

Supporting people affected by COVID-19

This factsheet provides advice and guidance on supporting anyone directly or indirectly affected by the COVID-19 virus and its subsequent societal impacts.

Impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing and mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event and can affect the mental health of anyone.

The impact may include:

- Fear of infection for self, loved ones and friends/family in different states and countries.
- Loss of job and income; grief responses can be common.
- Disruption of usual routine.
- Social isolation distress caused by isolation with persons who may be abusive with reduced social contact.
- Worry and uncertainty about the future.
- Worries about accessing food, medications and health services.
- Inability to visit persons who are sick/dying; disruption to normal grieving processes due to quarantine restrictions.
- Supporting others who have been directly affected.
- Distress at the global impact of the pandemic on health and economic systems.
- Distressing media scenes and information.
- Feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information relating to COVID-19.

Reactions to impacts

People will react differently to the pandemic and associated changes. This can result in a variety of emotional responses including:

- Sadness or depression
- Loneliness
- Guilt
- Grief and loss
- Panic
- Worry and anxiety
- Reduced motivation
- Feeling flat or stuck.

Some people may initially present as highly distressed may recover in weeks or days. Others may report positive changes, such as feeling closer to their loved ones and an increased sense of resilience. Some people may experience an increase in a pre-existing mental health problem. Others may develop a new mental health difficulty such as depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder, substance use difficulties or post-traumatic stress disorder.

There is no right or wrong reaction to distress caused by the pandemic.

How you can help

In a crisis, always seek emergency support and ensure your own safety first (continue to adhere where possible to social distancing rules) and follow instructions of professional responders. Here's some other things to keep in mind:

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be mindful of your own emotional state and readiness to help; it's okay if you are unable to help.• Listen to the person non-judgementally; be aware that irritable or challenging behaviour may be a reaction to their experience.• Remain as calm and patient as possible.• Provide accurate information to the person; acknowledge that you may not have all the information.• Encourage appropriate professional help (e.g., GP, hospital emergency department, support line).• Encourage use of accurate information sources regarding COVID-19 (WHO, Department of Health).• Encourage use of other supports - contact over phone/text/FaceTime is better than no contact at all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't force the person to talk about their feelings or experience or probe for details.• Don't share your own feelings or emotions or interrupt the person.• Don't compare the person's experience to that of your own or others, or minimise the experience (for example, "it could have been worse").• Don't offer religious solace (for example, "God has reasons").• Don't tell the person how they should be feeling.• Don't discourage the person from talking about their feelings.

Who can help?

Anyone can provide mental health first aid to people affected by COVID-19-related distress. If you feel uncomfortable to assist someone yourself, offer to link them with a more professional support such as:

Emergency: 000

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Suicide Call-back Service: 1300 659 467

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (for people under 25)

1800 RESPECT: (for domestic violence concerns)

1300 MH CALL: (Acute Care Team)

Usual GP

Community Psychologist

After experiencing a distressing event, people will recover at their own pace. If they are not improving after 4 weeks or distress is increasing, professional help should be sought.

(This information has been adapted from Mental Health First Aid Australia. Assisting a Person Following a Potentially Traumatic Event: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines (revised 2019). Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2019 & Assisting a Person Affected by the Bushfire Crisis: Mental Health First Aid Guidelines. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2020).