

**ADVISORY FOR THE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT & MENTAL
HEALTH PROMOTION FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS
DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND**


The outbreak of the global pandemic COVID -19 understandably presents a challenging time for everyone around the world. Not only is this pandemic a serious medical concern, but it also brings mixed emotions and psycho-social stressors for all. There are emerging mental health concerns with specific focus on children, adolescents and youth especially children with disabilities. Children and adolescents may be more vulnerable and may experience heightened level of stress, anxiety and fearfulness, along with a range of other emotional and behavioural issues. Such unanticipated and sudden changes will be required to be addressed from all educational platforms. Teachers as well as families with an empathetic and patient approach can go a long way in mitigating such needs of children and adolescents.

COVID-19 is also bringing new stressors on **teachers, parents and caregivers**. This can hamper their capacity to provide adequate support and remain positively engaged with their wards. One aspect is certain that COVID-19 will have **profound impact on the psychosocial wellbeing** of students, families and teachers across the country. ‘*Manodarpan*’ is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to mobilize **Psychosocial Support** to help children and adolescents country-wide in a comprehensive and multimodal manner.

A few suggestions and practical tips for parents, teachers and students are highlighted below:

Suggestions & Practical Tips For Parents & Families

Be updated and provide age-appropriate information:

-  Discuss facts about COVID-19 gathered from authentic sources including health authorities. Sharing of facts will help in reducing fear and distinguishing them from myths and rumours.

- ✚ Information updates can be had at specific times during the day, two or three times at the most. Double check the news you read or hear on COVID-19. Avoid misleading news and rumours.
- ✚ Highlight the importance of hand wash, respiratory etiquettes like the use of handkerchief over mouth while coughing / sneezing, use of tissue paper or using the sleeve of shirt covering upper arm, and avoiding any social gathering etc.
- ✚ Set boundaries on time to be spent on social media, watching television and focus only on trusted sources.
- ✚ Find opportunities to relate positive and hopeful stories and images of local people who have experienced COVID-19. For example, stories of elderly couple in Kerala (aged 93 and 88 years) who have recovered and the nurse who supported them. Emphasize the fact to children in an age-appropriate way that a huge majority of people are recovering from this disease.

Be supportive:

- ✚ Give children space to share how they are feeling and let them know you are there for them.
- ✚ Children may have a lot of questions to ask. Allow children to ask questions and listen attentively to their queries and ensure that they know that they can come to you when they have any concern.
- ✚ Reassure them that they are safe. Let them know that it is natural to feel confused, upset or worried during times like these.
- ✚ Watch out for repetitive reassurance-seeking – a sign of distress in children. If there is significant distress, consider an opinion by a mental health professional. Seek options available in your locality, or online.
- ✚ Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope with it.
- ✚ Note that managing mental health and psychosocial well-being during this time is as important as managing physical health. During such trying times, it is likely for children to seek more attachment and be more demanding on parents.

- ✚ Be a substitute of your ward's friends. Tell them interesting anecdotes, jokes or stories. Engage in a creative activity with them. Make them feel responsible and contribute to efforts for their own and their family's safety.
- ✚ Addressing children's concerns eases their anxiety. Children will observe adults' behaviours and emotions for cues on how to manage their own emotions during difficult times.
- ✚ Be a role model to your child. During these tough times of lockdown where changes influence our daily lives, how we express our emotions between each other and amongst our families is an important factor of observation for our children.
- ✚ Find a way to take care of yourself. You are a strong pillar of support within the family. Your psychological space & "Me Time" is recommended.
- ✚ Closely observe your child with special needs during lockdown and thereafter, please discuss the learning and behavioural need assessment and welfare with your counselor and special educator of the school.
- ✚ Take note of change in patterns of emotions and behaviour of children such as excessive worry or sadness; avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past; difficulty with attention and concentration; bedwetting; irritability and unrestrained and difficult behaviors in adolescents and unexplained abdominal ache or body pain etc. and if these symptoms persist, take professional counselor's advice.

Build Responsibility:

- ✚ Encourage children to stay active. Add yoga in daily routine as it is good for their physical and mental health.
- ✚ Create a routine for children at home which can consist of having a set time for sleep, waking up, eating, learning, playtime and free time etc. as a structured schedule helps the children stay focused and motivated.
- ✚ Assign simple tasks to perform through the day (watering plants, helping to arrange clothes/books/play materials, helping younger sibling to learn, etc.)
- ✚ Make sure children stay in touch with their friends via social media or video call to help support social and emotional needs of your child.

- ✚ Engage your children in activity-based learning such as puzzles, painting, drawing, and crafting.
- ✚ Encourage children to create a journal in which they can jot down their feelings or emotions, new things learned about one's own self and/or others (such as siblings, parents, friends etc.).
- ✚ Do regular indoor exercise with your wards, eat healthy food and have sufficient sleep. Phone a friend or family members residing at other places. Play some games involving the entire family.
- ✚ Enable your ward to participate in online classes if possible and allow them to do all their activities in as similar way as they do normally.
- ✚ Ensure adequate support and attention for your child with special needs wherever applicable and do not hesitate to seek guidance from the school principal/school counsellor or special educators. For any medical support, contact the local medical authority.
- ✚ As a parent, you may play a vital role in ensuring that your wards maintain their mental health by listening to them, acknowledging their difficulties, clarifying their doubts, reassuring them, generating hope and providing emotional support in resolving issues.

Suggestions & Practical Tips For Principals & Teachers

- ✚ Reinforce 'education is for learning' through random engagements on out of syllabus activities encouraging children to read and exchange things they have read or learnt beyond textbooks. This will reduce the pressures created due to uncertainty in examinations.
- ✚ Engage students in expressive art activities such as drawing/painting or story telling that can help them express their feelings in a safe and supportive environment.
- ✚ Involve them in play activities like playing with clay or stress ball which can help release emotions like fear or anxiety.
- ✚ Teachers should take care of their own mental health and well-being to help with students' mental health.

- ✚ Encourage students to narrate any inspiring story of COVID-19 that they have read in a newspaper or seen on TV or in their locality where people have recovered from COVID-19 or who have supported a loved one to recover.
- ✚ Notify students verbally that they are always welcome to share their feelings regarding COVID-19 whenever they want.
- ✚ Reassure students that they are not alone and support is always available.
- ✚ In case the school is conducting online classes using application /social media platform, the responsibility is to ensure safety of children in digital space.
- ✚ Design guided offline activities that parents can perform with children which develops parents as mentors and also accommodates locations with connectivity issues.
- ✚ The participation of children in virtual classrooms should be under parental as well as teacher's supervision. For this school may provide proper orientation to parents.
- ✚ Enrich the utilization of human resource such as school counselor, special educator and the school nurse/ doctor for necessary inputs regarding health education, mental health & wellbeing classes.
- ✚ Conduct online examination preparation and career orientation sessions.
- ✚ Create a folder in google drive and name it – 'My Doubts and Worries' and encourage children to write their emotions and feelings, worries and doubts. Also create another folder that reads – "My Gains and My Learning". Motivate children to write positive stories, of what new skills they developed being at home, how they are spending their time with family, encourage them to post pictures or videos also shares stories of some act of kindness that they have done or seen or read of someone do it and share it on school's website. This will bring out lots of stories of resilience.
- ✚ It is advisable not to take any test within two weeks of reopening as and when possible. Teachers will be advised to take note of any symptoms of stress in children and immediately report it to school counsellor for taking appropriate action in collaboration with parents.
- ✚ Schools can have a 10-15-minute meditation/mindfulness session before starting the day's online classes where the students will be asked to sit quietly and allow the body to breathe deeply. It will help reduce tension and stress and increase feelings of well-being.

- ✚ It may please be noted that all special needs children need are to be given attention and care to help the families facilitate learning as well as day to day activities to keep the learners meaningfully engaged and stress free.

Suggestions & Practical Tips For Students / Adolescents:

Adolescents comprise nearly one-fourth of India's population. This is a huge demographic bonus for awareness and empowerment in coping with the change. Perhaps the most important thing they are learning is how we deal with an immediate crisis and what our priorities are. As an adolescent, going through the lockdown period and spending time away from school and peer group can bring forth a range of coping difficulties. On the other hand, this is an opportunity for a very new kind of learning to take place and help oneself to be aware, responsible and empowered.

- ✚ Learning is lifelong process. Your creative thinking in these times can go beyond the academic learning. Extend yourself by learning household chores and supporting younger siblings and parents.
- ✚ As an adolescent, you can involve grandparents and younger siblings in taking lead towards indoor activities such as art and music.
- ✚ During lockdown, expand the perspective on learning. Schools are one type of learning environment which prioritises academic learning. Home is different, and here social and cultural learning can be prioritised. Do things together such as reading books, making models, playing games and making meals. It's all a form of learning.
- ✚ Figure a new routine for yourself. Be responsible; take charge of your schedule, your study and your leisure time. Weigh the consequences of your actions and choose them wisely. This routine may include academic work, chores, play, interaction with peers and relatives over the phone or using other forms of technology as well as family time.
- ✚ Have a set time for meals and bedtime. It would be wonderful to also have some indoor exercise as part of this routine – for instance, simple breathing exercise, yoga, skipping and stretching. The routine must be made collaboratively with changes over time.
- ✚ Family time can be a good opportunity to reconnect with the family playing board games, cards, carom, antakshari, etc. Board games sites allow you to play games together.

Monopoly, Ludo and kitchen-kitchen can all be played with far away friends or family online.

- ✚ Listen to your language and monitor it – Do not say ‘Oh, I am locked at home; instead tell yourself – well I choose to stay home and stay safe.’ Use a proactive rather than reactive language
- ✚ Food is for nutrition of the mind and body. Choose healthy balanced diet and easily available home-made food and assist in cooking and chopping with your parents.
- ✚ As an adolescent, you can come forth to be a peer educator/mentor, with the help of your school counselor and family; you can initiate and innovate online-based peer support programs on life skills enrichment.
- ✚ Remember, it is a great opportunity for learning through online classes. Your support for the academic learning through these classes will go a long way in enriching the utility and productivity of these times.
