

The COVID-19 pandemic has created ongoing sources of anxiety and depression, including fear of infection, isolation from social supports, loss of income, stigma, and feelings of helplessness. Any further waves are likely to exacerbate these feelings.

Family physicians can help patients be proactive and plan ahead for identifying and managing mental health issues.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak can include:

- Fear and worry about health
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Worsening of mental health conditions
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.

Patients who have had to self-isolate may feel sadness, anger, or frustration if people fear coming into contact with them. People may also feel guilt about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties during quarantine.

TACKLING STIGMA

The stigma associated with mental health problems may cause reluctance to seek support.

Be mindful of the impact of stigmas arising from COVID-19. There has been a rise in verbal and physical attacks on Asian people in B.C. and globally, and stigmatized people may be treated differently in schools, workplaces and in the health care system.

People who have or think they might have COVID-19 may feel guilty or ashamed, leading them to isolate further and avoid treatment or testing.

People who are affected by COVID-19 should be reminded that they have not done anything wrong and are deserving of care and compassion.

Do not refer to people with the disease as “COVID-19 cases”, “victims”, or “the diseased.” Instead, use terms like “people who have COVID-19”, “people who are being treated for COVID-19”, or “people who are recovering from COVID-19.”

WAYS TO SUPPORT PATIENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

- Give accurate, clear information about the COVID-19 risk. Correct misinformation. Resources for patients can be found at www.bccfp.bc.ca/covid-19
- Acknowledge your patient's stress and help normalize it (“I see that you're stressed, and that's understandable. Many people are feeling this way right now.”)
- Inform patients of techniques for relieving anxiety, such as box breathing, exercising, mindfulness techniques, or engaging in hobbies. Additional forms of treatment, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, can be effective.
- Encourage patients to develop preparedness plans, continue preventive measures and maintain a healthy lifestyle in order to gain a sense of control.
- Share positive stories of people who have recovered from COVID-19.
- Advise limiting intake of news and social media.
- Refer patients to resources to seek further help if necessary—see www.bccfp.bc.ca/covid-19
- If a patient is experiencing severe emotional distress or has a diagnosable mental illness, refer for specialized mental health care.

If an in-person appointment is needed, reassure patients about measures your practice is taking to protect them.

ADDRESS YOUR OWN WELL-BEING

Responding to COVID-19 can take an emotional toll on you. Monitor any impact on your own mental health and seek care when needed.

Access the physician health program 24-hour help line at **1-800-663-6729**.

We provide resources for managing your resilience and wellness at www.bccfp.bc.ca/resiliency-and-wellness/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BCCFP COVID-19 Resources: www.bccfp.bc.ca/covid-19

HealthLinkBC: www.healthlinkbc.ca/mental-health-covid-19

SOURCES

www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/managing-mental-health-during-covid-19
www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/quarantine-and-isolation
www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Caring_for_Patients_Mental_WellBeing_during_Coronavirus.pdf
www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID19ForProviders032020.pdf
www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrs