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## **Helping Teens Cope with the Impact of COVID-19**

***Attribute to:*** Mark Copertino, LCPC, Case Therapist at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital

### **How important is it to structure your daily schedule? How much input should teens have in developing that schedule?**

I think structuring one's schedule is important for teens and adults alike. Teens should have some input on this, and parents should take into account what works best for their child. For example, many schools have switched to an online format. Parents and teens should consider what works best in terms of when to focus on school work, and they should try to stick with this plan. I know for some kids, they prefer to do their work all in the morning directly after breakfast, while others like to take breaks throughout the morning and afternoon. Each child's individual needs and preferences should be taken in to account, but for the most part, some kind of structure is definitely recommended during these extended hours at home. I am a fan of including your child on such schedule discussions because it makes him/her feel like they have a say in their own daily life. No one wants to be forced into something they don't want to do. It's more of a plan made together versus a parent stating, "this is what you need to do and when you need to do it." Teens will definitely appreciate having a voice at the table when it comes to their day, and parents and teens can work together to build a schedule that makes sense for everybody.

### **How can teens practice self-care and support their mental health during this time?**

I would say that the areas in which we need to engage in self-care have not really changed much, however, such self-care activities may look a little different during this time. There are several areas of life in which teens can practice self-care during this time: physical, social, familial, intellectual, leisure and spiritual. Parents can help teens think of ways in which some of these self-care areas can be worked on during the stay at home order. For example, teens may be allowed to have a little more time on certain social media applications and/or video game counsels, as this is a way that many teenagers tend to connect with one another. This, of course, is assuming their child does not get stressed out or more irritable with such time on the phone or on video games. Teenagers are perhaps the best generation when it comes to connecting with others socially via technology. While having to stay at home, various methods such as FaceTime, Snapchat, texting and video games can be ways in which teens can connect with their friends from a social perspective. This, of course, must be done within reason. I don't have a magic number for screen time, but parents should understand that such methods of

communication may be all that their son or daughter has at this present time to connect with their friends. Being connected with peers is most important to teenagers compared to any other age group. It is a big part of their lives.

At-home exercises can be done to take care of physical self-care needs. There are many workouts that can be easily followed on YouTube without needing any equipment at all. Also, going for walks, runs, or bike rides is perfectly acceptable if social distancing is in effect.

This is also a potential time for families to spend good quality time with one another through dinners, board games, movies, etc. I have had families tell me that they are eating dinner all together for the first time in many years. We live in a time where parents and their children have very active and hectic work, school and extracurricular activity schedules. Although there is opportunity for quality family time, parents should understand that teens will also need time alone in their rooms as well. This is completely normal within reason. We were all teenagers at one point, and I know we all appreciated time to ourselves.

Parents can help their kids make a list of leisure activities that can be done while under the stay at home order. Electronics, movies, TV, arts and crafts, reading, rearranging one's room, painting/drawing, writing, board games, card games and journaling are just some ideas for potential leisure activities. I have also had several teens tell me that they are using this opportunity to clean out their closets, donate old clothes, paint their rooms a new color and rearrange the furniture to give it a new fresh feel in a time of stagnation and repetitiveness. Parents may consider allowing something like this during such a stagnant time.

### **How do you recommend balancing staying informed with staying positive?**

It's important to be grounded in some of the basic facts about this virus, as there is a lot of conspiracy theory and scare tactic rhetoric on the internet. Mostly though, avoid the news or at least watching it for long periods of time. I like to encourage people to focus more on what they are in control of versus what is out of one's control. The aforementioned interventions for self-care and activities to stay connected socially, familial wise and leisure wise are all within the control of an individual. Following the stay at home order is also something simple, but profoundly impactful when it comes to making a difference during these hard times.

### **How do we help teens who are worried that they or their parents/loved ones will get sick with the virus?**

Once again, encourage teens to follow CDC guidelines and to remind their loved ones to follow such guidelines as well. Focus on what can be controlled versus what cannot. Washing hands, not touching your face and keeping up with 6 feet of social distancing make profound impacts on not receiving or transmitting this virus. All of these are simple to do. Communicating anxiety and fears out in the open is encouraged with teens and their parents. Many of us have similar fears for those who are sick and/or elderly, and families can lift one another up and support each other by talking about such fears and worries.

**How can teens handle their stress and anxiety about how this will impact their academic performance and long-term goals?**

Two things come to mind here. First, be in contact with your teachers about your classes, online work and missing work. Although I have been hearing many assignments are not being graded officially, teachers will certainly make note of those who are participating in online work and making efforts compared to those who are not. I would recommend talking to your teachers via video chat or email to discuss your goals for their class and how to achieve them. Second, remember that everyone is all in the same boat. Remind yourself that you will not be judged differently than someone else, as everyone is going through this uncharted territory of online school and sports being cancelled. Colleges and universities will need athletes and students to fill their rosters and classrooms when this is all said and done. There will likely be make up test dates and perhaps tryouts or showcases in the future for sports that could not be completed this year. Contact prospective coaches, colleges, or athletic staff to inquire about joining a team or being admitted to a school if there are specific concerns.

**What is some advice for parents on managing disappointment with things like prom or graduation being canceled?**

This has come up several times with some of my patients and families. I think first and foremost, have empathy and understanding for their child if such events end up being cancelled. These are events that are looked forward to for many, and there is a sense of loss and grief if they end up being permanently cancelled. It would be completely normal for a teen to be upset that he or she cannot go to their senior prom or walk in front of their loved ones at a graduation ceremony. Keeping with the theme of focusing on personal control, I would encourage some alternative planned event if such formal events are cancelled. For example, I had a senior female patient explain to me that her, her boyfriend and several other close friends and couples plan to get dressed up, go out to dinner and do their own dinner cruise downtown on a Navy Pier boat if prom ends up being cancelled. Prom being cancelled will certainly be disappointing, but making your own fun in an alternative format is a great way to stay focused on other possibilities within your control.