

Session 2: COVID-19 ADDENDUM

It is important to recognize the additional challenges, demands and stresses placed on you as a family caregiver in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This addendum to Session 2 will provide information on how to:

- Adapt strategies for providing support to your family member during COVID-19
- Effectively manage additional stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic
- Reimagine your self care plan in the face of COVID-19
- Pay attention to your own needs and limits, and take care of your own health and hope during this unprecedented time.

The “Treatment Battle” and COVID-19

Providing care for a family member who has schizophrenia or psychosis is an important role, but it can also be challenging. Supporting and encouraging your loved one and collaborating with treatment may be more difficult during COVID-19 for many reasons, including:

- Routines may be disrupted
- Usual ways of communication and support might not be possible
- Physical distancing requirements may hinder ability to provide both practical (doing laundry, preparing meals, etc.) and emotional support
- Family member’s psychotic symptoms may exacerbate
- Access to mental health services for your family member may have changed
- Uncertainty about the availability of mental health services and supports during COVID-19 and/or temporary disruptions to services
- Inpatient units may have reduced or suspended visiting hours, or may only permit essential visitors

While all of the communication and support strategies you have learned in this session still apply, it is important to consider how additional challenges may impact the ways in which you can provide this support. Some additional strategies are listed below:

Strategies for Encouraging Collaboration with Treatment

1. Become knowledgeable about how supports and services will change during COVID-19
2. Help your family member make alternative arrangements to access medication if necessary. (For instance, there may be an ability to sign up for repeat prescription delivery if your family member requires an ongoing prescription medication.)
3. Help your family member make alternative arrangements to access required services and supports.

Strategies for Social Withdrawal and Isolation (While Physical Distancing)

1. Agree to connect at certain times, either over the phone or via a video call

2. Encourage your family member to take part in online social activities, such as online peer support

3. Suggest other online activities for you to do together, such as playing online games or sharing your favorite photos

4. When safe to do so, certain in-person physical distancing activities may be appropriate, such as meeting outside in an open space or going for a walk (while maintaining a safe distance).

Strategies for Encouraging Protection from COVID-19

Family caregivers often need to anticipate the level of assistance and encouragement their family member will need to take care of themselves and to keep themselves safe, especially during COVID-19. Many of the strategies previously discussed apply to assisting your family member with taking the appropriate safety precautions for COVID-19, including:

1. Use the LEAP (listen, empathize, agree, partner) approach to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of taking safety precautions

2. Remind your family member to wear a mask, wash their hands, and physical distance when appropriate

3. Provide support for accessing the equipment required to stay safe (mask supply, hand sanitizer). In some situations you may have to provide these to your family member yourself.

4. Encourage learning about COVID-19 and prevention strategies

5. Follow the tips you learned for supporting good personal hygiene

Self Care During COVID-19 – Tips for Family Caregivers

In addition to causing challenges for supporting your family member, the additional stress due to change and uncertainty can have a negative impact on your own mental health. With the addition of these extra stressors, it is even more important to ensure that you pay attention to your own mental health and self care. The following provides a few additional tips related to COVID-19 and emphasizes some tips that you have already learned about:

- **Be media mindful:** try to limit the amount of COVID-19 news you consume, and only seek information from trusted sources that allow you to make informed plans to protect yourself and your family member. Avoid inaccurate or overly sensational news stories and outlets.

- **Have a routine:** as much as possible, try to keep to the routines you were used to before COVID-19. If some of your daily routines have been disrupted, try to find alternatives or develop a new routine.

- **Stay healthy:** Try as much as possible to keep a regular exercise routine, and maintain healthy eating

habits. In addition, try to take time to engage in activities that you find relaxing and that you enjoy.

- **Stay connected:** Though at times you may not be able to share the same physical space, try to stay connected and in regular contact with people in your social network. Make sure to reach out to your own support network if you are feeling overwhelmed.
- **Check in with yourself:** Though it is perfectly normal to feel anxious or overwhelmed during this challenging time, try to be mindful of your thoughts and mental states, and challenge unhelpful thinking.
- **Be patient with yourself:** If you feel that you are not doing enough or operating at your usual capacity, remind yourself that you are doing your best in this uncertain and difficult time! Celebrate your resilience and what you have been able to accomplish, and give yourself space to adjust to this new and unpredictable situation.

Reimagining your Self-Care Plan

You learned a lot about self care and making a self care plan in session 2 today. In your previous self care plan, you may notice that some self-care activities that you previously engaged in are no longer available to you due to social distancing measures. Taking some time to think of some similar alternatives may help you to feel more prepared to manage your self care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pre-COVID-19 Self-Care Activity	Alternative Activity

Additional Supports for Family Caregivers During COVID-19

The specific supports available for caregivers will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and it is important to reach out to your regional health authority and local organizations to understand what supports are available to you. In addition to the resources provided in the participant notes for this session, an extra collection of online resources that can help caregivers deal with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic is included below.

Recommended Online Resources

- https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2020-04/fact_sheet_caregivers_eng.pdf

- <https://www.iamentalhealth.ca/Find-Support/Resource-Hub/Support-During-COVID-19>

- <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/covid19-infosheet-help-when-feeling-worried-pdf.pdf?la=en&hash=9599BDB0FC3DFDCF4AF57A4555E11D9461D8A83C>

- <http://howrightnow.org/>

Additional Notes

Paranoia about COVID-19 in People with Schizophrenia

There is little literature available, (other than a few case examples), regarding the presence of and impacts of COVID-19 related paranoia in people with schizophrenia. One case study recorded the experience of an individual with schizophrenia presenting with COVID-19 related delusions and hallucinations which illustrated “the potential of COVID-19 to precipitate entry into a psychotic phase and impact symptom manifestation.”¹ In this case, the individual was more paranoid about the people around him getting COVID-19 than himself. The authors of this case study suggest that “media coverage of extraordinary circumstances may influence the content of delusional thoughts, especially in a crisis such as a pandemic.”

Another recent number of cases in a similar case study reported on four individuals who presented with acute psychosis in response to the various psychosocial stressors associated with COVID-19.² These individuals did not specifically have a pre-existing psychosis, but several had pre-existing anxiety or depression, etc. This study further referenced an observational study that suggests a “25% increase in acute psychosis for individuals living in areas with a high prevalence of COVID-19 cases (Hu et al., 2020)”.

The above illustrates the important job that media has in presenting “balanced and responsible” reporting on COVID-19 so as to reduce the potential of overreaction in people who are at risk, (including people with pre-existing schizophrenia), and to prevent potential psychotic episodes. As well, it is important as we have already discussed, that individuals try to limit the amount of COVID-19 media coverage that they watch/read and to try to consider information only from credible sources.

¹ COVID-19 Paranoia in a Patient Suffering from Schizophrenic Psychosis – a Case Report. M. Fisher et al. Psychiatry Research. 2020 June.

² Valdes-Flórida et al., 2020)

How to Help a Family Member who Experiences “Technology Paranoia”

During COVID-19, the use of technology for medical, treatment, crisis, and support related services for people with serious mental illness has increased. We know that several provinces as well as the federal government has increased virtual and telephone therapies, crisis services and supports since the onset of COVID and that some in-person services have had reduced access in some circumstances.

Research regarding how people living with schizophrenia use and relate to technology is very limited. However, one study involving a web-based survey of 457 individuals who identified as having schizophrenia schizoaffective disorder, or schizophrenia spectrum disorder looked at the positive and negative feelings regarding the use of mobile devices amongst those surveyed.

The study results found that while positive feelings toward mobile devices were more common, “individuals with schizophrenia, like the general population, have both positive and negative feelings toward their mobile devices”.³ Of the survey respondents with schizophrenia, 25% reported feeling “frustrated,” 24% “paranoid,” and 19% “angry,” which were similar to the feelings caused by use of technology in the general population. One limitation of this survey, however, was that some who are afraid of technology may not have participated in the web-based survey.

So what does a caregiver do if a family member is afraid of using technology for medical treatment, recovery oriented supports, and other necessary and important services during this time of COVID? There are a few possibilities:

- If the person is more comfortable with a phone vs a computer, they could be encouraged to undertake their appointments via phone.

- A person close to the individual whom they trust could demonstrate the use of an Iphone (with Facetime) or an android phone (with skype).

- A person close to the individual and someone they trust could have a computer/laptop side by side with the family member and they could have a virtual chat together in the same room so they can reinforce the reality of the use.

- Your health care provider may have other ideas as to how to facilitate needed appointments.

³ Digital Technology Use Among Individuals with Schizophrenia: Results of an Online Survey. Katrina Gay et al., JMIR Mental Health, Apr-June 2016.