



## Student Mental Health and Addictions Newsletter Special Edition April 2020

YRDSB Mental Health services are provided by YRDSB psychology and social work personnel

### Supporting mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

During this time of much uncertainty, change in routine and time away from school, it is natural and expected that students may experience heightened levels of anxiety and worry. This special edition newsletter will focus on how to support student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic by discussing tips, resources and advice from experts in the field.

[School Mental Health Ontario](#) has created a variety of resources for educators, parents and families, and students regarding supporting student mental health during this time.

For educators, this includes topics such as: How can I help with student mental health during the school closures? How do I learn more about student mental health? How do I support student mental health when we are back at school?

For parents and families, topics include: How can I keep my child or teen mentally well during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the signs my child or teen might be struggling with their mental health? How do I support my child with their mental health? How can I access help for my child or teen's mental health?

Students can access topics such as: Why are schools closed? What does the closure mean for me? What can I do to take care of my mental health while I'm not at school? How do I know if I should reach out for help about my mental health? What do I do if I'm worried about a friend?

In addition, School Mental Health Ontario has created [activities](#) for children that connect to mental health. These ideas are based on practices that educators use in the classroom and can be used at home in fun ways. These activities cover the six domains of social-emotional learning skills that are found in the Health and Physical Education Curriculum.

They include:

Managing Stress

Identifying emotions

Staying positive

Nurturing relationships

Knowing yourself

Planning and problem solving.

Check out some more tips from School Mental Health Ontario on building [personal resiliency](#).

Dr. Susan Biali Haas, physician in ambulatory care and educator in mental health and resilience discusses what the best response to COVID-19 would look like, for the average individual. The article highlights the need to focus on the well-being of our collective community rather than focusing solely on an individualist approach. Click here to see the [article in Psychology Today](#), or see below for a summary of what she recommends:

**Focus on what's best for everyone, not just you (because that's what's best for you).** Share resources. If you buy all the hand sanitizer in the store, this may create a situation where others are left with none. Let's work together to protect society.

**Follow the recommended precautions, even if you think it's "overkill".** Some may not have the same robust immune system as others. We are taking these measures to ensure that we are also protecting our most vulnerable co-citizens.

**Take really good care of yourself, both physically and mentally.** Get enough sleep. Exercise (at home). Eat well. Stay hydrated. Stay informed but if it is causing you stress to read or watch the news, take a break or limit your exposure. The increased fear and worry can release the stress hormone cortisol which can interfere with proper sleep.

**Include helping others as part of your COVID-19 game plan.** It is natural to think of protecting yourself and your family. However, consider how you can help other in the community during the crisis as well, while still following the health guidelines.

Dr. Rachel Mitchell is a child and adolescent psychiatrist at The Centre for Youth Bipolar Disorder at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and assistant professor at the University of Toronto. Together with Dr. Gili Adler, child and adolescent psychiatrist, head of the Child Anxiety Clinic at Michael Garron Hospital and assistant professor at the University of Toronto, they have compiled a list of striking a balance when talking to children about COVID-19. Click [here](#) to see the article in the Globe and Mail, or see below for a summary of what they recommend:

**Manage your own anxiety.** Demonstrating to a child that you can cope with worry is just as helpful as staying calm in the first place because it can help build resilience and let them know it's okay to be worried.

**Meet your child right where they're at.** Know your facts, be age-appropriate, use familiar language and administer only at a "dose" they can manage.

**Always be truthful.** Avoiding the truth perpetuates anxiety, whereas facing the truth and coping decreases it. Picking and choosing what information you give is a parent's/guardian's prerogative).

**Provide a sense of control.** Children (like adults) like to feel in control. Emphasize what children can do to mitigate risk (hand washing, not touching their face, etc.)

**When to seek professional help.** Anxiety is normal and can be adaptive. However when it impedes daily functioning (eating, sleeping, communicating with others), it could signify that it's time to seek professional help. The family doctor is a good place to start. Many physicians are offering virtual appointments during this pandemic.

**Make the best of the new normal.** Life is going to be different for a while. Take this time to create new routines and new memories. And try to do what kids love best – have fun!

[Toronto4kids.com](https://toronto4kids.com) published an article on How to Deal with Tween and Teen Anxiety during COVID-19. Click the link to see the article or see below for a summary of the tips that they suggest:

**Ask Questions and get the facts.** Check in with your teen/tween and ask what questions they have. Acknowledge and don't dismiss their fears. Choose a time for discussion that works for the family and avoid tough topics right before bed.

**Limit social media and the news.** Teens/tweens should be careful about where they are getting their information and only use sources that are credible and reliable. Helping them understand the news and how to separate fact from fiction is the job of the adult.

**Create a routine.** Establishing a daily routine gives children a sense of personal structure that is vital for managing emotional stress during a challenging time.

**Adult colouring books.** Colouring generates wellness, quietness and also stimulates brain areas related to motor skills, the senses and creativity.

**[Kids Help Phone.](#)** Teens can have trouble opening up to the adults around them. This service is a national support service that offers professional counselling, information and referrals, in both English and French. The website also has articles and activities for students regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and coping.

**Journal.** Journaling can help kids get worried thoughts and feelings out of their head and body. Start by having them write for a few minutes to let their emotions flow out.

**Exercise and keep fit.** Releasing endorphins (the chemicals produced by the body to relieve stress) is an effective way to fight stress and anxiety. Especially at this time, it is crucial for people to keep some kind of fitness regimen. Whether it be walking outside, or doing home workouts, try to exercise daily.

**Get Fresh Air.** Even stepping into the backyard for some fresh air can be helpful to clear the mind and reduce anxiety.

**Have teens/tweens focus on what they can control.** There is much uncertainty during this time, however everyone can control the washing of hands, practicing social distancing, and following the government guidelines during this pandemic. All members of society (including kids, tweens and teens), are part of the solution to “flatten the curve”.

**Set aside quiet time.** Even ten minutes a day of guided breathing, relaxation or visualization can help with better sleep and a feeling of calm.

**Remind them that things will get better.** Although it is impossible to predict the future, it is important to remind ourselves and the children around us that there have been other societal crisis and over time, with the help of many professionals, that they have been resolved.

Continue to check out the [YRDSB Novel Coronavirus](#) page for updated information as well as the Twitter account @YRDSB

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