

# Mental Health during COVID-19



It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after a stressful situation.

Everyone reacts differently, and your own feelings will change over time. Notice and accept how you feel. Self-care during a stressful situation will help your long-term healing. Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and protect yourself and your loved ones.

## Depression and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary public health measures taken to protect the population from the virus, have caused significant stress for many people. The distress we feel is a normal human response to a severe crisis. As the world settles into a new pace, isolation, loneliness and a feeling of vague dread—all symptoms of depression—are now a part of everyday life for many individuals across the globe. This can be very hard on a person's mental health, and leave them feeling both fearful and hopeless, in the face of this unfamiliar situation. Acknowledging and accepting these feelings can help to prevent this distress from turning into a more significant mental health problem.

Depression is significantly influenced by environmental stress. The unique environmental stressors of the COVID-19 crisis suggest a larger number of people than usual may develop depression. Added to the stress of this crisis, many of us are suffering significant personal losses and grief reactions, which are strong predictors of depression. And because the stressors are ongoing and unpredictable, the risk is even higher.

As well, symptoms of pre-existing conditions such as major depressive disorder (MDD) may also get worse due to the increased stressors and loneliness being experienced.

## Particular groups at risk

**Social isolation:** Those living alone and lacking social opportunities are at risk. Our bodies are not designed to handle social deprivation for long. Loneliness breeds depression.

**Financial difficulties:** Those who experience unemployment, debt, financial losses and financial insecurity are at significant risk for depression due to increased stress and difficult life circumstances.

**Personal conflict:** Families, who must navigate unusual amounts of time together in confined spaces, may experience more conflict, also increasing risk. Divorce may be a potential consequence, which can increase the risk of depression.

**Grief:** Individuals may suffer significant grief over the death of loved ones.

**Front line health care workers:** For those on the front lines, acute experiences of grief, trauma and exhaustion will compound the stress and place them at even greater risk.

## Tips for managing depressive symptoms

Although there is no doubt that stress caused by the COVID 19 crisis can bring on depression, there is no reason that it must. By practicing good self-care, many will be able to either defeat their depressed mood or keep themselves from falling into depression

altogether. Here are some tips for taking care of yourself:

- 1. Acknowledge and express your feelings:** Be attentive to your feelings, emotions and reactions and allow yourself to voice them to someone you trust. Write them down or express them through physical or other types of activity.
- 2. Get moving:** Make use of physical activity to let the stress out and eliminate tension.
- 3. Take care of your body:** Practice healthy living habits like proper nutrition and getting enough sleep. Avoid use of alcohol or other drugs.
- 4. Participate in relaxing activities:** Allow yourself life's little pleasures such as listening to music, taking a warm bath, reading, cuddling with a pet, etc.
- 5. Stay connected:** Remain in contact with people that do you good. If you can't see someone in person, find ways to connect with them. You can still reach out by phone, text, or video call.
- 6. Remember your own strengths and strategies:** Remind yourself of winning strategies you used in the past to get through difficult times. Count on your own strengths.
- 7. Set limits for yourself:** Limit your access to stressors. Refuse tasks that you do not want to do and that are non-essential. Learn to delegate and let others help you (this might be asking your children to do the dishes).
- 8. Build structure into your day:** Create regimens of simple tasks that give structure to the day. For example, start every day with 30 minutes of exercise or stretching, walk the dog, make coffee, and then sit down to begin working from home. Or volunteer for a worthy cause.
- 9. Learn something new:** Sign up for an online class. There are literally thousands of online groups, covering almost every aspect of life, from knitting to astronomy.
- 10. Explore self-management strategies:** Explore self-management strategies like mindfulness, yoga, meditation, art, or exercise. Check out free access to various tools to help build skills to manage how you are feeling:
  - [Calm](#) – Calm is an award-winning app for Sleep, Meditation and Relaxation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they are offering a range of free resources.
  - CMHA NB Webinars – The Canadian Mental Health Association NB is offering free webinars related to coping with stress related to COVID-19 and can be accessed at [www.cmhanb.ca](http://www.cmhanb.ca).
  - [Wellness Together Canada](http://www.Canada.ca/coronavirus) - Government of Canada web portal that provides mental health tools and resources at [www.Canada.ca/coronavirus](http://www.Canada.ca/coronavirus)

## Major Depressive Disorder

Everyone experiences times when they feel sad or down. These moods may be triggered by any number of life stressors (ex. relationship break-down, death of a loved one, loss of job, etc.). However, for some, depression can become an illness, with more severe symptoms and a significant impact on their functioning.

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a common and serious medical illness that can strike anyone. It negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at work and at home.



## Symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder can vary from mild to severe and can include:

- Feeling sad or having a depressed mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite — weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Loss of energy or increased fatigue
- Increase in purposeless physical activity (e.g., hand-wringing or pacing) or slowed movements and speech (actions observable by others)
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide

## Impact of COVID-19 on those who already have depression

**Current illness may get worse:** Those with pre-existing depression may get worse due to the increased stressors and loneliness being experienced during the pandemic. Their existing symptoms may worsen, and they may develop new symptoms. Social isolation may affect them even more than others, as they may tend to ruminate over themes of sadness, sorrow and despair, without someone to help lift them out of this loop. Compared with the general population, they may have more difficulty working from home, have fewer nonwork-related personal contacts outside the home, experience changes in their sleep, and be more likely to increase their use of alcohol. They may also be more likely to perceive public health restrictions as having a negative impact on their mental health; and anticipate a longer period of time for “normal” to return. **People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms.**

**Recovery may be harder:** While the COVID-19 crisis increases the risk for depression, depression will make recovery from the crisis harder across a variety of needs. Depression has an impact on motivation and problem-solving. Therefore, when our economy recovers, those who are depressed will have a harder time pursuing new goals and finding work. When the limits on social interactions are lifted, those who are depressed will have a harder time re-engaging in meaningful social activity and exercising.

## When should I seek help?

In general, overcoming reactions to stress and depression is possible. Still, some unease may persist for weeks or months, and even worsen. The following may be signs that your state of health is deteriorating. These signs may mean that your personal resources are no longer enough to manage your mental health on a daily basis. Seeking help could be beneficial.

### Physical symptoms :

- Major sleep problems
- Pronounced reduced appetite, possibly associated with weight loss
- Low energy and pronounced fatigue or exhaustion

### Psychological and emotional symptoms:

- Negative pervasive thoughts
- Loss of pleasure and interest in activities that you usually enjoy

## Behavioural symptoms

- Difficulty in carrying out daily tasks
- Intense, frequent crying
- Pronounced irritability and aggression, conflict with other members of the household
- Inability to concentrate
- Alcohol, drug and medication abuse

If you feel this applies to you, contact your health care provider or your [local addictions and mental health centre](#).

## How to help others

One of the best things anyone can do for friends, family or neighbors who may be suffering is to reach out. It is important to check in on those you care about, especially those who may be lonely or be more vulnerable to mental health struggles. We are all struggling in our own ways, with the challenge now being how to safely reach out and show we care.

## Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength.

**If you feel that the stress or anxiety you experience as a result of COVID-19 is getting to be too much, there are options available to you:**

**[CHIMO Helpline](#) - Help is just a phone call away: 1-800-667-5005**

**[Hope for Wellness Helpline](#) - The Hope for Wellness Helpline offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous people across Canada: 1-855-242-3310**

**[Kids Help Phone](#) - Text TALK to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868 to chat with a volunteer Crisis Responder 24/7.**

**If you experience stress reactions in response to the COVID-19 outbreak for several days in a row and are unable to carry out normal responsibilities because of them, contact your health care provider or your [local addictions and mental health centre](#).**

