

Tips to Support Caregiver Mental Health

Dear TDSB families,

Here are some tips for helping you and your family get through this difficult time. Having a special needs child means that on a typical day, you are probably in survival mode, constantly problem solving and exhausted. During the pandemic, you are under even more stress and are having to cope with even more challenges. The following suggestions aren't meant to add to your workload. Take your time to consider each of them and pick one thing that you think might help-even just a little bit. Most of all, know that we are all in this together and we want to support you in any way we can.

- 1) Stay informed about COVID-19 but limit how much news you watch (and make sure the sources are reliable).** Try not to watch TV or scroll through social media right before bedtime.

Reliable sources:

- Government of Canada COVID-19 information:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>
- Ontario Government COVID-19 information:
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus>
- City of Toronto COVID-19 information:
<https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19>

- 2) Focus on what you can control.** There is so much uncertainty in the world right now and it can be overwhelming. Decide what things in your life you *can* control and let them be your focus. In terms of health and wellbeing, washing your hands and physical distancing are things you can do to ensure your safety and that of your family. With regard to other aspects of your life, it might be helpful to make a list, such as what foods you are eating, how much news you are watching or how many friends you are reaching out to and then set small, realistic goals for yourself.

- 3) **Take care of yourself.** It's a natural instinct for parents and caregivers to focus on the needs of others. However, if you don't take proper care of yourself, you may experience additional stress and burnout that might interfere with your ability to care for others. If possible, eat regular healthy meals, drink lots of water, find opportunities for movement, and try to maintain a regular sleep pattern to ensure you have the energy and resources to get through the day. Try to limit use of alcohol and other substances. See the link below:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/taking-care-mental-health.html>

- 4) **Take a break-even a small one.** Parents of special needs children don't get much of a break on a normal day, never mind during a pandemic. We know many of you are constantly busy and exhausted. Some of you are trying to balance work and home life while others of you are at home full time without any other support. It's not realistic for you to take a few hours off but you might be able to take a few minutes and what you do with those few minutes is important. Focus on activities that can help you recharge, such as deep breathing, speaking to a friend or sitting near a sunny window. If another adult or older child lives with you, try to spell each other off by taking short shifts to care for your child and then each of you taking a short break.

Ideas for movement breaks using videos:

<http://www.varietylvillage.ca/about-us/restrictions-closures/covid-19-updates>

- 5) **Be kind – to yourself and to others.** It can be stressful to be with your family day after day without going outside much or at all. It is normal to feel frustrated or irritable toward others but keep in mind that we are all struggling with the same situation and want our lives to go back to the way they were. Try not to take things personally if a family member isn't acting their best. Instead of becoming angry, try to have empathy. Many children are confused, frustrated and scared by the huge change in routine and may not have a better way of expressing these feelings. Most of all **be kind to yourself**. You are doing the best you can. It's normal to feel stressed, sad, nervous or angry. None of us have experienced this situation before. Think about all of your strengths and how much you've had to adapt and problem solve since having children. **Remember-you're track record for getting through difficult days is 100%!**

- **Relaxation/Mindfulness Apps and Programs**
- [BounceBack](#)
- [Mindfulness Mondays](#)
- [Starling](#)
- [Mindful](#)
- [Headspace](#)
- [Balance](#)
- [Calm](#)
- [Talk Space](#)
- **Virtual Forest Therapy Walks:** Guided virtual walks to connect to nature.
- **Insight Timer:** A free app targeting anxiety and stress relief.
- **Calm:** Free 10-minute meditations live streamed on Mondays and Fridays on Facebook and Youtube. An app is also available.
- **Smiling Mind:** A free body scanning and mindfulness app for children and adults.

6) **Focus on gratitude.** Gratitude? During a pandemic? Before you stop reading, we are not saying that you should be grateful for the current situation. It is horrible and scary. However, research tells us that our thoughts have a big impact on our mood. If we spend a minute or two each day focusing on 2 to 3 things that we're grateful for, it can improve the way we feel. Find something small to be grateful for (e.g., chocolate ice cream, your child sleeping in 10 minutes later than usual, speaking with a friend by phone) and write them down. There are also free apps you can download to keep track. If you make a habit of doing this, you will probably find your mood lifting a bit. Free gratitude apps include Bold: CBT journal and Gratitude Diary.

7) **Keep a schedule.** Maintaining a schedule can be challenging at the best of times. We are not suggesting a strict routine during this stressful time. However, adults and children benefit from some predictability during their day. Even though the family sleep cycle might have shifted, try to establish a new "normal" with regular sleep and wake up times and regular meals. Perhaps adding in one or two other activities (e.g., a walk, a chore, or video call with friends) could be a goal for the day. However, remember these are just goals, and not rules, so try your best, but be forgiving if it doesn't work out. Remember, you can always try again tomorrow!

Tips for how to improve your sleep hygiene:

<https://www.businessinsider.com/get-a-good-nights-rest-sleep-expert-fall-asleep-quicker-tips-health-science-2018-1>

How to create a visual schedule:

<https://www.erinoakkids.ca/ErinoakKids/files/ca/caca1f61-bb42-49cc-8a66-313dff-dca388.pdf>

- 8) Stay connected.** We are all in this together and staying in touch with family and friends and maintaining connections with your social network, including school and/or religious community, can help. Find opportunities to spend time with the people in your home, to talk, share a cuddle, play a game, enjoy a meal, etc. In order to maintain connections with people outside of the home, emails, texting, phone calls and video conferencing are some of the ways that you can maintain important relationships and receive emotional support from friends, family, and trusted others.

How to stay connected:

<https://globalnews.ca/video/6783201/tech-expert-tips-on-staying-connected-during-covid-19>

Play board games online for free (<https://en.boardgamearena.com/join>)

- 9) Make a plan.** It's important to think ahead and make a plan if you or your child gets sick. Collect information about your child's health (health number, names and numbers of doctors, names and dosages of medications) and keep them in a safe place (in a file or on your phone). If you are worried about losing your job or cannot pay your bills, please look at the resources below. Having information and making an emergency plan will help bring down your stress level and allow you to concentrate on your day.

Documents to help people with intellectual disability and their families prepare for health care visits: <https://ddprimarycare.surreyplace.ca/tools-2/general-health/about-my-health>

Financial resources and government benefits information:

<http://www.planningnetwork.ca/en-ca/resources/28358/COVID-19-FAQ>

<https://t.co/jLgYqIXyGG?amp=1> (government benefits written in plain language).

- 10) Managing emotions and knowing when to seek out help.** It is important to recognize that feelings of stress, anger, and anxiety are all normal responses to the current situation. That being said, there are things you can do to help reduce feelings of distress. In addition to the mindfulness/relaxation apps provided above, here are some additional mental health resources:

- [Mental Wellness Holland Bloorview](#)
- [Mental Health and the COVID-19 via CAMH \(Centre for Addiction and Mental Health\)](#)
- [Take Care for Your Coronavirus Anxiety](#)
- [Tolerance for Uncertainty: A COVID-19 Workbook](#)
- **Online Talk Therapy**
 - [Stella's Place](#) - Mental Health Supports through phone, video or Bean Bag Chat app
 - [Tangerine Telephone Counselling](#): 45-minute telephone-based brief consultations on Wednesdays
 - [COVID19 Therapists](#) - Facilitating **free** mental health services for Ontario COVID-19 healthcare providers
 - [Big White Wall](#) - is a **free**, online mental health and wellbeing service that helps people who are dealing with everyday stressors or major life events. Available 24/7/365
 - [7 Cups](#) connects you to caring listeners for **free** emotional support 24/7; or be a listener for others
- **Additional Mental Health Supports**
 - [Assaulted Women's Health Line](#): A 24-hr crisis counselling line for women in crisis or domestic situations. Contact Number: 1-866-863-0511.
 - [Distress Centres of Greater Toronto](#): A 24-hour crisis and distress line, which offers emotional support, crisis intervention, suicide prevention and linkage to emergency help if necessary. Contact Number: 416-408-HELP (4357).
 - [Telehealth Ontario](#): Nurses will provide answers to health-related questions with the appropriate care via telephone, or will connect you to an appropriate health professional. Contact Number: 1-866-797-0000.
 - [The 519's Emotional Self Care Resources](#): Resource guides for LGBTQ2S communities in different languages.

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis please go to your nearest hospital emergency department.