

COVID-19 and Mental Health

Information for Parents

Yellowstone Behavioral Health Center

As the world's focus turns to a virus with physical symptoms, the emotional repercussions should not be ignored. Adults and children have a lot to deal with these days from fear of infection, to a sense of dread and lack of control. Paying attention to your mental health, and your child's mental health is of particular importance right now. Our children's world has been turned upside down as they are pulled away from their regular routines. They may be feeling lonely and isolated as they are not in school or hanging out with their friends. There are numerous ways parents can help reduce the myriad feelings of anxiety, depression, fear and restlessness that children may be feeling.

We know that children react, in part, based upon what they see from the adults around them. Staying calm and having discussions about the crisis and your family's response is a good starting point.

Children's Mental Health Symptoms Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- **Returning to behaviors they have outgrown**
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.
- **Excessive worry or sadness**
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.

Some preteens and teenagers respond to trauma by acting out. This could include reckless driving, and alcohol or drug use. Others may become afraid and anxious. They may cut back on how much contact they have with their friends, or avoid activities they enjoy, or 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. Unexplained headaches or body pain can also emerge.

For special needs children:

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 require extra words of reassurance, more frequent check-ins on their emotional state, and frequent reminders concerning their safety.

Advice for Parents

- **Recognize that your children may react to your heightened emotions.**
- **Communicate with your children, in a calm manner, at an age appropriate level.**
Educate them on how you are going to care for them during this COVID-19 pandemic. Encourage children to talk about what they are feeling, answer their questions, and remain calm at all times.
- **Limit the amount of time they can spend on social media.**
Misinformation and sometimes traumatizing information is easily accessible and leads to a stress response in the body. Too much of this stress response compounded creates trauma responses including anxiety, depression, feelings of impending doom, increased respiration, poor sleep hygiene, unexplained body pains, and can lead to even greater problems in the future if not managed.
- **Find enjoyable activities that you can do together.**
Taking walks, playing games, listening to music, and practicing gratitude are all good ways to spend time together. Let your children help you come up with ideas for fun family activities. The process alone will help everyone feel connected as a family which makes a stronger defense against feelings of fear, anxiety and sadness.

If you feel you need further help managing your mental health, please feel free to reach out to Yellowstone Behavioral Health Center. We remain open via telephone and on video chat if needed. You can contact us at 587-2197 in Cody and 754-5687 in Powell. We also provide a 24/7 crisis line toll free at 1-800-949-8839.