

BACK TO SCHOOL 2020

COPING DURING COVID



OUTREACH TOOLKIT

MHIA
Mental Health America
B4Stage4

 /mentalhealthamerica
 @mentalhealtham
 @mentalhealthamerica
 /mentalhealtham
 /mentalhealthamerica
www.mhanational.org

This campaign is supported by contributions from Janssen: Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson and Otsuka America Pharmaceutical, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for downloading Mental Health America's 2020 Back to School Toolkit.

This school year is bringing on challenges like no other. As a result of the pandemic, schools throughout the country are wrestling with at-home learning, traditional in-school learning, or a hybrid of the two.

And everyone is wrestling with worry and uncertainty.

At MHA, we have been monitoring the effects of the pandemic. Here are some things we have learned:

- Young people are experiencing more anxiety and depression related to the pandemic than any other age group.
- Students of color are at particular risk, both because of historic racial inequities and because so many of the realities of racism have come to the surface during the summer months.
- Many young people are also experiencing symptoms of other serious mental health conditions, including psychosis.
- Students with symptoms of depression are reporting frequent thoughts of self-harm.

Mental Health America (MHA) has developed its 2020 Back to School Toolkit with this and more in mind to help students, parents, and school personnel navigate the uncharted waters of COVID-19.

Many children who return to school will be lonely, having been isolated for months. Many who remain at home will feel even lonelier and more isolated as they see members of their peer group out and about. Loneliness can translate to poor sleep, high blood pressure, greater risk of suicidal ideation, and even alcohol and drug use. Depression, anxiety, and fear can also increase.

That is true for age groups. This means that this year, we all – parents, teachers, caregivers, students – need to attend to our mental wellbeing more consciously than ever before.

We hope this toolkit will help. Please use and share it freely with others. And if you think you or someone you care about needs more help than this, start by taking an anonymous screening at www.mhascreening.org, and get connected to even more information and resources that will help.

Sincerely,



Paul Gionfriddo, President & CEO
Mental Health America

This year's toolkit includes:

Media Materials

- Key Messages
- Drop-In Article

Social Media Components

- Sample Post Language
- Social Media Images for Sharing

Additional Resources

Handouts for Adults

- Dealing with Potential Exposure: The Stress of Physically Reopening Schools
- Teachers: Protecting Your Mental Health
- Teachers and Parents: Working Together to Make Distance Learning Work
- Know the Signs: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens

Handouts for Kids and Teens

- Missing How Things Used To Be
- What Can I Do When I'm Afraid?
- How to Maintain Your Social Relationships During Online School
- Worksheet: Dealing with Tough Situations

QUESTIONS?

If you have further questions about Back to School, please contact Danielle Fritze, Associate Vice President of Public Education and Design at dfritze@mhanational.org

KEY MESSAGES

- Mental Health America (MHA) has developed its 2020 Back to School Toolkit to help students, parents, and school personnel navigate the uncharted territory of COVID-19.
- The COVID-19 pandemic continues to exact a huge toll on both the physical health and the mental health of the nation—and our young people are not immune.
- As we enter a new, very uncertain academic school year, it's important for parents, caregivers, and school personnel to know the signs that a young person is struggling with their mental health.
- Stress and anxiety can be common during the school year for students, but with the pandemic upon us, it's even more important to pay attention to the toll isolation can take.
- Research shows that chronic loneliness—which many of us are feeling these days with stay-at-home orders and virtual learning—can translate to poor sleep, high blood pressure, greater risk of suicidal ideation, and even alcohol and drug use. Depression, anxiety, and fear can also increase.
- This year, it's also equally important that parents, caregivers, and school personnel check in on their own mental wellbeing.
- With many teachers conducting classes remotely, and many families navigating virtual learning, parents, caregivers, and teachers need to work together to support each other and be there for students.
- For those who are physically going back to schools, the anxiety and fear is palpable—and simply navigating the uncertainty can feel overwhelming. But no one has to suffer in silence.
- One of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take an anonymous screen at www.mhascreening.org.
- MHA has 10 online screening tools, including one that is youth-focused and one for parents. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

Feel free to supplement these key messages with language from the fact sheets and other materials included in this toolkit.

DROP IN ARTICLE

Use this article in your next e-blast or share with your local schools to include in their next student newsletter.

.....

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to exact a huge toll on not just the physical health but the mental health of the nation. As we enter a new, very uncertain academic school year - it's important for parents, caregivers, and school personnel to know the signs that a young person is struggling with his or her mental health.

We know that stress and anxiety can be common during the school year for students, but with the pandemic upon us, it's even more important to pay attention. For those who are physically going back to schools, the anxiety and fear is palpable – and simply navigating the uncertainty can feel overwhelming. And for those who are learning virtually, too much isolation can be harmful.

Research shows that chronic loneliness, which many of us are feeling these days with stay-at-home orders - can translate to poor sleep, high blood pressure, greater risk of suicidal ideation, and even alcohol and drug use. Depression and anxiety have also increased in the months since the pandemic began.

Half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14, and about 75 percent begin by the age of 24. But it's also important to know that mental health issues are common and treatable – you don't have to suffer in silence!

Know the signs and symptoms of mental health issues so that you can seek help for you or someone you care about. Free, confidential, and anonymous screening tools are available at www.MHAScreening.org to check in on symptoms and to find resources to help.

Just like physical health, taking care of mental health struggles early can help to prevent more serious problems from developing in the future. If you are concerned that you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health problem, it is important to act before Stage 4. Start the conversation. Seek help from a trusted adult. Remember there is nothing to be ashamed of and that there is help and hope.

There are also serious signs that someone is in crisis and needs more immediate help. These include thoughts or plans of hurting oneself or another person. If you think a child or teen is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action, call the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-TALK. Their trained crisis counselors can help you find local resources or suggest next steps. You can also look up information for a local mobile crisis team, psychiatric hospital, or psychiatric unit and call or go to the hospital for immediate support.

SAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

DOWNLOAD THE TOOLKIT

- Mental Health America has developed a #BackToSchool2020 Toolkit themed #CopingDuringCOVID to help students, parents, and school personnel navigate the uncharted territory of #COVID19. Learn more at mhanational.org/backtoschool.
- As we enter a new, very uncertain school year, it's important for parents, caregivers, and school personnel to know the signs that a young person is struggling with their #mentalhealth. Download MHA's free #BackToSchool2020 Toolkit at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #CopingDuringCOVID
- Teachers, students, and parents are at the forefront of #CopingDuringCOVID. Whether it's remote learning or uncertain reopenings, the stress and anxiety is palpable. Download MHA's free #BackToSchool2020 Toolkit at mhanational.org/backtoschool for resources and tools to cope.
- With many teachers conducting classes remotely, and many families navigating virtual learning, parents, caregivers and teachers need to work together to support each other and be there for students. Learn more about #CopingDuringCOVID at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #BackToSchool2020
- #CopingDuringCOVID is hard enough for adults. It's important to support young people as we head into the new school year. Download MHA's free #BackToSchool2020 Toolkit for tips, resources and more at mhanational.org/backtoschool.
- Stress, #anxiety, and #depression have risen since the start of the pandemic. We must support teachers, parents, and students as they start the new school year. Learn more about #CopingDuringCOVID at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #BackToSchool2020

FACTS AND STATS

- Over 70% of young people who took a screen at mhascreening.org between April and July 2020 mentioned loneliness and isolation as the main things contributing to their struggles. Learn more about #CopingDuringCOVID at mhanational.org/backtoschool.
- Young people continue to be disproportionately affected by #COVID19 related #mentalhealth issues. Roughly 9 in 10 are screening with moderate-to-severe #depression and 8 in 10 are screening with moderate-to-severe #anxiety. Learn more at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #BackToSchool2020
- Chronic loneliness, which many of us are feeling these days due to #COVID19, can translate to poor sleep, high blood pressure, greater risk of suicidal ideation, and even alcohol and drug use. Learn more about #CopingDuringCOVID at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #BackToSchool2020
- The majority of young people screened between April and July 2020 mentioned loneliness and isolation as major concerns. If your kid or teen still seems to be struggling, something more might be going on. Get screened for mental health at MHAscreening.org. #BackToSchool2020
- Since March of 2020, 83% of 11-to-17-year-olds screened positive or at-risk for #anxiety at MHAscreening.org, and 91% screened positive or at-risk for #depression. Learn more at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #BackToSchool2020 #CopingDuringCOVID
- 61% of teachers said their jobs were always or often stressful and 58% said they had poor mental health due to #stress. Debates over reopening and safety concerns are making teachers' #mentalhealth worse. Learn more at mhanational.org/backtoschool. #CopingDuringCOVID #BackToSchool2020

SCREENING

- Some people are experiencing new emotions and feelings because of the pandemic. Make sure to check in on your #mentalhealth at MHAScreening.org regularly in case what you are experiencing are symptoms of a mental health condition. #CopingDuringCOVID #BackToSchool2020
- If you think a kid or teen may be struggling, Mental Health America has a variety of free, confidential, and anonymous screening tools that can help determine if they may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Visit mhascreening.org to get started. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results.
- MHAScreening.org has 10 online screening tools, including one that is youth-focused and one for parents. Once you get the results, you'll be provided with more information and help you to figure out next steps. #CopingDuringCOVID #BackToSchool2020
- The youth screen available at MHAScreening.org is for people aged 11-17 who are concerned that their emotions, attention, or behaviors might be signs of a problem. #CopingDuringCOVID #BackToSchool2020
- The parent screen at MHAScreening.org is for parents of young people to determine if their child's emotions, attention, or behaviors might be signs of a problem. #CopingDuringCOVID #BackToSchool2020
- Half of all people who will have a #mentalhealth disorder in their lifetime start to experience symptoms by age 14. Taking a screen at MHAScreening.org can help

HASHTAGS

Best practices:

- For Facebook and Twitter, use no more than one or two strategic hashtags per post.
- For Instagram use at least 10 hashtags per post.

Here are our suggested hashtags for this year's Back to School campaign:

- #BackToSchool2020
- #CopingDuringCOVID

IMAGES

Download and save the images provided for use on your social media platforms or websites. The images below *and more* can be downloaded by visiting www.mhanational.org/back-school-2020-toolkit-download, and saving from the linked [Google Drive](#).




COPING DURING COVID

Mental Health America (MHA) has developed its 2020 Back to School Toolkit to help students, parents, and school personnel navigate the uncharted territory of COVID-19.

DOWNLOAD THE 2020 BACK TO SCHOOL TOOLKIT AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL



COPING DURING COVID

Mental Health America (MHA) has developed its 2020 Back to School Toolkit to help students, parents, and school personnel navigate the uncharted territory of COVID-19.

DOWNLOAD THE 2020 BACK TO SCHOOL TOOLKIT AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

COPING WITH CHANGE

FEEL YOUR FEELINGS
Grief is natural. Everyone deals with it in their life, and most people are dealing with it right now in some way.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS
Try laying down, closing your eyes, and focusing on your breathing, or go for a mindful walk (pay close attention to the sounds, smells, and sights).

KEEP UP NORMAL HABITS WHEN POSSIBLE
Figure out what you can do to keep some things the way they were before COVID-19 hit, like waking up at a certain time every day.

THINK AHEAD
Brainstorm some fun virtual events (like an online game night) for the next few weeks and make a list of other things you want to do.

STAY CONNECTED
Plan a virtual game night with friends or send friends funny memes more often. It's not the same as hanging out, can help you feel less alone.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

DEALING WITH POTENTIAL EXPOSURE: THE STRESS OF PHYSICALLY REOPENING SCHOOLS

If you have a child that will be going back to school in-person—whether full time, every other day, or every other week—it's important to prevent that fear from becoming debilitating.

FOR PARENTS

- ACKNOWLEDGE PRODUCTIVE VERSUS UNPRODUCTIVE WORRIES.
- FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.
- TAKE A BREAK FROM THE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA.
- ADVOCATE FOR YOUR NEEDS.
- DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOUR AND YOUR FAMILY.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

DID YOU KNOW?

50% OF ALL PEOPLE WHO WILL HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER IN THEIR LIFETIME START TO EXPERIENCE SYMPTOMS BY AGE 14.

THE MEDIAN AGE OF ONSET FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS IS 4 YEARS OLD!

OF 11-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO TOOK A SCREEN AT MHSSCREENING.ORG SINCE MARCH 2020:

83% (11,000) SCREENED POSITIVE OR AT RISK FOR ANXIETY.

91% (23,000) SCREENED POSITIVE OR AT RISK FOR DEPRESSION.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- Problems with concentration, memory, or ability to think clearly
- Changes in appetite
- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or worthless
- Loss of interest in things that they used to enjoy
- Excessive worry
- Irritability or restlessness
- Changes in sleep
- Angry outbursts
- Not wanting to be around people or take part in activities

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

HOW COVID-19 MIGHT BE CAUSING YOU TO GRIEVE

You may have only heard of grief in terms of death, but it's a lot more than that. Grief is the emotions we feel related to loss, even if that loss is something like your typical schedule or your sense of safety and control.

STAGES OF GRIEF

DENIAL
Acting as though it's the same as the flu and therefore unnecessary to worry about
Thinking that you don't need to care about it because you're young

ANGER
Not caring about whether or not restrictions and seeing friends anymore
Blaming others for not quarantining and being the reason this is still an issue

BARGAINING
Acting as though if people look healthy, they are fine to be around
Telling yourself that this will all be over by Halloween

DESPAIR
Thinking that this is forever, and you'll never be able to hang out with your friends anymore again
Worrying that many of your loved ones will die before this ends

ACCEPTANCE
Realizing that other people can't control the pandemic, and you're the best person
Acknowledging that even though you miss it, home, you can still connect with friends and family

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

HOW TO DEAL WITH FEAR

You can't change the fact that we're living in a pandemic or the effects of COVID-19, but you can control how much the fear that comes with it impacts you. Sometimes the hardest thing about feeling afraid is that you don't know what to do to change it. If that sounds familiar, here are some things you can do to help yourself.

- TALK TO A TRUSTED ADULT.
- LIMIT YOUR SCREEN TIME.
- REMINDE YOURSELF OF WAYS TO STAY SAFE.
- TAKE SOME DEEP BREATHS.
- KEEP HAVING FUN.
- MAINTAIN HEALTH BEHAVIORS.
- STICK TO A ROUTINE.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

TEACHERS AND PARENTS: WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE VIRTUAL LEARNING WORK

For those districts that have decided to continue distance/virtual learning, parents and teachers will have to work even more closely together to make sure kids and teens are learning and to monitor their mental health.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- SET UP AN INITIAL MEETING.
- DISCUSS THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.
- ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS.
- IDENTIFY RESOURCES.
- DISCUSS EXISTING CONCERNS OR CHALLENGES.
- SHOW SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER.
- GET ON THE SAME PAGE ABOUT WARNING SIGNS.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL



#COPINGDURINGCOVID

As we enter a new, very uncertain academic school year, it's important for parents, caregivers, and school personnel to know the signs that a young person is struggling with their mental health.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL



#COPINGDURINGCOVID

Research shows that chronic loneliness—which many of us are feeling these days with stay-at-home orders and virtual learning—can translate to poor sleep, high blood pressure, greater risk of suicidal ideation, and even alcohol and drug use. Depression, anxiety, and fear can also increase.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL



#COPINGDURINGCOVID

Stress and anxiety can be common during the school year for students, but with the pandemic upon us, it's even more important to pay attention to the toll isolation can take.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL



#COPINGDURINGCOVID

One of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take an anonymous screen at MHAScreening.org.

LEARN MORE AT MHNATIONAL.ORG/BACKTOSCHOOL

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FOR EVERYONE

[MHA Screening](#): Online screening is one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine if you're experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. Our screens are free, confidential, and scientifically-validated – they're the same questions you would get in a doctor's office.

[2019 Back to School Toolkit](#) - Stress & Loneliness: The content in last year's Back to School toolkit is still relevant, especially during COVID times.

[NotOK App](#): It can be really hard to ask for help, especially in our toughest moments. The NotOK app allows you to pre-select up to five contacts, and when you press a button in the app, it will text those contacts with your location and a message that says "Hey, I'm not OK. Please call me, text me, or come find me." It's a great way to let your support system know that you need some help, even if you can't put it into words.

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): The Lifeline provides 24/7, free, and confidential support to people in distress – you don't need to be suicidal to reach out. Call 1-800-273-8255 to be connected with a crisis counselor.

[Crisis Text Line](#): If you prefer texting to talking on the phone, text MHA to 741-741 to be connected with a crisis counselor who will help you get through your big emotions.

[Domestic Violence Hotline](#): The stressors of COVID have the potential to increase violence between partners and in homes. If you're experiencing domestic violence, looking for resources or information, or are question unhealthy aspects of your relationship, call 1-800-799-7233 or go to their site to virtually chat with an advocate.

[Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#): If you or a child you know is being hurt or doesn't feel safe at home, you can call or text 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) or [start an online chat](#) to reach a crisis counselor. They can help you figure out next steps to work through what is happening and stay safe.

FOR TEACHERS & SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

[CREATE – Creating Resilience for Educators, Administrators, and Teachers](#): The goal of CREATE is to nurture healthy, caring school communities that support social and emotional learning and teacher and principal wellness. They offer webinars, mindfulness practices, and workshops.

[Supporting Safety and Well-being of Children and Families During COVID-19](#): Some children are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect during this time of crisis. People who work with children play an important role in making sure they are safe at home, but it's hard to know how they are truly doing when you only have virtual contact. This guide has tips to help you check in on your students and families.

[The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#): CASEL defined social and emotional learning (SEL) over two decades ago and continues to advocate for making it a priority in all schools. Their site has information on how to integrate SEL into classrooms and they recently released Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School, a guide to support students during the transition back to school (in whatever form that is for your district).

[Classroom Mental Health](#): This site has information on mental health in the classroom, helping students manage their emotions and behaviors, and how to support students who open up to you about their feelings.

[Tips for Teachers: Ways to Help Students Who Struggle with Emotions or Behavior](#)

[Youth Mental Health: Emotions Matter \(infographic\)](#)

FOR PARENTS

[Back to School Planning: Checklists to Guide Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers](#): This guide from the CDC can help you and your children prepare for in-person classes or distance learning. It also includes resources on navigating stress and uncertainty.

[Families in Schools – Coronavirus Learning Resources for Families](#): If you're looking to supplement your child's schoolwork, this site has online educational resources categorized by subject (from core subjects to nutrition to arts & culture) and age as well as guides on topics like supporting your child's reading and creating a new routine.

[Child Mind Institute](#): The "For Families" tab has information on children's mental health and how to navigate those challenges as a parent. It includes concerns like attention, bullying, sleep, and grief as well as diagnosable disorders like anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and learning/development disorders.

[Psychology Today](#): Psychology Today has articles on a number of psychology and mental health related topics as well as a "Find a Therapist" feature. If you or your child needs some professional support, you can use this tool to find therapists in your area and can even filter by insurance, concern, age they work with, and more.

[MHA Screening – Parent Test](#): The Parent Test is from parents of young people to help you determine if your child's emotions, attention, or behaviors might be signs of a mental health concern.

[Talking to Adolescents and Teens: Starting the Conversation](#)

[Helping at Home: Tips for Parents](#)

[6 Things to Know About Self-Injury](#)

FOR STUDENTS

[KidsHealth](#): We all have feelings and sometimes they can be hard to deal with. This site can help you figure out how to make it through tricky situations like fighting with your parents, not liking school, or feeling really sad.

[Teen Mental Health](#): This site will help you learn more about mental health, the challenges that many teenagers face, and how to get through them. You can also find resources to help you help a friend if someone close to you is struggling.

[Self-Care in Middle School](#): We all face tough situations like schoolwork or arguing with friends. It's important to take care of yourself so that you can deal with the stress. In this video, middle schoolers share their tips for self-care and overcoming challenges.

[Guide of Things To Do at Home to Combat Loneliness & Boredom](#): If you're feeling trapped at home and missing your friends, check out this list for ideas of ways to add something fun to each day.

[MHA Screening – Youth Test](#): This questionnaire can help you determine if you're having emotional, attentional, or behavioral difficulties.

[Helpful vs. Harmful: Ways to Manage Emotions](#)

[Ideas for Building a Healthy Self-Image and Improving Self-Esteem](#)

[Time to Talk: Tips for Talking About Your Mental Health](#)

DEALING WITH POTENTIAL EXPOSURE: THE STRESS OF PHYSICALLY REOPENING SCHOOLS

As officials push to reopen schools, many people still don't feel safe going back in person yet. Across the U.S., districts differ in their plans—some are fully virtual, others are fully in-person, and many are following various hybrid models. You're probably experiencing stress about an uncertain future. If you're on edge and feel like you're waiting for something bad to happen, that's anticipatory grief.¹ It's especially confusing with COVID-19 because you know that the virus is out there and causing harm, but you can't physically see it. The threat of potential exposure to COVID-19 is scary. Some fear is good because it makes you vigilant about taking precautions, but too much fear can do more harm than good. If you are a teacher or have a child that will be going back to school in-person—whether full time, every other day, or every other week—it's important to prevent that fear from becoming debilitating.

FOR PARENTS

ACKNOWLEDGE PRODUCTIVE VERSUS UNPRODUCTIVE WORRIES.

Some worries are productive to think about, like what you'll do if your child comes home sick. Other worries don't have any answers, like how long will we have to live like this. When a worry pops into your head, figure out if it's something you can plan for or if nothing can be done. If you can make a plan, do it! If not, remind yourself that thinking about it won't change anything.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.

People like predictability. During such an uncertain time, controlling what you're able to will likely give you an added sense of security. Make a schedule for yourself that includes time for things you enjoy (and stick to it). Plan ahead for anything that feels overwhelming—deciding on weeknight dinners over the weekend can take some of your mental burden away from the following week. Think about other things you can do to increase your feelings of safety during this time.

TAKE A BREAK FROM THE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

While it's important to stay up to date on the news, a lot of media coverage related to school reopening is the same thing over and over. Social media can be riddled with false information, worst-case scenario stories, and heated arguments that go nowhere. Save yourself the added stress by limiting your overall consumption or tuning out once in a while.

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR NEEDS.

You know your family and kids best, so speak up if there is something about going back to school that needs adjusting for your circumstances. Maybe you're an essential worker and can only help your kids with distance learning at night—let their teacher know if you need to schedule an evening phone call to make sure you're on the same page. Or maybe someone in your home is immunocompromised, so you don't feel safe with in-person schooling right now. Ask your district about options to continue virtual learning despite the general plan to return to schools.

DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

Deciding what to do in terms of schooling right now can be difficult. When weighing choices, think about both your family's needs and situation as well as your comfort level with what your school is doing to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Every student and family are different, so do what works best for you—no apologies necessary.

FOR TEACHERS

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF FREQUENTLY.

To a large extent, you can actually control your feelings and their intensity. The best way to do this is to explore those feelings. Ask yourself: What's my level of anxiety? What am I worried about? How can I help myself cope?

EMBRACE YOUR EMOTIONS.

You may be feeling angry, scared, or a number of other feelings about your school reopening. As uncomfortable as they may be, you can't get rid of your emotions. Ignoring them will only delay their surfacing. Give yourself 10-15 minutes to journal about everything on your mind. Often just taking the time to process your feelings can help them be less overwhelming.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU DO HAVE CONTROL OVER.

While it's important to stay up to date on the news, a lot of media coverage related to school reopening is the same thing over and over. Social media can be riddled with false information, worst-case scenario stories, and heated arguments that go nowhere. Save yourself the added stress by limiting your overall consumption or tuning out once in a while.

TAKE A SOCIAL MEDIA BREAK.

While social media can be a great source of news, it can also be incredibly toxic. You're probably seeing some unverified claims, scary news articles, and people on your feeds broadcasting their opinions about school reopening. This takes a toll, so close out of the apps and browsers to give yourself a break.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION.

Give yourself grace—don't place blame on yourself for things outside of your control and avoid holding yourself to standards that are too high, even if you could meet those standards during pre-pandemic times. Doing your best to protect yourself and your loved ones is enough.

Remember—this is an especially difficult back to school season. Nothing will take away the pandemic right now or that fact that teachers and children may be in classrooms that don't feel safe. It's normal to feel some distress right now but pay attention if it starts to take over your mind or affect your functioning. Not sure if your emotions are signaling a bigger concern? Take a quick mental health screen at mhascreening.org. It's free, anonymous, and confidential. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results. Screening results can be a helpful tool for starting a conversation with a health care provider.

Results aside, if you're feeling like it's hard to cope, it may be time to talk to a professional who can help you identify strategies specifically targeted to your worries and needs. You can find a therapist or other health care provider through your insurance. If you don't have insurance, your local MHA affiliate may be able to help (search for the MHA affiliate closest to you at mhanational.org/findaffiliate). Many therapists are using telehealth right now, which may provide an extra sense of comfort and safety.

SOURCES
¹Berinato, S. (2020, March 23). *That discomfort you're feeling is grief*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>



TEACHERS: PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

According to several studies and reports, teaching is one of the most stressful jobs in the country. The American Federation of Teachers' 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey found that 61 percent of teachers said their jobs were always or often stressful—more than double the rate of non-teaching working adults—and 58 percent said they had poor mental health due to stress levels.¹ That was before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and since then, the transition to online learning, debates over reopening, and individual safety concerns are making teachers' mental health worse.²

If you're feeling tired and disengaged, there's a good chance it's related to trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and/or "battle fatigue." Teachers are often focused on taking care of and supporting others, but without prioritizing your wellbeing, those stress levels won't lift. Your mental health isn't only important to you—teacher wellness is also linked to stability in schools and student achievement.³

WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF

SET BOUNDARIES EARLY ON—AND HOLD THEM. Expressing your needs is necessary. Whether your school has gone virtual or not, you may be in more constant contact with parents that you're used to. You can't be on-the-clock at all times, so set office hours for remote teaching—even for young kids. A 2-hour block a few times a week lets students (and parents) know when they can reach you immediately and allows you to protect your free time. Schedule time to respond to other requests or let students' families know that you're unavailable after 5pm and will return any emails or calls the following day. If your school goes virtual, give yourself a dedicated workspace at home to signal to both yourself and others that you're in work mode.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL. COVID-19 has taken a lot of certainty away from everyone—controlling what you're able to will help give you back structure and a sense of security that you've likely been craving. You're in charge of how you spend your free time, your priorities, and your mindset. Check in with yourself: Are your news sources trustworthy? Do you need a break from media exposure? What can you do to boost your own sense of safety? Get involved in policy decisions in your district, attend school board meetings, and participate in your union to voice your opinions on school plans.

MOVE YOUR BODY. Teachers are often on their feet all day and spend a lot of time moving around the classroom. It may not seem like much, but you're actually releasing a lot of energy through that constant movement. If your school has gone virtual, you may be sitting a lot more. Set a timer to remind yourself to get up, even if it's just for a 30-second stretch or walk around your house or apartment. If you want more consistent movement, think about using a yoga ball for a chair, get a standing desk, or buy a mini exercise bike for under your desk.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY. Social connection is crucial during times of hardship, so lean on your support network. You aren't the only one trying to adjust. Feeling isolated or unsupported can make things worse. Reach out to that colleague who seems to "get" you, the person who always makes you laugh, or someone else who you can count on to validate your feelings. A short conversation can go a long way in helping you feel less alone.

KEEP UP WITH THE SELF-CARE. One of the best ways to ensure mental wellness is by having a strong foundation. Make sure you get at least 7 hours of sleep, eat a nutritious diet, spend time outside, and exercise regularly. Don't forget to work in some other self-care activities like journaling or meditation—write it into your schedule so you don't make excuses! Self-care can be hard to do in between creating lesson plans, teaching, communicating with parents and taking care of other responsibilities like cooking and cleaning, but it's important.

MAINTAIN REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS. Life isn't "business as usual" right now, no matter how much you may want it to be. Work on shifting your expectations—don't frame current experiences as "terrible," look at them as "different." Give yourself time and space to adjust to your new normal instead of pressuring yourself to act how you did before COVID-19. Be patient with others—some of your students have probably been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and have their minds on things other than school. And set small, realistic goals for yourself, especially with distance learning. Remember that you don't have control over your students' environment, background noise, workspace, or parental support. But you can still help make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed, by giving students access to you and the necessary materials.

WAYS TO HELP OTHER TEACHERS

CHECK IN ON EACH OTHER. Just a genuine “how are you doing?” can really help a fellow teacher feel supported and more connected to the people around them. Vulnerability can be hard, so you may need to open up first to show you’re sincere. If someone tells you they’re struggling, let them know they have your support and if you can’t talk then, that you’ll reach out soon. When you follow up, make sure to listen to what they need; some people may need help finding resources, while others may want some time to vent with someone who gets it.

HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE FOR SELF-CARE. Share what you’re doing to maintain your own mental health and any upcoming self-care goals you have, like reading a book to unwind or what you’re up to next weekend. Ask what others are doing. Making time to take care of yourself can be hard; knowing your coworkers are aware of your plans can provide that extra bit of motivation to follow through with them, especially when you’re exhausted. Don’t forget to ask your coworkers how their self-care activity went the next time you see them!

EXPRESS GRATITUDE. Practicing gratitude is a great way to give yourself a more positive outlook. Try to name three things you’re thankful for each day. Thank your coworkers when they do something to help you out or make your day a bit easier and let your students and their parents know you appreciate their hard work and flexibility. It’s a win-win: it will boost your mood, make others feel appreciated and noticed, and help you all feel more connected to your community.

TAKE TIME TO LAUGH. Humor can be an effective coping tool during scary and tense times. Don’t be afraid to lighten the mood by sending memes or sharing a funny story—just be mindful of your timing and audience.

PAY ATTENTION TO NONVERBAL CUES. A lot of people have trouble opening up about how they’re feeling, and others may not even realize that they’re struggling if their mind is constantly focused on work. If you’re at school in-person, you can probably pick up on which of your colleagues or students are having a harder time than others. Typical body language varies, but if you notice a change like less eye contact or moving or talking slower, it’s worth bringing up. If your school is virtual, think about who you haven’t heard from lately that you may have expected to. Reach out to those individuals—there’s no need for anyone to suffer alone. If you aren’t comfortable doing so, mention what you’ve noticed to a colleague that they are closer with or a supervisor.

LEND EACH OTHER SUPPORT. There is a lot of power in shared experiences. People need social connection, and mutual feelings of vulnerability and stress often create some of the strongest social bonds.⁴ Start up a weekly support call with a group of friends, grade-level teachers across your district, or all teachers at your school. Planning for this makes it a priority and gives you all a safe space to vent, listen, and problem-solve together. You can also help each other with work logistics—if you love teaching a certain subject or unit, offer to share your lesson plan with other grade level teachers and they can share theirs with you to split up the burden.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and feel as though your stress is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take a screen at **MHAScreening.org** to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

¹American Federation of Teachers. (2017). *2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey*. https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwl_survey_web.pdf
²Mader, J. (2020, August 6). *As we talk about reopening schools, are the teachers ok?* The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/as-we-talk-about-reopening-schools-are-the-teachers-ok/>
³Cox, A., Solomon, B., & Parris, D. (2018, May 8). *Teacher well-being is a critical and often overlooked part of school health*. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/teacher-well-being-is-a-critical-and-often-overlooked-part-of-school-health>
⁴Seppala, E. (2012). How the stress of disaster brings people together. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-stress-of-disaster-brings-people-together/>



TEACHERS AND PARENTS: WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE DISTANCE LEARNING WORK

Many parents and teachers got a taste of what distance/virtual learning looks like during the spring and probably learned quickly about what worked and what didn't work so well for students. This fall, some districts will have students and teachers return to school buildings and previous protocols for parent-teacher interaction. For those districts that have decided to continue distance/virtual learning, parents and teachers will have to work even more closely together to make sure kids and teens are learning and to monitor their mental health.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

SET UP AN INITIAL MEETING.

During this initial meeting between parent and teacher, figure out the basics. How does the teacher plan to communicate—will it be in a special platform or through email, and how often should parents expect general communications? When one-on-one communication is needed, what day of the week works best, at what time, and should it be via phone, email, or video chat? Should routine one-on-one meetings be scheduled? If English is not the primary language spoken by the parent or caregiver, is there someone they can contact who speaks their language to ensure that the caregiver can get the support they need to stay updated on communications from the school, or support their child's studies? This is the time to ask questions openly. If the teacher isn't available for a one-on-one meeting at the very start of school, parents should find out when the meeting will occur or try using email to get their questions answered.

DISCUSS THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

If a student's parents aren't working or can work from home, the student most likely will be learning from their own home with a parent present. If a student's parents must physically leave the house to go to work, students may be learning outside of the home under the supervision of a caregiver other than a parent. Establish if the student has the technology necessary for distance learning or if the school needs to provide resources like a tablet or laptop. Determine if there will be more than one student trying to also engage in distance/virtual learning at the same time in the same place. Parents of students without Internet access should contact the school for accommodations or advice.

ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS.

Parents and teachers should talk about what a typical day of distance/virtual learning will look like. Is there a schedule for how the day will be divided? How much of the day will consist of live instruction, and how much will be independent study? What subject matter will be covered? Will there be "homework," or will all assignments be started and completed over the course of the structured learning part of the day? If the schedule is set by the school or the county, what flexibility do teachers have to adjust it?

IDENTIFY RESOURCES.

Kids and teens encounter more than just teachers and parents in the process of learning. They have guidance counselors, receive meals, and interact with their peers. Parents and teachers should discuss what resources are available to replace those interactions and supplement online learning. For instance, is the school offering some sort of meal program for students who typically receive free or reduced-price lunches? Are tutors or teaching assistants available for students who need extra help? How can the guidance counselor or school psychiatrist be reached if needed? Is there a contact list for other students in the class if they want to study together? Have parents organized a contact list for other parents in the class that they can share?

DISCUSS EXISTING CONCERNS OR CHALLENGES.

If a student has had a history of learning, behavioral, or health difficulties in the past, it is important for parents to let teachers know. This gives the teacher context for any learning struggles or absences that may take place. It may be necessary to set up an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 Plan to make sure the student's needs are being met. Make sure to be clear about how an IEP or a 504 Plan works in a distance/virtual learning environment.

SHOW SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER.

Both teachers and parents are going through a challenging time. Parents can support teachers by sending thank you cards or encouraging students to thank their teachers. Teachers can help by showing patience with parents who may be juggling many new responsibilities and working with parents to find solutions to any challenges.

GET ON THE SAME PAGE ABOUT WARNING SIGNS.

A lot of young people are struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will be harder for teachers to notice signs of mental health struggles without in-person student interaction. Parents and caregivers should be aware of the early warning signs of mental health conditions, and teachers can look for hints that something might not be right as well. Check out our fact sheet, *Know the Signs: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens*, to be informed about what to look out for. If you do notice that something doesn't seem right, set up a time to talk with the school's mental health staff (usually a guidance counselor or school psychiatrist).

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you think a kid or teen may be struggling, Mental Health America has a variety of free, confidential, and anonymous screening tools that can help determine if they may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Visit [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhscreeing.org) to get started. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results.

If you think a child or teen is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action, call the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Their trained crisis counselors can help you find local resources or suggest next steps. You can also look up information for a local mobile crisis team, psychiatric hospital, or psychiatric unit and call or go to the hospital for immediate support.



KNOW THE SIGNS: RECOGNIZING MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS IN KIDS AND TEENS

Life during a pandemic is complicated. Along with new safety protocols and restrictions, kids and teens are dealing with changes to routines, school, and socializing. It's normal for kids and teens to have some difficulty getting used to a "new normal." In fact, the majority of young people who took a screen at mhascreening.org between April and July of 2020 mentioned loneliness and isolation as the main things contributing to their struggles.¹ If your kid or teen still seems to be struggling, something more might be going on.

DID YOU KNOW?

50%

OF ALL PEOPLE WHO WILL HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER IN THEIR LIFETIME START TO EXPERIENCE SYMPTOMS BY AGE 14.²



THE MEDIAN AGE OF ONSET FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS IS 6 YEARS OLD³

OF 11-TO-17-YEAR-OLDS WHO TOOK A SCREEN AT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://mhascreening.org) SINCE MARCH 2020:⁴

83% (11,000) SCREENED POSITIVE OR AT-RISK FOR ANXIETY.

91% (23,000) SCREENED POSITIVE OR AT-RISK FOR DEPRESSION.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Symptoms that happen across multiple conditions:

- Problems with concentration, memory, or ability to think clearly
- Changes in appetite
- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or worthless
- Loss of interest in things that they used to enjoy
- Excessive worry
- Irritability or restlessness
- Changes in sleep
- Angry outbursts
- Not wanting to be around people or take part in activities

Other things to look out for:

- Hearing or seeing things that other people don't
- Extreme panic
- Onset of new behaviors or rituals that are repeated
- Mood swings or frequent shifts in energy
- Changes in how they dress –if your child is wearing long pants and sleeves in hot weather, or hats all of a sudden, they could be hiding signs of self-injury like cutting or hair pulling

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you notice these symptoms in your child, you may want to consider a mental health screening. A screening is a free, anonymous, and confidential way to see if a person is showing signs of a mental health condition. Screening tools for young people and parents are available at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhascreening.org). Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results. Screening results can be a helpful tool for starting a conversation with your child's primary health care provider.

WHEN IS EMERGENCY ACTION NEEDED?

If you notice the following signs in your child, take immediate action as they may be thinking about suicide:

- Giving away possessions for no logical reason
- Risky or self-destructive actions
- Increased drug or alcohol use
- Obsession with death
- Withdrawing from life
- Indirect or direct threats of suicide
- Drastic personality change
- Lack of interest in future plans

If you think a child or teen is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action, call the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-TALK. Their trained crisis counselors can help you find local resources or suggest next steps. You can also look up information for a local mobile crisis team, psychiatric hospital, or psychiatric unit and

SOURCES

¹Proprietary data (2020). Mhascreening.org.

²Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 62(6):617-27.

³Merikangas, K., Hep, J., Burstein, M., Swanson, S., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benezet, C., Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication—Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 49(10): 980-989.

⁴Proprietary data (2020). Mhascreening.org.





MISSING HOW THINGS USED TO BE



There are a lot of things you might be missing right now. You probably know what big things you're missing, like summer activities with friends, sports games, and school dances. But chances are you're missing some small things too—things you may have taken for granted, like sitting next to your friend on the bus every day or getting to show off your new outfit. Almost every part of life has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we're all living in a completely new world than we were a year ago. As you shift to a "new normal," it's common to miss how things were before. Part of that sadness and discomfort you're feeling is actually grief.

You may have only heard of grief in terms of death, but it's a lot more than that. Grief is the emotions we feel related to loss, even if that loss is something like your typical schedule or your sense of safety and control. Grief is a complex emotion. Many people recognize five distinct stages of grief. You may not go through all of them, and you may experience them in different orders, but these are common responses to loss.

STAGES OF GRIEF¹

DENIAL is when you refuse to accept that a loss is factual. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though it's the same as the flu and therefore unnecessary to worry about
- o Thinking that you don't need to care about it because you're young

ANGER is the emotion you may feel when you want control over your fears. Rather than dealing with the problem, you might blame others and refuse to follow safety guidelines. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Not caring about shelter-in-place restrictions and seeing friends anyway
- o Blaming others for not quarantining and being the reason this is still an issue

BARGAINING is when you acknowledge reality but still try to maintain control. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though if people look healthy, they are fine to be around
- o Telling yourself that this will all be over by Halloween

DESPAIR occurs when the seriousness of the situation sets in. You may feel hopeless—like things will never get better. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Thinking that this is forever, and you'll never be able to hang out with your friends normally again
- o Worrying that many of your loved ones will die before this ends

ACCEPTANCE is when you finally admit that the situation is what it is—it's not great, but it's not complete doom either. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Knowing that while you can't control the pandemic, you can do your part by washing your hands, wearing a mask and keeping 6 feet of distance between yourself and anyone who doesn't live in your home
- o Acknowledging that even though you're stuck at home, there are still things you can do from a distance, like keeping up your schoolwork and connecting with friends virtually

COPING WITH CHANGE

Most people don't like change. People are creatures of habit, and we like to stick to our normal day-to-day life. Sometimes change feels threatening – we don't know if everything will work out and we worry about all the new challenges we might face. It's normal to feel uneasy as we leave our old normal behind. If you're struggling, here are some ways to help yourself adjust:

FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

Grief is natural. Everyone deals with it in their life, and most people are dealing with it right now in some way. Letting yourself feel however you feel – whether that's angry, sad, or worried – is the first step to feeling better. You will probably move in-between these different emotions, and even have moments of acceptance or happiness. It's okay to let yourself be sad, and it's okay to let yourself be distracted and have fun. All of it is part of the healing process.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness helps you tune into your emotions – these techniques can be really helpful in situations where your routines are disrupted or you're feeling overwhelmed. You might feel so many different things that you don't even know how to start dealing with them. Try laying down, closing your eyes, and focusing on your breathing, or go for a mindful walk (pay close attention to the sounds, smells, and sights). You can also listen to a guided meditation to feel more connected to yourself.

KEEP UP NORMAL HABITS WHEN POSSIBLE

Routines help people know what to expect throughout the day or the week—that's why change is often so uncomfortable. Figure out what you can do to keep some things the way they were before. If you're used to sitting with a certain group of friends at lunch, maybe you can do a group video call once a week and have lunch together. And even though you might not need to wake up as early as when you were physically going to school, going to bed and waking up on a schedule will help you get more restful sleep and have more energy during the day.

THINK AHEAD

Some events that you were really looking forward to have probably been cancelled over the last few months, and that's not easy. It can be especially hard when it wasn't your decision – like if your parents or school cancelled the event. Even though it's for everyone's safety, feeling like you have no say in what happens is frustrating. Stay positive by looking to the future. Brainstorm some fun virtual events (like an online game night) for the next few weeks and make a list of other things you want to do once it's safer.

STAY CONNECTED

Even though you can't see your friends in person, it's important to make time to talk to people and keep your support network strong. Plan a virtual game night with friends, or just send your best friend funny memes more often. It's not the same as hanging out, but just a quick conversation can help you feel less alone and more able to take on the changes that you're facing.

If you still feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhascreeing.org) to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES
Axelrod, J. (2020, July 8). *The 5 stages of grief & loss*. PsychCentral.
<https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>



WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I'M AFRAID?

Even though we've been dealing with COVID-19 for a few months now, most of us still aren't used to it. You may not fully understand what it even is, or maybe it feels impossible to make sure you and your loved ones will stay safe. It's totally normal to be a bit scared right now, but just because it's normal doesn't mean it feels good.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is one of the basic emotions that everyone feels at one point or another. We often feel fear when we sense a threat—real or imaginary. It can be a really uncomfortable feeling and may even make it hard for you to think about anything else.

It may not seem like it, but fear can actually be a good thing! Being scared is usually what makes us act in ways that protect us.¹ Think about it—if you weren't afraid of catching COVID-19, you probably wouldn't follow the rules of washing your hands for 20 seconds or wearing a mask. You might not enjoy feeling fear, but it serves an important purpose right now, so don't ignore it.

Fear becomes a bad thing when you can't stop thinking about what scares you or if it's interrupting your daily activities. If you're in full-on panic mode, it's important to take some steps to help reduce your level of fear to better fit the situation we're facing.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FEAR

You can't change the fact that we're living in a pandemic or the effects of COVID-19, but you can control how much the fear that comes with it impacts you. Sometimes the hardest thing about feeling afraid is that you don't know what to do to change it. If that sounds familiar, here are some things you can do to help yourself:

TALK TO A TRUSTED ADULT.

If you're a bit lost on how to handle this whole situation, check in with an adult about how you're feeling. This could be a parent, teacher, coach, or someone else you trust. Whether you don't quite know what COVID-19 is and how to stay safe, or you're worried about starting a new school year virtually or in-person, an adult can help calm your fears and give you tips to stay healthy and comfortable.

LIMIT YOUR SCREEN TIME.

While it's important to understand what's happening in the world, there's such thing as too much information. Constant news coverage might make you feel more scared of COVID-19, and social media can be full of false information and worst-case scenarios. Unfollow or mute social media accounts if they're constantly upsetting you. If you see a story or statistic that worries you, bring it up to someone who can help you talk it out.

REMINDE YOURSELF OF WAYS TO STAY SAFE.

Even though things seem scary right now, there are a lot of ways to keep yourself safe—and you're probably already doing most of them! Washing your hands regularly, wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, and avoiding large groups are all ways to reduce your risk of infection. Remind yourself of these things and challenge yourself to think of more reasons to not worry.

TAKE SOME DEEP BREATHS.

Focusing on your breathing is a great way to relax and reduce some of the anxiety you may be feeling. When you feel big emotions, you might notice you start to breathe faster. If you work to slow your breathing, it signals to your brain that it's time to calm down. Try 4-7-8 breathing: breath in for four seconds, hold for seven seconds, and breathe out for eight seconds.

KEEP HAVING FUN.

It's important to still participate in activities you enjoy, even if they're a bit different right now. Maybe you can play a game with your family or have a virtual movie night with some friends. You could also do a craft or a puzzle or start a new book. You should do these things regularly, but they can be especially helpful to distract yourself if you're having a moment of serious fear.

MAINTAIN HEALTHY BEHAVIORS.

Keeping up healthy habits is really important. Handwashing is important to curb the spread of COVID-19, but things like eating healthy food, getting some exercise, spending time outside, and getting a good night's sleep (9-12 hours if you are 6-12 years old, or 8-10 hours if you are 13-18 years old) impact your health too. And if you do happen to get sick, these habits will help your immune system be ready to fight off those germs.

STICK TO A ROUTINE.

It's normal to be scared of uncertainty, and COVID-19 has added some uncertainty to almost all parts of life. You can help reduce the impacts of this by adding some structure to your days. Make a schedule for yourself—try to eat your meals, do your schoolwork, move your body, and go to bed and wake up at the same times each day. This can help you feel more in control and prepared to take on the challenges you're facing.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and as though your fear is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at MHAScreening.org to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

¹Sanderson, C. (2020, April 13). *Coping with fear and sadness during a pandemic*. Hofstra University PhD Program in Clinical Psychology. <http://psychrescue-covid19.com/>



HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS DURING ONLINE SCHOOL (FOR KIDS AND TEENS)

Transitioning to online school comes with many challenges, including not being able to see your friends every day which can lead to loneliness. Maintaining relationships with people virtually can be a challenge, and it might take a little extra work than if you were going to school with them. As long as you focus on your studies, you can also make time to connect with your friends, even if you aren't physically at school with them every day.

STUDY WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

STUDY WITH YOUR FRIENDS VIRTUALLY.

Set up a time for you and your friends to meet up over video chat to work on your homework or classwork together. You can invite anyone who's available, and you can help each other out with tough problems as well.¹ Make sure you actually get your work done! It can be easy just to chat with your friends the whole time but try to work on your homework too.

PARTICIPATE IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS ONLINE.

Depending on the class or your teacher, there may be opportunities for you to chat with your classmates during your online class. If the opportunity arises, be sure to talk with your classmates about your assignment and what you need to do for the class.² Think of how you'd talk to your classmates if you were in a classic school setting together.

CREATE A BOOK CLUB TO TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE READING FOR CLASS.

If you have assigned readings, it can be helpful to talk them over with your classmates to get a new perspective. Try to schedule specific meeting times with your peers, and set goals for each meeting to get a certain amount of reading done.³ If you're having trouble putting together a book club, reach out to your teacher for help.

HANG OUT VIRTUALLY

CONNECT WITH YOUR FRIENDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

Social media is a great place to keep up with your friends and update people on what's going on in your life. If you don't have a social media presence yet, talk to your parents about setting one up. If you do have one, make sure you're following your friends on all of your accounts to stay connected with them.⁴ Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat are all popular social media sites that your friends might be using.

Scrolling aimlessly through social media might not leave you feeling very connected with your friends. Try having private conversations or commenting on their posts to get an actual connection.

TEXT YOUR FRIENDS THROUGHOUT THE DAY.

If your friends have social media accounts, there's a good chance they have a phone as well. Make sure you have all your friends' numbers and send them a few texts during the day to let them know what you're up to and ask how they're doing.⁵ To talk to all of your friends at once, try putting multiple people into a group chat so you can all text at the same time. Remember to take a break from your phone when you're doing schoolwork so you can focus!

CALL YOUR FRIENDS TO TALK TO THEM ON THE PHONE.

Texting and social media are nice, but nothing beats chatting with someone on the phone. Text your friend and ask them if they can talk, then call them up and have a conversation about how you're both doing, what you're doing to stay busy, and how school is going.⁶ Some people don't like to talk on the phone, which is okay too. You can just text or video chat instead.

SCHEDULE REGULAR ONLINE CALLS WITH A GROUP OF FRIENDS.

Video chatting is a great way to get some face-to-face communication without leaving your home. Try to schedule a video meeting when all of your friends are available. You can just hang out, play games, or work on homework together.⁷ Skype, Google Hangouts, and Zoom are free video chat apps that can host multiple people at once.

SEND YOUR FRIENDS LETTERS IN THE MAIL.

It's always fun to get stuff in the mail, especially when you're stuck at home. Ask your friend for their address and then send them a sweet note or a postcard. Stick a stamp on the package and then send it off via the postal service to start a fun pen pal relationship.⁸ If you don't have any stamps, the grocery store or your local post office have them available to buy.

DO ACTIVITIES TOGETHER

PLAY ONLINE GAMES WITH YOUR FRIENDS.

Online board games, card games, or video games are fun to play on your own, but they're even better when you're playing against your friends. Find a game that your friend group likes and create a game where you can all play at the same time.⁹ Minecraft, Fortnite, and Counter Strike are a few online multiplayer video games that you could try. Catan, Monopoly, and Scrabble are all board games that have online apps you can use. UNO, Solitaire, and Texas Hold 'Em are all card games available online.

CREATE A GROUP PLAYLIST WHERE YOU CAN ALL ADD MUSIC.

Music connects a lot of people, and your tastes probably vary slightly between your friends. Try making a playlist where all of your friends can add songs, then update it every week to see what everyone is listening to.¹⁰ You can make a collaborative playlist on Spotify or Apple Music.

JOIN IN ON SAFE SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES TOGETHER WITH YOUR FRIENDS.

Even if you can't be in the same room as your friends, you can still all participate in the same social media challenge. Find a hashtag on Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok, then film yourself doing it and tag your friends. Hopefully, they'll do the challenge and upload it too!¹¹

Pick a challenge that's fun and safe. Never participate in dangerous activities like the Tide Pod challenge (which can be deadly), the outlet challenge (which creates electrical sparks that can lead to a fire), or the salt and ice challenge (which is painful and has resulted in burns and scarring). You can even participate in an educational challenge, like #SafeHands from the World Health Organization that challenges users to upload a video of themselves washing their hands safely.¹²

MEET UP WITH YOUR FRIENDS ON THE WEEKEND, IF YOU CAN.

If both you and your friends have been taking the right measures to protect their health, like wearing masks in public, you might be able to meet up in person. Talk to your parents about getting together with your friends outdoors for a small, socially distant gathering. You can play games, throw a ball around, or simply sit and chat with each other. Seeing your friends in person is always nice and finding a way to do that can be super helpful for your mental well-being.¹³

Always follow the social distancing guidelines set by your state or county and talk to your parents about following safety measures before you head out. Be sure to wear a mask whenever you're within 6 feet (1.8 m) of someone who isn't part of your household. It's worth noting that some of your friends (or their parents) might not be comfortable hanging out with in person yet, which is also okay and shouldn't be taken personally.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and as though your loneliness is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at **MHAScreening.org** to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

This article was authored in partnership with wikiHow, the world's largest "how to" site, and also featured at [www.wikihow.com/Maintain-Your-Social-Relationships-During-Online-School-\(for-Kids-and-Teens\)](http://www.wikihow.com/Maintain-Your-Social-Relationships-During-Online-School-(for-Kids-and-Teens)).

SOURCES

- ¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2020/03/18/17-tips-for-people-taking-online-classes/#4a48a0323fff>
- ²<https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=How-To-Run-a-Virtual-Online-Zoom-Book-Club-middle-schoolers-library-school>
- ³<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teenagers-can-protect-their-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19>
- ⁴<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Teens-and-COVID-19.aspx>
- ⁵ibid.
- ⁶<https://www.wku.edu/news/articles/index.php?view=article&articleid=8681>
- ⁷<https://ptaourchildren.org/kids-staying-connected-during-covid-19/>
- ⁸<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/entertainment/g32073897/best-apps-to-play-with-friends/>
- ⁹<https://support.spotify.com/us/article/create-playlists-with-your-friends/>



DEALING WITH TOUGH SITUATIONS

We will all be in tough situations at some point in our lives. It can be helpful to think through these situations to figure out what we can change and how to go about it. This worksheet can help you through this process. Be sure to start a new sheet for each different situation that you want to tackle.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION THAT IS TROUBLING YOU OR STRESSING YOU OUT?

WHAT ABOUT THIS SITUATION CAN YOU CHANGE?

WHO CAN YOU ASK FOR HELP TO CHANGE IT, AND WHAT DO YOU WANT THEM TO DO?

While you can't always control your feelings or emotions, you can challenge your own thoughts and change your own actions. You also can't change other people's thoughts or behaviors, how COVID-19 is impacting the world, or whether schools are open or closed. As hard as it is, sometimes we have to accept what we can't control or change and make a plan to deal with those situations.

WHAT ABOUT THIS SITUATION ARE YOU NOT ABLE TO CHANGE?

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO HEAR TO FEEL BETTER?
