

Session 5: Covid-19 ADDENDUM

Even in times of significant stress, we can look to our strengths to build our resilience and to inspire us with hope. This session talks about using our strengths during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- Building on our internal strengths
- Building on our external strengths
- Advocating for additional mental health services and supports

Building on our Internal Strengths During COVID-19

The six strengths of families mentioned earlier in this session can continue to be practiced during times of COVID-19:

1. **Appreciation and Affection:** While we may not always be able to physically hug our loved ones during COVID-19, things like smiles and jokes are easy to offer over the phone or during facetime. Even sending small notes to loved ones through the mail can demonstrate that you are thinking of them.
2. **Positive Communication:** It is easy to focus communication on COVID-19 and the stress and worry that it brings, but it is also important to talk about other things that we can feel positive and hopeful about. What are some of the things you enjoyed talking about before COVID-19 came to be? Recall fun memories, talk about something new you learned today, or about some of your dreams you have for when this is all over.
3. **Adaptability (flexibility):** In these times of COVID-19 our ability to adapt to change and to be flexible are certainly challenged. And this can be even more challenging for people who don't like change to begin with. The following nine tips from the New Zealand Department of Health can help you adjust to our "new normal":
 - > Be accepting of the situation
 - > Respond instead of reacting
 - > Give yourself time to process new information
 - > Allow yourself time to adapt to change. Everyone reacts to new things differently
 - > Be flexible and open to relinquishing control over the situation
 - > Go easy on yourself and manage expectations at work and at home
 - > Focus on what you can do, not on what you can't
 - > Set new routines that work for you and don't pressure yourself
 - > Practice mindfulness. Be in the moment and focus on what you can achieve today.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/covid-19/update/Pages/adapt.aspx>

4. **Unity:** while there are times during COVID-19 when we cannot come together physically to do the things we used to do, we can still endeavor to do those things “virtually”. We can still have a meal together or play a favorite game via skype. Do not forgo some of your traditional and favorite family times altogether. Try to use your imagination and creativity to continue to do some things together!

5. **Spiritual Well Being:** However you think about life and its meaning, continue to spend time to find peace and hopefulness within your heart. You can do this with your family member or you may find solace in being a part of a family caregiver community. Find solace in your traditional ways, or perhaps a new possibility to find solace will emerge as part of your personal COVID-19 experience. If you belong to a specific religious denomination, you may want to look into available live stream worship services.

6. **Commitment:** Commitment to stay emotionally connected when may not be able to be physically connected can be a challenge. COVID-19 has forced us to be even more committed to staying connected than before COVID-19. But we also need to be committed to self care even more than previously.

Building on our External Strengths During COVID-19

During times of self isolation and social distancing during COVID-19, social support becomes even more important for family caregivers as anxieties and stresses increase. In addition to the suggestions provided earlier in the session, here are some additional tips to keep in mind:

- It is still important to reach out to family and friends by whatever means are possible to tell them what kind of support you need from them. From providing a listening ear, to assisting with grocery shopping for your loved one, there are many things that you may need help with from time to time so don't be reluctant to ask!

- In many areas of the country, support groups have gone virtual. Search out your local health authority and mental health organizations to determine what online family caregiver support groups/communities are available and make connections if this is something that you find helpful.

- Many family therapists offer sessions either over the phone or via facetime or skype. Virtual therapy is still a very effective way of getting support if needed.

Housing and Financial Support During COVID-19

Information related to housing and financial support during COVID-19 can change from month to month, and differs according to region. For specific information about what supports are available in your region during COVID-19, please refer to the regional resources provided by your facilitator.

Since COVID-19, governments have responded quickly by providing rent, income and employment relief to those who are struggling.¹⁸

¹⁸ CMHC, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020; Government of Ontario, 2020

- The federal government announced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in the early months of COVID-19. CERB is a benefit of \$2000 per month over four months for workers who lost their employment, or who are ill or quarantined due to COVID-19. As well, people who were looking after someone with COVID-19 or who couldn't work because they had to stay home with their children were also eligible for CERB. CERB has been widely applauded. Unfortunately, however, it has not been accessible to some vulnerable people. To keep up to date on CERB, please see the following link: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html>
- In addition, the federal government announced a one-time \$600 payment in recognition of the extraordinary expenses faced by persons with disabilities during COVID-19. The following link provides further information on this: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/covid19-emergency-benefits/one-time-payment-persons-disabilities.html>
- To address the risk of homelessness during COVID-19, some new housing initiatives have been put in place very quickly.

Advocacy for your Family Member During COVID-19

COVID-19 raises many opportunities to advocate generally for better mental health services and supports, as well as improved income and housing programs. Some areas to consider focusing advocacy efforts on include¹⁹:

- The relative success of CERB has led to calls to make this a permanent replacement to the antiquated income support programs. You may want to advocate for a basic income guarantee with your local government which can improve social and health outcomes.
- You may also want to advocate for making the recent expansion of virtual mental health services permanent following COVID-19. Telemental health and other virtual supports are effective, convenient, and particularly relevant for people living in rural, northern, and remote communities, not just during COVID-19 but always.
- Continued advocacy for increased housing options (particularly supported housing options) needs to occur. The response to COVID-19 in this regard has demonstrated that enhancements can occur quickly when needed, and this needs to be continued.

The response to COVID-19 in general has demonstrated both the need for drastic improvements to our health and social support systems, and that enhancements to programs and services can occur quickly when needed. Though many new additional supports may be phased out, the impact of the pandemic will not go away so quickly. The energy for change needs to be maintained as we move beyond COVID-19.

Recommended online resources:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/what-matters-most/202003/coronavirus-coping-6-ways-your-strengths-will-help-you>

¹⁹ Mental Health in Canada: COVID-19 and Beyond CAMH Policy Advice, July 2020