

Prioritizing One Another During COVID-19

Proactive family strategies for the COVID-19 emergency.

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This post was written with Laura Colucci, BSc Hons, and Jackson Smith, MA.

Communities across Canada and the world have started implementing emergency measures to slow the spread of [COVID-19](#). Social distancing and shelter in place orders are being facilitated by closures of workplaces, schools, daycares, and other public and private amenities. This means that many families find themselves at home suddenly having to juggle numerous demands, including child care, self-care, and professional responsibilities, while also managing financial and health-related anxieties.

It is important to acknowledge that these are difficult times and that it is normal to feel overwhelmed. It is also important to know that there are things you can do as a family to make this time more manageable. These practices can foster healthy relationships, while simultaneously preventing the spread of disease.

We have outlined five proactive family strategies for maintaining positive family functioning during the COVID-19 emergency:

1. Encourage the productive sharing of feelings;
2. Be aware of each other's needs;
3. Embrace the change of pace with [gratitude](#);
4. Balance family activities and responsible distancing;

5. Stay in touch with family and loved ones outside of your home.

Encourage the productive sharing of feelings

It's important to acknowledge difficult feelings that you and other members of your family might be experiencing. Feelings of [fear](#), [anxiety](#), and uncertainty are among many normal and healthy reactions to the COVID-19 crisis. We are biologically hardwired to respond to threats in these ways. These feelings are your body's attempt at protecting you; they are reminders to be aware of your surroundings and actions during this time.

Encouraging the reciprocal sharing of feelings within the family is important and can prevent blow-outs. This includes providing dedicated time for the members of the family to have the opportunity to share how they feel and to listen to how everyone else feels. The content of what is shared should, of course, be developmentally appropriate based on the age of any children in the family; however, children should not be completely insulated from the realities of the situation. See [this article](#)

for tips on how to speak with your children about COVID-19.

Calm, deliberate, and authentic discussion of emotions can help tame these responses while facilitating best practices for cleanliness in the home. Thank your body for doing its job, take productive action according to recommendations of health officials, and understand that, beyond these measures, the fear and anxiety no longer serves you. At this point, it is time to shift your [attention](#) to

things that instill calm, love, and joy. Engage in breathing exercises, do something physical, and engage in whole family activities (see strategy #4 below).

See [this video](#)

for coping and [parenting](#) strategies during the COVID-19 crisis beyond this article.

Be aware of each other's needs

Amidst the shifting news updates and changing of plans, many families may face challenges with routines and staying busy. This may include disruption in income, layoffs, and other interruptions in activities that were important (e.g., children's cancellation of sports or arts). Similarly, elderly family members may find it challenging to access groceries and basic necessities amidst transit closures or because of mobility limitations. Be mindful of those in and around your family who may be in need during this time, either financially or practically. Offer to lend a hand. This tendency to think about the needs of one another can foster [empathy](#) and perspective-taking. Ask yourself, "what is it like for this person right now?" It may be hard for our family members to ask for help so don't wait for this; if you see or anticipate a need, cultivate [generosity](#) by standing in the gap and lending a hand to those who need it most.

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Embrace the change of pace with gratitude

Creating an agenda as you transition from the workplace to your home may retain a sense of normalcy in your days. However, this may be more difficult to execute than you initially anticipate, especially with young children. With the numerous

school and work closures, many families might find themselves in closer proximity than usual. Take a moment to try and cultivate an intentional stance of gratitude, even though this may not be your immediate or initial response. Try to embrace these changes, as they are yielding some much-needed family time in our lives; something that, as a society, we are often starved of. This is an opportunity to reconnect with important people in our lives, practice self-care, and take part in activities for which we would otherwise be too busy.

Balance family activities with responsible distancing

In the best of times, people need a balance of social and solitary time in order to thrive. This premise does not change during the state of emergency. Engaging in activities that involve all members of the family is important, as is personal time to refuel your tank.

Whole family activities create important opportunities to bond, learn, and grow together, while providing each other with the emotional security needed to navigate rough waters. Simple activities can go a long way. A few easy examples could be cooking and eating together, doing crafts, going for walks or playing games outdoors, playing board games, playing cooperative video games, and listening to music or dancing. These are opportunities to explore and foster shared interests and to promote the development of important social skills, such as collaborative [decision-making](#), clear communication, and reciprocity (give and take). Additionally, when families engage in collaborative tasks together, it creates a shared [identity](#), togetherness, safety, and sense of belonging.

An important point: When it is time to take a break from one another, make a family rule that everyone will practice social distancing and safe practices. Discuss why this is important, emphasizing themes of togetherness and interdependence.

Stay in touch with family and loved ones outside of your home

Social distancing does not have to mean self-isolation. Now is an important time to continue interacting with others despite having limited interaction face to face. Perhaps it is a good time to Skype or FaceTime with family members who live far away. We're fortunate to have numerous ways to communicate with those around us in ways that don't put anyone's health at risk. Take advantage of social media, calling, and texting with family and loved ones to stay close amidst the crisis.

That being said, keep up with your family media plan and maintain health media hygiene. You may discuss relaxing your regular [screen time](#) rules, but ensure there are still non-digital activities. Contacting friends and family members online could be exempt from these limitations. Indeed, reaching out to check in with loved ones can provide comfort and help to ease anxiety, especially for those who are living alone or stranded abroad.

Conclusion

Though families find themselves navigating uncertain times, we have also witnessed worldwide solidarity and goodness as nations, communities, and individuals have collectively worked together. Celebrate these moments with your family, and consider what you can do for each other and your neighbors.

To summarize Mr. Rogers, when times get tough, look towards all the people who are helping. Families are a powerful source of strength. Unity during times of crisis can create a ripple effect across society. By engaging with our feelings and each other in healthy ways we can mitigate the impact of COVID-19. It is possible to move beyond merely surviving. Families can thrive during this crisis as we shift our priorities to one another.

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