

Guidance:

# Psychosocial Wellbeing and Support During

# COVID-19



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION

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## Challenge: Our New Reality

The Covid-19 outbreak has resulted in family members, old and young, experiencing stress, fear, worry and anxiety as a result of disrupted schedules, isolation at home, illness of family members, care for elderly, remote working, supporting the learning and development of children at home, etc. There is a great deal of uncertainty and it can be natural to fear the unknown. Human beings naturally crave social connections and now these are more difficult to maintain in the manner they were previously.

### **COMMON REACTIONS DURING A PANDEMIC**

There are many physical and emotional reactions that are common during this type of situation. Here are some things people commonly experience during periods of uncertainty, pressure and high stress.

- Feeling more anxious, worried, and tense than normal.
- Feeling distracted, nervous, and unable to focus on anything very well, or for very long.
- Finding yourself thinking about COVID-19 all the time.
- Wanting to research and learn everything you can about COVID-19 and what may unfold.
- A general sense of high energy or being alert and in “overdrive”. Periods of high energy can be followed with sudden fatigue and feeling overwhelmed or helpless.
- Difficulty sleeping well.
- Isolating or withdrawing from others, and/or fear of going to public spaces.
- Craving more unhealthy food and dangerous things to cope with stress and tension (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes).

# Recommendations: Support to Individuals and Families

It is important to note that most people are resilient and will bounce back from this difficult situation. With some social supports and exercises, most people will be able to relieve stress, anxiety and cope.

We have put together tips, resources and activities from reliable sources for your considerations that we hope will help you and your families to have a better understanding of how to reduce stress, anxiety and remain hopeful in an unsettled world. You may not be able to do all that is included in this guidance note. That's ok. Do the best you can.

## GENERAL TIPS TO STAY RESILIENT

These are general tips that are relevant to all persons no matter their age.

- 1. Have a routine:** We know how important routine is. When many people are working from home or told to stay at home, it might feel like we don't need it. But it's much better for everyone's well-being to try to keep a routine going, as much as possible. It is also important to set it up with all members of the family, including children so all members can own and feel a sense of control over it.
- 2. Maintain community and social connections:** Social connections are critical for human beings' well-being, but this can be difficult with "Lockdowns", "Curfews" and "Stay-at-Home" orders. Talk to people you trust. Contact your friends and family through email, phone calls and other available platforms. Allow children to use phone calls or other methods to connect with friends (this is especially important for tweens and teens). Elderly family members who are separated from other family members may be at greater risk of isolation and loneliness. Try your best to call them and connect to them regularly.
- 3. Maintain a healthy lifestyle:** Depending on the situation in your country, as long as you are permitted to spend time outdoors and can maintain a safe physical distance from others, fresh air and sunshine can clear the mind and help you de-stress and relax. If you are not permitted and/or unable to leave your home, open doors and windows to let the fresh air inside. Take at least 30 minutes a day to get some sort of exercise (even if in your home). It allows for a complete break from electronics, the news, and the pressures of the day, de-stress, gain a renewed positive spirit, and feel accomplished for the day. Eat well and get enough sleep. Engage in fun activities that can allow for exercising while having fun.
- 4. Stop and Breathe:** Controlled breathing has been used for millennia to calm the mind. Pay attention to your breathing and come back to it as many times you can. When you notice that thoughts pop up in your mind, come back to your breathing – or feel the floor beneath your feet.
- 5. Practice gratitude:** When people are going through hard times, one thing that can help them feel better is learning to be grateful for what they have rather than fixating on what they do not have. So even though it might be a challenge right now, write down some of the things you're grateful for, or if you have little kids and it's easier, try talking about and listing aloud things that make you happy and that you're thankful for. You can make this part of your family dinner every day when each member of the family can say what they are grateful for. These moments can help remind us to celebrate, love, and enjoy one another during this difficult time.
- 6. Be kind to yourself:** It is difficult time so be kind to yourself. Accept it when you are upset, it is normal. Feel it with your heart. Don't get upset if things are not going perfectly in your household or with your work. It is much more valuable for all of us to use this time to reflect on the important things and try to keep a sense of everyone is in this together.

7. **Help others in need:** Being of service has strong and immediate mental health benefits. And feeling a sense of purpose helps people to recover from negative events and build resilience. For people who are lucky enough to be healthy right now and not caring for a loved one who's sick, finding ways to help others in this kind of crisis is probably very good for your own well-being. And with physical distancing please remember use phone calls, emails or even checking on your neighbor through your balconies or windows if possible.
8. **Seek help if overwhelmed:** It is normal to feel sad, distressed, worried, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. But if you feel overwhelmed, reach out by phone or email to someone you trust, a health worker, social worker, similar professional, or another trusted person in your community (e.g., religious leader or community elder). Find out who to contact and seek help for physical and emotional mental health and psychosocial needs, if required. Many organizations in various part of the world have already set up hotlines. Find out their numbers. For example, AKDN agencies have set up hotlines in some countries.
9. **Get the facts right:** Use credible sources to get information about COVID-19, such as the World Health Organization's website or, a local or state public health agency. Please check the public awareness packages that AKDN has developed and shared.
10. **Decrease media time:** There is a lot of upsetting and distressing media coverage these days. And for your wellbeing and the wellbeing of your family, decrease the time spend watching or listening to upsetting media coverage. Try to only access news once or twice a day.

## TIPS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN

1. **Be calm and proactive:** Parents and caregivers should - as much as possible - have a calm, proactive conversation with their children about the coronavirus disease, and the important role children can play in keeping themselves healthy. Let your children know that it is possible that you, your children or family members might start to feel symptoms at some point, and that they do not need to feel frightened. Some of the symptoms of COVID-19 can be treated. But be honest with your children that in some cases, people will be hospitalized and like with other diseases can result in a death.
2. **Let the child feel their emotions:** Children can get upset and disappointed because they can't go to school, see sports matches or play with friends. It's okay for them to be sad. As a caregiver, you can support, expect and normalize that they are very sad and very frustrated about the losses they are mourning. Acknowledging their emotions without judgement and with care and love is important. Play is a great way for children to process their emotions. Use play to help them. Remember, there are no "bad" emotions—it's ok for them to feel whatever they feel, and your job is to help them use strategies to cope.
3. **Check in with your child about what they are hearing:** There is a lot of misinformation circulating about the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Listen to your child and find out what he/she is hearing and what they think is true. It's not enough to just tell your child that what he/she heard is inaccurate but focus on what your child already knows and start from there to get them on the right track. If they have questions you can't answer, instead of guessing, use it as an opportunity to explore the answers together. Use trusted and reliable sources.
4. **Check in with your child about how they are feeling:** Many children are facing bullying and abuse at school, in the neighborhood or online around the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). It's important to check that your children are neither experiencing nor contributing to bullying. Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe. Bullying is always wrong, and we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other. It's important your children know that you and your family are always there for them to support and they should feel comfortable to talk to you. **Create welcome distractions:** It's important to balance talking about feelings with finding distractions and allow distractions when children need relief from being very upset. Family games or cooking meals together are good distracters.

5. **Help your child to be responsible:** It is important to explain to your children that we can protect each other by being responsible. By following the recommendations (hand washing, covering face when coughing or sneezing etc and staying at home) we can help to reduce the infection. We can all be pro-active.
6. **Monitor your own behavior:** Parents and caregivers should try to manage their stress and anxiety on their own and not to share their fears with their children. Children rely on their parents and caregivers to provide a sense of safety and security and they take emotional cues from adults.

## Recommendations: Support to Programmes

We are recommending the following actions and platforms for considerations by AKF country units and the COVID 19 National Task Force if they are interested to use and disseminate the guidance and the recommended resources as part of their AKDN COVID-19 response plans:

- **Align with Government:** If your country's Ministry of Health has issued guidance or support for mental health and psycho-social well-being, follow that guidance.
- **Translate:** Adapt and translate this document to ensure that language is culturally and contextually appropriate and relevant. Some of the online resources might require translation or you might need to develop a similar type of video in the local language.
- **Context Matters:** Review the exercises in the annexes for their contextual relevance and only select the ones that are contextually relevant and appropriate for your context. Include any other additional tips and/or activities that contextually relevant to your context.
- **Important Numbers:** Identify and include any available support hotlines numbers for COVID19 information and prevention, mental health, domestic violence, etc and include them as part of your package of support.
- **Disseminate in your context:** Consider conducting webinars that can be recorded to disseminate the package especially in the language that is mostly used in your context. The recorded webinar can be distributed via WhatsApp, Facebook or any other media.
- **Use Radio and TV:** If internet is not reliable in your country, please make use of local radio or TV stations to deliver these messages.
- **Use Existing Networks:** Partnering with the governments in disseminating these resources via radio and/or TV can also be a good way to show the government of our commitment on responding to the COVID19.

## ANNEX 1:

# Offline Activity Ideas

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- 1. Family Reflection Exercise 1:** As a family (including children) take turns talking about personal needs during this time. Then discuss as a family how you can help each other with those personal needs. Try what the family discussed over a week and reflect again at the end of the week.
- 2. Family Reflection Exercise 2:** As a family (including children) talk about “What is one personal goal I hope to complete this next year? In what ways could others in my family help my efforts?” This helps us focus on the positive opportunities ahead rather than dwell on what we do not have or are restricted from having at the present.
- 3. Family Gratitude Activity:** In the next week, choose one thing each day that you could secretly do, as a positive surprise, for another person in the family—without being discovered immediately and without expecting any gesture of gratitude; simply wait for a reaction to your kindness. This is a practical step for addressing positive mental health.
- 4. Family Appreciation Activity:** Make an “I appreciate you card” with text and a hand-drawn picture to a family relative that does not live with you. The occasion is not for a holiday or birthday; rather “just thinking of you and wanted you to know” moment. If this is possible to draw and then send via a WhatsApp photo, text message or e-mail; it can really help promote positive mental health for some relatives who may be alone and disconnected at this time.
- 5. Family Memory Sharing Activity:** Ask your grandparents, aunts, uncles and parents to describe what they remember about growing up when they were the same age as the child (their family, their friends, their favorite routines, and school). This recall of positive memories helps to strengthen mental health for adults and children in imagining life in another time.
- 6. Family Drawing Activity:** Draw a picture of everyone in your family, including pets, with each person doing something they love to do. Keep these family portraits in a special place as it helps understand everyone’s mental picture of the positive roles of their family members in their own lives. You can do this for other groups as well such as friends at school, teachers, neighbors and/or other community groups.
- 7. Family Journal Activity:** Have kids and adults keep a Journal or Sketchbook where they can express their emotions through writing or drawing.
- 8. Family Feelings Discussion:** Use the Feeling Wheel to discuss as a family how each person is feeling. Be open and listen and accept that feelings will change every day. This can be done every day or every week.

**9. Muscle Relaxation Exercise:** The deep muscle relaxation technique asks each person to take 5 minutes to systematically mentally move from the head to the toes in engaging in a 'tense-relax' sequence for each muscle group. It is best to do so while lying down on a bed or the floor. For each muscle group, simply tense it for 5 seconds and then release it before moving onto the next muscle group. Have family members try to mentally move throughout their body, tensing and relaxing each muscle group as they go from top to bottom. Some examples are below:

- For the forehead, one should lift the eyebrows as if to touch the hairline - then relax;
- For the eyes, squint tightly—then relax;
- For the mouth, give an exaggerated smile as if touching the corners of the mouth and touching the ears - then relax;
- For the jaw, clench your teeth - then relax; jut the jaw forward - then relax.

Move through each muscle in the same way from your heads to your toes. Soft instrumental music will enhance the relaxation experience. Repeat as many times as you wish; by focusing on your muscle groups it also allows your mind to be cleared of random thoughts for the short exercise and overall helps the relaxed state of your body's muscles.

## 10. Exercise to Reduce Triggers

Many people experience very stressful situations which are trapped in a part of the brain that hosts memories associated with extreme danger. This can be cause triggers that result in pain, depression, deep sorrow and even insomnia. You can reduce these triggers by stimulating both the left and right parts of the brain when the traumatic memory is present. This 5-minute process can help relocate the memory of the traumatic event to one's "regular" memory and reduce (or even eliminate) the trigger of the high-alert danger-related memory.

The process involves three elements:

- First, ask the person who has the difficult memory to sit on a chair while someone taps their shoulders from behind in one second intervals from one shoulder to the other (right and then left side).
- Second, as this bilateral stimulation occurs on the right and left shoulders, the person is asked to think of the stressful experience and/or memory.
- Third, the person who is tapping the shoulders, verbally speaks of *positive results* of the effects of the stressful experience such as the courage shown by reporting the experience or allowing others to be helpful (rescue workers, police, other adults).

These three steps should then be followed by a 15-minute period of silence. No inquiry is made. No interpretation is given. Let the experience of the bilateral stimulation sit. This process can be repeated up to three times, but not after 3 pm. This pause allows the stimulation to dissipate. This therapeutic tapping has been found to be effective. Events and stress can begin to then be recalled without the associated elevated anxiousness over time and help provide an easy-to-do physical intervention to help with mental health.

## 11. Recite poetry, read

## 12. Make time for your spiritual devotion

## ANNEX 2: Online Resources and Activity Ideas

### SAMPLE OF RESOURCES, EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

1. **Save the Children** – Stress Busters - Relaxation Activities to Do at Home with Kids  
<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/usa/reports/emergency-response/stress-busters-from-our-heart-program.pdf>
2. **No Limit Generation short videos and exercises** – See Specifically Energizing and Empowering exercises and Calming Exercises (in English)  
<https://www.nolimitgen.org/emotional-wellbeing-playlist>
3. **Yoga for Kids** – There are many videos online about Yoga for kid. Here is one video:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=50&v=vMMRb10LtGM&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=50&v=vMMRb10LtGM&feature=emb_logo)
4. **Calming breathing techniques and mindfulness activities to reduce stress**  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tania-dasilva/child-stress-management\\_b\\_9595378.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tania-dasilva/child-stress-management_b_9595378.html)
5. **Guided Imagery**  
Johns Hopkins Hospital - Guided Imagery for 6-12 year olds  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1-0Jjw\\_IQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1-0Jjw_IQ)
6. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**  
<https://www.mottchildren.org/health-library/ta4146>

### SAMPLE OF RESOURCES, EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES FOR ADULTS

1. **Save the Children** – 5 TIPS YOU CAN TRUST: Self-Care and Coping with Stress for Adults
2. **Save the Children** – 5 Tips for Grandparents on How to Stay Connected with Their Grandkids, Despite Social Distancing  
<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/emergency-response/coronavirus-outbreak/resources/social-distancing-tips-grandparents-grandchildren>
3. **Guided Imagery** - John's Hopkins Hospital  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35ch88kmlls>
4. **Keep a Journal or Sketchbook where an adult can express their emotions through writing or drawing**
5. **Meditation** - Meditation reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, and even increase the volume of certain areas of the brain. But if meditation isn't for you, just breathing (not always possible for those who are affected by the virus) slowly might be helpful. There are many online videos that teach meditation. Here is one example that is 5 minutes.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CozPpadMho>