

## COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis Response: Supporting the Children and Teens of Health Care Workers



COVID-19 is impacting our country in unprecedented ways. Much of everyday life has changed, and many of us have experienced hardships we never even imagined prior to the pandemic.

Having a parent or family member who is a health care worker presents special challenges for those who love them. For these children and teens, every day brings new fears, worries, and anxieties. These young people struggle with the same challenges as their peers—separation from friends, loss of school and sports, and changes to their daily routines. But these challenges are compounded by additional stressors, including fears, worries, and anxieties about the personal safety of their family members; their own potential exposure to the coronavirus; and most recently, the impact of potential layoffs or furloughs.

To support these special young people, consider implementing the following recommendations, modeled on the NOVA Crisis Response.<sup>1</sup>

### Safety and Security

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs establishes safety and security as a basic need for human beings.<sup>2</sup> Safety

focuses on all aspects of physical safety, including handwashing, social distancing, and wearing masks when in public. Security addresses the emotional needs during this pandemic, including communication and connectedness.



- Establish and implement a flexible but consistent daily schedule. When changes are necessary, include children and teens in rearranging the priorities for the day.
- Provide clear, specific communication that considers the young person's needs. Be open to asking, "What do you need right now?" Don't be afraid to overcommunicate.
- Help children and teens focus on ways to maintain their own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of others. Describe the extra steps the family is taking to ensure the safety and security of their frontline workers and the family overall.

- Provide choices and alternatives (when possible) to help the young person feel some level of control over their environment. When life feels out of control, help them focus on those aspects of life that are controllable.

- Remember the importance of comfort items and routines. These can help to minimize anxiety over the unknown.

- Help them stay connected—to the parent or family member who may need to physical distance for safety reasons, and to others they trust. When possible, connect young people to a broader support system, whether through phone calls, caring cards, texts, or visits that accommodate physical distancing guidelines. Help them see they are not alone.



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## Ventilation and Validation

Once young people have an established a sense of safety and security, provide them with opportunities to tell their story. We are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. Each of us is experiencing this pandemic differently, and each of us needs an opportunity and safe place to share our personal experiences. Children and teens need an opportunity to tell their story (ventilation) and have their personal reactions and feelings accepted and normalized (validation). A range of fluctuating emotions is common during times of change and uncertainty. Caregivers can help support young people by providing a safe space for them to express themselves and by encouraging safe emotional expression.



- Provide frequent, safe opportunities for children and teens to tell their story. Open the door by asking “I’m wondering how all these changes are affecting you?” or “What is the hardest part of dealing with the pandemic for you?”
- Encourage young people to identify and stay connected with their peers, as well as with their adult support system. Remember the developmental importance of peer connections, especially for middle school and high school youth.
- Model healthy ways to express feelings. Sometimes naming your emotions opens the door for conversation and support.
- Listen and validate the emotions expressed and the reactions shared. Acknowledge common responses to stress, such as changes in sleep and eating patterns, mood instability, brain fog, and inability to focus.
- Encourage healthy feelings expressions and use of coping skills. Provide suggestions for using art, storytelling, music, writing, and physical activity to work through emotions.

- Acknowledge compounding stressors. These may include feeling unsafe, being unable to attend school, losing physical access to peers and other support systems, and being unable to participate in usual hobbies, sports, and other day-to-day activities.

## Prediction and Preparation

Prediction helps us establish a new balance by decreasing chaos and anxiety. Preparation allows us to begin making decisions and take some control of those aspects of our lives that are controllable. Our ability to focus on prediction and preparation may seem particularly challenging right now, given how many unknowns and unanswered questions we face daily. To support our young people, we can focus on what we do know and adjust our conversations as needed to new and changing recommendations.



- Focus on the short term—that is, on what will happen in the next few days and weeks.
- Establish a consistent but flexible schedule. Structure and routine offer children a sense of control and the comfort of consistency.



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  - Help initiate conversations about what may be different over time and what is likely to stay the same.
  - Recognize that these changes are challenging and that you will be here to support them.
- Limit media and news exposure. Work together to set healthy boundaries for time spent engaging in media activities. Ask questions about what your children and teens are seeing and hearing.
  - Support young people in balancing their school requirements, home and chore responsibilities, social interactions (including social media), and other activities. Recognize that existing “rules” related to these activities may need to be adapted during these unique times.



Having a mom or dad, grandmother or grandfather, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, or other loved one working on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic isn't easy. Every day produces a flood of emotions—ranging from pride and love to worry, anxiety, frustration, confusion, anger, and sadness. These feelings are exacerbated among young people with family members who are health care workers. Taking steps to support and acknowledge the special needs of these young people is critical to protecting their physical and mental health now and into the future.

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**If you are concerned about a friend or family member who is struggling with the trauma and challenges of this pandemic, contact your local crisis or mental health provider or reach out to the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255](#).**



<sup>1</sup>National Organization of Victim Assistance. (2009). The community crisis response training manual (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.

<sup>2</sup>Maslow, A. H. (1943, January). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 50(4) 370–396. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>