Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to contribute to a range of responses including but not limited to anxiety, depression, a fear of loss of control. Some will experience emotional and physical pain from deep worry that will affect sleep, eating, and care of self. For those who already experience anxiety in their day to day life there may be an additional level of anxiety. Let’s continue to be sensitive to each other and support our clients as we navigate a very challenging world crisis. This document was created to offer some ways to navigate this difficult time. It is meant to serve as a resource and is not inclusive of the ways we can promote well-being. Please be sure to practice self-care and model what you expect from others.

Youth In Need Staff

We can best support our clients and each other when we are practicing good emotional and physical self-care. What follows are some considerations to maintain and boost our personal well-being:

• **Pause and reflect** – Take a moment to reflect on the daily and weekly activities you already practice that build positive emotion, creativity, meaning and purpose, connection to others, and accomplishment. We are likely to continue to do what we already have routines around. Consider modifications that will allow continuation of the things that are most beneficial to you.

• **Take care of your body** – Try to eat healthy well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep. Limit or avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

• **Connect with others** – Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend, colleague, or family member. Maintain healthy relationships and a strong support system.

• **Take breaks** – Make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Try taking in deep breaths. Try to do activities you usually enjoy. Practice mindfulness exercises that will help you to focus on positive experiences.

• **Stay informed** – When you feel that you are missing information, you may become more stressed or nervous. Watch, listen to, or read the news for updates from officials. Be aware that there may be rumors during a crisis, especially on social media. Always check your sources and turn to reliable sources of information like your local government authorities.

• **Avoid too much exposure to news** – Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do enjoyable activities and return to normal life as much as possible and check for updates between breaks.

• **Seek help when needed** – If distress impacts activities of your daily life for several days or weeks, talk to a professional. We are not immune!
Youth In Need Clients

Factors that Influence the Response of Children, Youth, and Families to Crisis

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) are an excellent source of information. The CDC reminds us that separation from school, family, and friends can create a great amount of stress and anxiety for children and youth. The emotional impact of an emergency on a child depends on a child or youth’s characteristics and experiences, the social and economic circumstances of the family and community, and the availability of local resources. Not all children respond in the same ways. Some might have more severe, longer-lasting reactions. The following specific factors may affect a child’s emotional response:

- Direct involvement with the emergency
- Previous traumatic or stressful event
- Belief that the child or a loved one may die
- Loss of a family member, close friend, or pet
- Separation from caregivers
- Physical injury
- How parents and caregivers respond
- Family resources
- Relationships and communication among family members
- Repeated exposure to mass media coverage of the emergency and aftermath
- Ongoing stress due to the change in familiar routines and living conditions
- Cultural differences
- Community resilience

Most common reactions to distress will fade over time for most children. Children who were directly exposed to a crisis can become upset again; behavior related to the event may return if they see or hear reminders of what happened. In the case of COVID-19, a young person may have a person close to them who later becomes ill which triggers the original fear. Children and youth may also worry about their friends, teachers, and schools. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to communicate with their YIN counselors about concerns they may have.
Below are common age-related reactions to distress:

3 to 6 year-olds
Preschool and kindergarten children may return to behaviors they have outgrown. For example, toileting accidents, bed-wetting, or being frightened about being separated from their parents/caregivers. They may also have tantrums or a hard time sleeping.

7 to 10 year-olds
Older children may feel sad, mad, or afraid that the event will happen again. Peers may share false information; however, parents or caregivers can correct the misinformation. Older children may focus on details of the event and want to talk about it all the time or not want to talk about it at all. They may have trouble concentrating.

Preteens and teenagers
Some preteens and teenagers respond to trauma by acting out. This could include reckless driving, and alcohol or drug use. Others may become afraid to leave the home. They may cut back on how much time they spend with their friends. They can feel overwhelmed by their intense emotions and feel unable to talk about them. Their emotions may lead to increased arguing and even fighting with siblings, parents/caregivers or other adults.

Children and youth with disabilities and/or special needs
Children who need continuous use of a breathing machine or are confined to a wheelchair or bed, may have stronger reactions to a threatened or actual disaster. They might have more intense distress, worry or anger than children without special needs because they have less control over day-to-day well-being than other people. The same is true for children with other physical, emotional, or intellectual limitations. Children with special needs may need extra words of reassurance, more explanations about the event, and more comfort and other positive physical contact, such as hugs from loved ones.

How to Help Caregivers, Children, and Youth Cope
Children and youth look to caregivers and supportive others for guidance and support. Encourage parents and caregivers to set a good example for their children by managing their stress through healthy lifestyle choices, such as eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep, and avoiding alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. Parents and caregivers who are prepared, rested, and relaxed are likely to respond better to unexpected events and can make decisions in the best interests of their families and loved ones.

The following tips can help parents and caregivers to reduce stress during and after a crisis.

During

- Encourage discussion with their children so they know their caregivers are prepared to keep them safe. Offer ideas for how caregivers can communicate with children and youth about what is happening in a way that they can understand. Remind caregivers to keep it simple and appropriate for each young person’s age.

- Have caregivers review safety plans. Having a plan will increase their children’s confidence and help give them a sense of control.
• Talk with caregivers about remaining calm and reassuring their children.

After

• Have caregivers provide children and youth with opportunities to talk about what they went through or what they think about it. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions.

• It is difficult to predict how some children and youth will respond to traumatic events. Because parents, teachers, and other adults see children in different situations, it is important for them to work together to share information about how each child and youth is coping after the crisis has dissipated.

How to Further Help as a Mental Health Professional

You have been trained to help and support people who experience different forms of crisis and its aftereffects. Next are a few ideas to further support children, youth, and families:

Before Sessions, Meetings, and Interactions

Keep in mind:

• We have an extraordinary capacity to help children, youth, and families.
• We can change social conditions to create environments in which children and youth feel safe.
• Language gives us power to change ourselves and others.
• Communication of our experiences helps us to define what we know and find a common sense of meaning.
• Children and youth have the ability to regulate their physiology through such activities as breathing, moving, and touching. Ask what they need, and respond appropriately.
• As much as possible, try to maintain consistency in contact with children and youth. This may be challenging given the circumstances so plan accordingly. Contact helps promote safety and security.

In Sessions, Meetings, and Interactions

• Create comfortable environments where children and youth can talk openly (including the use of art, music, etc.). Do not push them to talk about things they are not ready for.
• Think body-mind, not mind-body. Trauma increases physiological response and inhibits thinking and speaking. Promote calmness by focusing on breathing, relaxing music, a low voice tone, and/or items in the setting that contribute to a sense of safety and security. Children and youth are more likely to talk when their bodies feel calm.
• Listen patiently to what children and youth have to say.
• Acknowledge and validate their concerns.
• Be mindful of safety. Crisis can trigger overwhelming fear that may put a child or youth at risk of self-harm as a result of feeling they have no control.
• Avoid trying to put a positive spin on the crisis or search for silver linings.
• Normalize feelings, particularly when they are associated with fear and anxiety. There are no right or wrong ways to feel.
• Children and youth will remember. Help them to cope with their feelings rather than trying to avoid the distress. Children and youth can learn to regulate their emotional responses as they remember.
• Our goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but instead to help children and youth to manage it.
• Help children and youth to explore things that they can influence in their lives. A sense of control can have a calming effect.
• Use therapeutic stories to encourage calmness and increase positive emotions.
• Explore recent successes of the child or youth to remind them of positive life experiences.
• Ask children and youth what their caregivers do or can do to help them feel safe and share.
• Talk about other social support systems and ways that children and youth connect to others in their communities.
• Talk about the future. A vision of the future has been shown to be very influential in coping with trauma.

The CDC and WHO provide further guidance for helping children and youth to cope with fear associated with situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources can be found at:

https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2