

Tips and tricks to help adolescents cope during the COVID-19 pandemic

Change can be difficult, especially when the situation creates unpleasant feelings, including fear, anxiety, stress, grief, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, or irritability.

One thing is clear: Adolescents all over the world are experiencing the same changes. You are definitely not alone.

Being an adolescent during a pandemic is not easy. Your parents are making rules, and are around more than ever. The government is telling you not to leave the house, for your safety and the safety of others.

What can you do?

Stay informed, without getting too stressed about it

Online information, from media sources, social media, or news channels can be contradictory. Being exposed to information non-stop (even if some of it is entertaining, like people hoarding toilet paper!) can cause us stress even if we don't realize it.

That's why it's useful to focus on a few sources that you can trust (like press conferences by the Prime Minister, or Premier of your province). If someone you know is posting too much information or if their posts are worrying you, you can simply block or silence them (Facebook has a "snooze for 30 days" function). You can also take a break from social media!

Some information might stay stuck in your head and worry you. Don't hesitate to ask a trusted adult to help you find answers to some of your questions. As much as possible, avoid "Dr Google", which can often create more worries. If you have questions about the virus or the pandemic, try referring to government sources.

- ❖ Government of Quebec: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/>
- ❖ Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>

Some services that were available to you before may be more difficult to access. Don't hesitate to call your counsellor and leave a message if things are not going well. Most of them leave details in their voicemail messages about how to contact them, or who else to contact in their absence.

The government is telling you to stay home and away from your friends. You've probably heard about "social distancing". But what does it do, really? It helps make sure that fewer people get sick at the same time, so that hospitals can take care of people who need the most help.

It's definitely not easy to be away from friends—especially a boyfriend or girlfriend—when everything has changed. Here are some tips to help you get through this time.

Remember, there was a time before this virus (school, parties, piano lessons, and soccer games), and there will be a time after!

How to adapt when everything is changing

To help reduce stress, it's helpful to do things that make stressful thoughts go away. Some people need music, others need silence. Some need to move, while others stay still, and some keep busy. There is no one way that works for everyone, except to take care of yourself and do what makes you feel good. Sometimes, what works for you one day won't work the next day. Try different things, and keep a list of what helps you sort out your thoughts when things get mixed up.

Love in the time of COVID-19

People's physical presence can be reassuring. What do you do when they are not there? You could ask them to leave you with a piece of their clothing—a sweater or a scarf, for example. It's not like a real hug, but it can help. Some people like to have the person's perfume/cologne, or a special object (a gift that they received from the person, a stuffed toy, a photo, or a letter). Having these objects can help some people cope with the physical absence of a person, even for a moment. For others, these objects may remind them just how much they miss the other person. If this is how you feel, you can put the objects away until you need to see them again.

Other things to remember:

- ❖ Long-distance relationships exist even without a pandemic (for adolescents and adults). If you've been involved in one, you can share advice with your friends.
- ❖ This time of physical distancing will also prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As the premier of Quebec said, this isn't the time to be exchanging bodily fluids! But remember: If you are taking a contraceptive pill, continue to take it. You should also make sure you have condoms for when isolation is over, (if you are sexually active).
- ❖ Be very careful not to exchange overly revealing photos or videos. Long before this pandemic, bullies have used photos to make fun of people who have shared them.

- ❖ An easy way to connect with your boyfriend or girlfriend is through video chats. This allows you to see non-verbal cues like facial expressions and gestures, which can help you feel physically closer.
- ❖ Maybe this is the time to write emails, virtual love letters, or maybe even a real letter on paper! Writing down your feelings can make you feel better.
- ❖ Another idea is to keep a personal journal about this unique event. Write down how you spend your days, what you are thinking and feeling, and describe positive or difficult events. It will certainly be interesting to look at in the future. You may be surprised to see just how brave you were.

What if I have conflicts with my friends, girlfriend, or boyfriend?

You probably know that it's not easy to manage conflicts by text. As much as possible, use video applications (Facetime, Snapchat, etc). And just as you might be feeling more stressed right now (or sad or angry or hopeless, or whatever else you feel at the time), remember that your friend, girlfriend or boyfriend might also be dealing with a lot. It's better to take a deep breath, or wait until tomorrow to have a difficult conversation, than act out of emotion and regret it later.

Relationships with your parents

Even in self-isolation, it's important for you to have alone time in your room. Parents should continue to ask your permission before entering. You might want to make this clear to them. If you don't have your own room, try to find a secluded or private space in your house where you can go when you want to have some alone time.

- ❖ Make sure you spend time with your family (for example, meals are good times for conversation). Set up a routine that includes activities you can do together (board games, discussions on different aspects of the pandemic, or whatever you decide).
- ❖ This is a good time to try to reconnect with your parents, especially if you feel like you haven't seen them a lot lately. You may realize they aren't that bad after all.
- ❖ If there is a conflict with your parents (and it's quite likely there will be), here are some things you can do: go for a walk by yourself (respecting the rules for social distancing; use a relaxation app (such as Breathr, MindShift or Headspace) or distract yourself with music. Use whatever works for you in times of conflict. Your parents should find ways to reduce the conflict as well.

I miss my friends ... what do I do?

Thanks to technologies that you probably know very well already, there are lots of things you can do with your friends without being with them physically. Here are some examples:

- ❖ Video chats, email, social networks.
- ❖ Watch the same film, show, or listen to the same music at the same time and talk over a group video chat.
- ❖ Organize a virtual party via Skype, Facetime or another app.
- ❖ Invite a friend to practice activities like yoga or do a workout at home at the same time as you, and talk about it afterwards (there are tons of free videos online).
- ❖ Your school will likely be sending you work to complete. Contact your classmates and do it together.
- ❖ As for screen time, it's often a topic that causes tensions between adolescents and their parents. Your parents will probably be more flexible than usual, knowing that this is how you're staying connected with your friends. But it's best to avoid using devices too late at night, (you should try not to change your sleep schedule too much). A good compromise would be to find a sleep schedule that is a balance between your typical school-day schedule and your typical weekend schedule.
- ❖ Many adolescents have a strong social conscience: Now is the time to show it! You can help neighbors with groceries, for example, as long as you follow government recommendations (physical distance, handwashing for at least 20 seconds, isolating yourself if you feel sick).
- ❖ This is also the time to develop those many talents that lie within you: art, room decorating, room organizing, writing, music...
- ❖ More ideas are here: www.thecubiclechick.com/2020/03/17/36-indoor-activities-for-teens-during-a-quarantine

Life hygiene tips

It's important to keep a schedule, even if you aren't going to school. The schedule will be different, but you can create it yourself or together with your family.

- ❖ For example, you could create a timetable showing the days of the week, names of your family members, chores to share, activities, and so on.
- ❖ It's tempting to stay in your pajamas all day when you have to stay inside most of the time. This is good for a while, but it's best to shower or bathe, and get dressed, just the way you normally would.

- ❖ You'll probably be in your room more than usual. Try to make sure it doesn't get too messy.
- ❖ It's important to eat 3 meals a day, and a variety of foods if possible. Sometimes boredom can cause us to eat more, or less than usual. It can be useful to take your parent's advice on this subject.

Physical activity

You can work out at home, as if you were at the gym, or practice one of your favorite sports. There are lots of videos on YouTube to help. Many yoga or dance teachers are offering free courses online, so it's worth doing a bit of research.

Drugs

Social distancing and being isolated at home with your parents can be a big challenge for many adolescents, especially those who are addicted to vaping, smoking cigarettes, cannabis, or other substances.

Here are some important recommendations:

- ❖ Even though youth are less likely to develop serious illness from coronavirus, this may not be true if you vape or smoke. Vaping or smoking (tobacco or cannabis) can weaken your lungs and cardio-vascular system. This can increase your risk of becoming very sick with COVID-19, or having serious complications like pneumonia or respiratory distress that can lead to hospitalization.
- ❖ Vaping, smoking cigarettes, or using cannabis increases the risk of spreading COVID-19 during the process of buying or sharing these products.
- ❖ Vaping and smoking with others should be strictly avoided at all times during a pandemic.
- ❖ If you vape, smoke cigarettes or use cannabis, this is a good time to try to cut down or quit altogether. Even though you have less in-person social support, you can still set goals and objectives and get support from family members or friends (by phone or video chat, for example).
- ❖ For help quitting, you can contact your paediatrician or other health professional, or use a help line. Physicians can prescribe nicotine replacement products, if needed.

Advice for parents of adolescents

This is also a stressful time for parents, who have had to make a lot of changes to their family and work lives. Here are a few helpful tips for parents:

- ❖ Allow your teen to have some screen time (phone or other device), and establish schedules that consider their emotional needs.
- ❖ If you have a partner living at home, talk with them to prioritize rules that are most important, and make sure your messages are consistent.
- ❖ Set realistic expectations, and remember that everyone is adapting to this situation.
- ❖ Let your teen have some “alone time”, but not all day!
- ❖ Open up conversations, and keep communication positive.
- ❖ Learn about the effects of stress, and how to manage it:
 - www.mindfulnessforteens.com
 - www.stresstrategies.ca (Psychology Foundation)

Resources for parents and adolescents

- ❖ Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868
- ❖ 2-1-1 (phone) or 211.ca: In most provinces, to help find community resources
- ❖ 8-1-1: to access public health in most provinces, or consult this list:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/2019-novel-coronavirus-information-sheet.html#pha>
- ❖ Abuse or violence at home? Access the Victims Services Directory (Canada) here:
<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/victims-victimes/vsd-rsv/index.html>
- ❖ [National Eating Disorder Information Centre](https://www.nedic.ca/): Website (<https://nedic.ca/>) or helpline 1-866-633-4220

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