

Coping with Stress and Worry during COVID-19: Information for People with Congenital Heart Disease and their Families

Many people are feeling stressed and worried about the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This is natural. These feelings can be even stronger for people with congenital heart disease (CHD) and their family members. When we don't know much about something, like this virus, we can feel unsafe. But, remember, people with CHD and their families have been through difficult times before and have already learned some ways to handle stress that can be helpful now.

The Cardiac Neurodevelopmental Outcome Collaborative (CNOC) put together this information to help people with CHD and their family members handle stress and worry that you may have about COVID-19. Remember, we all handle challenging situations differently, and it's important to do what feels right to you.

- 1) **Take breaks from news and social media.** News about COVID-19 is available day and night on the news and social media. You may feel like you need to keep watching, reading or listening to these updates to stay on top of what is happening. But if you spend too much time on COVID-19 updates, you can get even more worried and stressed. Instead, think about checking the news and social media for only a short time a couple of times a day. That way you still know what the federal/state public health and safety experts are suggesting. We recommend not getting updates in the hour before you plan to go to sleep.
- 2) **Take care of your body.** It is always important to take care of your body, but this is especially important during times of stress. Try to get to sleep early and eat healthy meals. Walk outdoors when it's less crowded outside or find free exercise videos online. The body and mind are connected, and taking care of your body will help you handle stress and worry.
- 3) **Deep breathing and mindfulness exercises can help.** Just breathing slowly and deeply for a few moments can help you relax. You can do this as many times as you need to during the day. You can learn about other relaxing exercises using apps on your phone or on the Internet. Many only take a few minutes to do. Some apps have free breathing, mindfulness, and guided meditation exercises (<https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>, <https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath>). Write down other things you like to do that relax you and try to do at least one of these every day.
- 4) **Try to plan out your day and make a list of goals** that you can finish each day. These goals can be for your work, family, home, or hobbies. Even if you are stuck at home, try to maintain your morning and evening habits (meals, showering, getting dressed, etc). If you have a plan and goals you can finish each day, you will feel more on top of things during this hard time.
- 5) **Connect with people who are kind and caring** using your phone, tablet or computer. You might enjoy connecting with other people affected by CHD (patients, parents, etc.) because they have had experiences like yours. Social media connections can help you feel less alone. But remember that people on social media may be scared too and may talk about the worst

possible situation. If you start getting more worried or scared by what people are saying, then you may want to stop for a while so you don't get more upset.

- 6) Talk to a mental health professional for help.** You may be able to speak to a mental health professional (psychologist, social worker, therapist) using online video meetings, without having to leave the house. This is called telehealth. If you feel like your sadness or worries are making it hard for you to get through your day, speaking to a mental health professional might help you. (For example, you might feel really scared often or cry a lot. You could have thoughts or pictures in your head that don't go away or find it hard to take care of yourself, others or your work tasks. You could have trouble sleeping or not feeling hungry like you used to.) To find a mental health professional, contact your insurance company for a list of mental health clinics that take your insurance. Call the clinics to find out if they provide therapy using telehealth. You can also call your primary care doctor or your cardiologist or heart doctor's office for suggestions of where to call. Many hospitals have social workers and psychologists on staff who may be available for telehealth or may be able to help you locate someone who provides telehealth services.

The links below have information on how to deal with COVID-19 related worry and stress:

- CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
- SAMHSA: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Taking-Care-of-Your-Behavioral-Health-During-an-Infectious-Disease-Outbreak/sma14-4894>
- American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/social-distancing>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19>