

Session 4: Covid-19 ADDENDUM

The stresses associated with COVID-19 can make coping with the symptoms of psychosis difficult, and at times it may seem impossible for a person with psychosis or schizophrenia to stay on course with their recovery plan. This session talks about strategies for promoting recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- How to support your family member to continue on their recovery journey
- How to recognize the warning signs of a relapse, and how to deal with relapses if they occur
- How to continue to instill hope in your family member and yourself during this difficult time

Strategies for Encouraging and Supporting Recovery During COVID-19

The strategies you've learned in this session are important to continue to practice, even though it may seem especially difficult to do during COVID-19. Remember that hope is essential to recovery.

The following summarizes three key things that the University of Michigan Department of Psychiatry suggests to emphasize during COVID-19 to promote and support recovery.

Supporting regular recovery activities: It is easy for our family members to fall away from healthy habits when they are stressed, however keeping up with their routines and focusing on their recovery goals puts them in a better position to manage the stresses they are experiencing. You can encourage your family member to keep in contact with those involved in their recovery plan by telephone, face to face technology, or even in person if public health guidelines permit.

Supporting coping skills: Part of a recovery plan often includes practice healthy coping and relaxation skills. As we've learned, even small stresses can affect a person with psychosis so it is imperative that your family member engage in activities that they enjoy to the greatest degree possible while of course, following public health guidelines. This could include a safe physical distance walk, deep breathing, reading, listening to music, etc. Perhaps now is a time where you could help your family member discover new interests as well, such as taking an online yoga class or learning a new skill on the computer.

Encourage connections: While there are times when face to face connections will not be possible, it is still important for your family member to maintain connections. These may be connections with people that they have already established in their lives, and/or it may be new connections that may be available in your community such as online groups, peer supports, etc. It may also be an opportunity for you to encourage your family member to connect with other family members that they may not have connected with in a while. As well, you can encourage your family member to have a "check in" buddy to connect with every day.

Some other tips for you as a family caregiver to consider:

Maintain a calm atmosphere: Due to the additional tensions and anxieties associated with COVID-19, it may be difficult to maintain a calm atmosphere at home. Try to avoid acquiring habits that may increase that level of anxiety, such as excessively playing negative news coverage on the television, or constantly discussing what is going wrong or what could go wrong in the world. Continue to practice calming activities together, and draw from your self-care plan in session 2 to help yourself stay calm.

Recognise your limits: Due to the additional stress that you may be feeling due to COVID-19, take some time to reassess the level of care and support you can reasonably provide. If you need to temporarily step back from providing some type of support, explain this to your family member and the health professionals involved in their care so that alternative supports can be arranged.

Relapses and Warning Signs During COVID-19

As we learned in session 1, there is a relationship between psychosis and stress and people who experience psychosis can be particularly sensitive to stress. Within the context of COVID-19, individuals with schizophrenia or psychosis may be vulnerable to relapse due to fear of COVID-19, increased stresses generally, or even the “boredom” of social isolation.¹⁵ As such, it is important to be able to anticipate your family member’s reactions to stress, and look out for warning signs that may indicate that your family member is at risk of a relapse.

The warning signs of a psychosis relapse vary between individuals. A family caregiver is often aware of their family member’s relapse “signature” which is a personal set of early warning signs. (Some examples of potential warning signs can be found in the previous section of these notes.)

During COVID-19, due to social isolation and not being able to have face to face contact at some points, it may be more challenging for family caregivers to recognize or notice some of these symptoms. It is important to remember that you can only do what you can do right now...that some things are not within your control. Continue to connect as best you can through phone calls or online venues such as facetime or skype.

It is important to take time to encourage your family member to review their personal relapse prevention program, to ensure it is feasible to follow during COVID-19. If there are any items that are not feasible, you can support your family member to come up with alternative strategies.

If a crisis does occur, refer back to your Family Crisis Plan and follow the additional measures that you outlined to account for the COVID-19 context.

A Word About “Normal” Reactions

When faced with an “abnormal” situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to remember that feeling anxious, sad, or afraid are all “normal” physiological responses.

¹⁵ Lais Fonseca, Schizophrenia and COVID-19: risks and recommendations, Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry, April 2020

Some common feelings may include:

- Fear of getting COVID-19 or infecting others
- Fear of being apart from family members
- Boredom or loneliness related to having to isolate or physical distance

As well, a sense of loss that comes from the COVID-19 pandemic may be experienced. This may include losing a loved one, a job, a routine, a hobby or anything else that we have “lost” during this time.¹⁶ Grief is a normal experience following loss but it can be very difficult.

Your family member may experience these feelings, as may you. It is important to respond to their COVID-19 related concerns in a supportive way by listening, reassuring them, and again, encouraging them to maintain their recovery routine to the greatest degree possible.

Recommended Online Resources:

- <https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/psychiatry/michigan-psychiatry-resources-covid-19/specific-mental-health-conditions/psychosis-spectrum-disorders-managing-stress-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19/loss-grief-and-healing>
- <https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-psychological-impacts-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19/>

¹⁶ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2020