

Tips for helping teenagers deal with the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19)

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is having a major impact on our health and way of life. Prevention United and Monash University recognise the stress that many parents are experiencing at the moment due to changes to their working and family life. That's why, to complement our *Partners in Parenting* program, we have developed this additional resource to help parents dealing with the stress of coronavirus in their own life and their children. Some of the tips are an extension of the strategies contained in *Partners and Parenting* while others are specific to the current situation.

It's important to recognise that some of the activities suggested below may not be feasible or appropriate depending on what the latest government regulations are – so it is important to stay up to date on that information from credible government sources. See [the Australian Government's health alert](#) for the latest updates.

Show your teen that it's possible to continue to do what is important to oneself while practicing healthy behaviors.

Everyone is working hard to manage the virus and the impacts on our lives. Explain to your teen that they too, can continue to do what is important to them while practicing healthy behaviours. Give them a sense of control by explaining what they can do to stay safe, for example:

- Avoid touching their mouth, eyes, and nose, which are places where the germs can enter their body.
- Wash their hands regularly for at least 20 seconds, with soap and water, before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
- Sneeze or cough into tissues (and throw them away) or sneeze or cough into their elbow. These behaviors help keep germs from traveling and making other people sick.
- If unwell, avoid contact with others (stay more than 1.5 metres away from people).

Keep communicating

The coronavirus pandemic is something we've never experienced. It's therefore understandable that we're struggling to get our head around it and adapt to the changes it's created. Stress is a natural reaction to situations that are unfamiliar and unpredictable. It's therefore perfectly understandable to be feeling some stress right now. It's also OK and important that we talk to others about how we're feeling. Teenagers can sometimes bottle things up, or not be sure whether or how to express their worries, so it's particularly important to support them to talk, express their worries, and ask questions.

Find the right time to talk with your teen. This might be when they finish their schoolwork, at dinnertime, or in the car. When they are ready to talk, give them your full attention.

Model calmness

Even though you may be concerned yourself, it is important to use a calm, reassuring tone and keep to the facts. Teens will look to parents to gauge how worried they should be, even though it may seem like they just tune you out!

Take cues from your teen

Some young people might not be worried about coronavirus. But some might be frightened, upset or distressed. They might be worried about the virus itself as well as how it's affecting their lives. Some of them might respond by withdrawing and isolating from friends and events. Tailor your support to the level of comfort that they need.

Find out what your teen knows about the coronavirus (COVID-19)

It's a good idea to start by asking what they know about the virus and whether they have any questions. For example, "I was just watching the news and they were talking about coronavirus. Are your friends talking about that? What are they saying?" Wherever possible, help your teen understand the facts and correct misconceptions. Offer to check out good information from credible sources together with them (e.g., [WHO](#), [Australian Government Health Alert](#)). Having accurate and factual information can help them feel a sense of control.

Ask your teen how they are feeling and listen to what they say.

It might reassure your teen if you share your own feelings and let them know what you are doing to cope with them. Knowing that others feel the same can help make them feel they're not alone.

Encourage your teen to have a routine during school cancellation/closure

Predictability is important during stressful times, so help your teen establish a new routine around social distancing and any school closures. Having a consistent routine can provide a source of certainty about the plans for the day.

Ask them what their plans are. Discuss what they can keep doing, what they may need to change, and what they can start doing that's new. Maintain essential routines such as staying physically active, eating nutritious foods, and staying connected with family and friends through technology. Support your teen to have a balanced range of activities each day. Be sure to encourage and check in with them to help them stay motivated.

Supervise screen use

It is likely that young people will be using screens more often over the coming weeks/months (e.g. phones, tablets, laptops, gaming consoles and the internet). Involve them in setting limits on screen use. Ensure appropriate content filters are active – the Australian Government [eSafety](#) website offers guidance on setting up parental control. Model good use of technology and social media habits yourself.

Constant reading and fact-checking about COVID-19 can keep us in a heightened state of anxiety. It's also important to recognise that some information on social media and other channels is sensationalist or factually incorrect. Be selective with your choice of information and encourage young people to do the same. Follow the government's announcements but otherwise limit the



time your family is exposed to news on COVID-19 to help contain everyone's anxiety. Instead, engage in activities that make you and your child/teen feel positive. Appropriate doses of fun activities and humour can help to alleviate tension.

Help or allow your teens to get creative with how they interact and stay connected with their friends and loved ones

For teens who enjoy spending time with their friends or are close to their grandparents, not being in contact with them for some time can be upsetting. Effective use of technology can keep us connected. Is it possible for your teen to talk to their friends/grandparents on the phone? Perhaps establish a group WhatsApp or FaceTime call? Perhaps they could write letters to each other. Can they post a message or send a text to share something they are grateful for? Find a buddy, or group of buddies, to set daily challenges to keep a healthy habit or start a creative pursuit? Can they do a virtual birthday celebration?

Platforms such as [Google Hangouts](#) and [Zoom](#) allow children to have virtual group hangouts, so there are still ways to remain connected to others to stave off loneliness. It's important to help teenagers maintain their social connections and not become withdrawn or lonely.

Provide reassurance

Young people may be concerned about the impact on their education, their exams, or even their job prospects. Reassure young people that the government and education authorities are working on a plan to prepare for a range of scenarios that may impact on the delivery and assessment of the final exams for secondary school students. It's also important to emphasise to young people that public health measures are temporary and designed to keep us all safe until the crisis passes.

Concerns about stigma and injustices

Stigma hurts everyone by creating fear or anger towards other people. If your teen has expressed concerns about stigma and injustices occurring during the outbreak, make time to listen and understand their concern, or correct their misunderstanding. Explain that coronavirus has nothing to do with how someone looks, where they are from or what language they speak. If they have been called names or bullied at school, they should feel comfortable telling you or an adult whom they trust. Show your teen how we can each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.

Keep an eye out for emotional or behavioural concerns

If you notice your teen is showing regressive behaviours (e.g., displaying behaviours they have previously outgrown, such as whining, thumb sucking, temper tantrums), increasingly withdrawing themselves from the family or events or is engaging with excessive handwashing, make time to talk with them and find out what's happening for them. It might be helpful to seek professional support. Ask your family GP to recommend mental health professionals who have experience working with young people struggling with mood and/or anxiety. Many mental health providers have the capacity to provide services via "telehealth" (i.e., therapy provided by telephone or an online platform) when in-person social contact must be restricted. If your teen already sees someone for mental health support, it will be worthwhile to check in with them.



Some healthcare services that are usually easy to reach may be hard to access during this time, so persist, try a few different options, until you get the support you need.

Keep looking forward

It may not feel like it, but ‘this too shall pass’. It is important to have confidence that things will improve, and to convey this confidence to your teen that people will recover, and things will get back to normal.

Additional resources for adolescents

- [ReachOut Australia: Resources and forum for managing the coronavirus](#)
- [Headspace: How to cope with stress related to Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [UNICEF: 6 strategies for teens facing a new \(temporary\) normal](#)

Additional resources for parents

- [Schooltv Coronavirus: a guide for parents \(video by Dr Michael Carr-Greg\)](#)
- [Raising Children Network Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) guide](#)
- [WHO Myth busters about COVID-19](#)
- [UNICEF How to protect yourself and your children](#)
- [Australian health advice on the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [DSS: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information and support](#)

Sources: [UNICEF Australia](#) | [Raising Children Network](#) | [The Australian Psychological Society](#) | [National Association of School Psychologists](#) | [The Child Mind Institute](#)