

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety for Families & Professionals Supporting People with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be stressful for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children.

Here is information about how to cope with mental health and stress and anxiety during this time.

What should I do if a person I support has an existing mental health condition?

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment plans during an emergency and monitor for any new symptoms. Additional information can be found at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website, <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>.

What are warning signs and risk factors that a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities may be experiencing emotional stress or anxiety?

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) impacted by disaster are faced with difficult challenges. Many people with IDD may already struggle to maintain social connections and meaningful activities. Their closest relationships can often be paid staff. There may be a lack of family involvement. They may have challenges with social interaction, especially nuanced skills like small talk and flirting and had the experience of marginalization, prejudice, and stigma. When asked to further limit contact with the public to reduce exposure to the COVID-19, they may experience increased loneliness and isolation. Additionally, many people with IDD are reliant on help from family, friends or paid caregivers. Fear of not having access to this care if the caregiver becomes sick can cause stress and anxiety.

Warnings signs of stress in people with IDD may include:

- Aggression
- Irritability
- Self-injury
- No longer participates in favorite activities
- Reinforcements no longer effective
- Increase in activity refusal
- Food-seeking
- Meal refusals
- Disruptive behavior
- Social isolation
- Need for frequent breaks
- Feeling guilty, helpless, or hopeless

People with IDD most at risk of experiencing severe emotional stress or anxiety include those with a history of:

- Exposure to other traumas, including severe accidents, abuse, and/or assault
- Chronic medical illness or psychological disorders
- Chronic poverty, homelessness, or discrimination
- Those who lost a loved one or friend involved in a disaster
- Those who lack economic stability and/or knowledge of the English language
- Those that may lack mobility or independence
- Those who rely upon others for daily assistance

What can I do to support people with IDD do to reduce emotional stress and anxiety?

You can encourage and support them to:

- ✓ Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19
- ✓ Only consult legitimate sources for information about COVID-19
- ✓ Engage in activities that bring comfort or joy
- ✓ Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate
- ✓ Eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs
- ✓ Make time to unwind and remember that strong feelings will fade
- ✓ Share their concerns and how they are feeling with you, a friend or family member

Where can I find additional resources?

Visit the CDC page on Mental Health and Coping with COVID-19:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/coping.html>

Visit the CDC page on Taking Care of Your Emotional Help:

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

Visit SAMHSA's page on Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors>

Visit the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress page on Coronavirus and Emerging Infectious Disease Outbreaks Response:

<https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response>

Visit the CDC page on strategies to help children cope with a disaster:

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html>

SAMHSA's page on Coping with Stress during Infectious Disease Outbreaks:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4885.pdf>

Visit SAMHSA's page on Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips for social distancing, quarantine, and isolation during an infectious disease outbreak

<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4894.pdf>

Visit SAMHSA's page on Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers during Infectious Disease Outbreaks

<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4886.pdf>

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. This toll-free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories: **1-800-985-5990**