention toward healthy habits, healthy relationships, healthy pleasures, and a healthy environment.



NUTRITION



RELATIONSHIPS



EXERCISE



Make things that replenish and sustain you (“fill your cup”) part of every day.

- Think of things that replenish and sustain you. Try to be very practical and specific.
 - What can I do to “fill my cup”?
 - What can I ask other adults to do to help fill my cup?
 - What are signs that my cup is getting empty and needs to be filled?
 - How can I remember to fill my cup every day?

Get your emotional needs met from other adults as much as possible.

- Try not to directly or indirectly ask your children/teens for emotional support or “vent” about your worries or stressors in front of them when you are feeling anxious or angry.
- Most parents are experiencing a lot of stress and it’s understandable to look for understanding and support from the people around us. However, supporting parents emotionally and hearing stressful information in this way often contributes to children’s and teens’ worry, results in them feeling less secure, competent and effective and negatively affects their behavior.
- Try to express intense emotions and get your emotional needs with/from adults as much as possible.
- We recognize that this can be challenging, especially for parents that don’t have enough adult support.
- It is helpful for children and teens to be active contributing members of the family in other ways.



If you are part of a couple, find ways to connect and support each other.

- Many of the ideas and suggestions in this booklet can be applied to couples as well as families.
- Try this website for inspiration:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHN2EKd9tuE>

Resources:

10 Self-Compassion Practices for COVID-19 by CMSC

- <https://centerformsc.org/10-self-compassion-practices-for-covid-19/>

Why Mindfulness Is a Superpower: An Animation by Happify

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6T02g5hnT4>

