



COVID-19 Mental Health Wellness Tips and Strategies to help Families Coping with Pandemic Stress and Anxiety

During these challenging times, many of our children and students are making an adjustment to distance learning from home. For some, this adjustment can be a difficult change and presents emotional challenges. West Bergen Mental Healthcare is committed to providing families and caregivers with essential support strategies to help navigate the “new normal”.

Below are guiding principles for all families, including those with children who have been diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum or with ADHD:

- Most importantly, continue to follow the CDC guidelines for protecting yourself and your family: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html> • Talk with your child about COVID-19 and any changes to the family routine. Encourage questions, clarify any misinformation, ask them to talk about their feelings and be sure and validate their feelings
- Create a structured schedule for each day. Keep meals, snacks, academic work, playtime and bedtime consistent. Post this schedule in an area for the family. • Have family meetings each morning to discuss the schedule for the day.
- Reward positive behaviors through a predetermined behavior plan (e.g sticker chart, allowance, earned tablet or game time). Keep this consistent for all positive and negative behaviors.
- Lack of social opportunities can present concerns. This is the time to be creative with having your child practice their coping skills. Encourage them to express their feelings through art, and social connection through technology, phones, computer games and video conferencing apps to connect with others.
- Plan a game night, in-person if that is safe and possible, or through video conferencing. Examples can be games like “I Spy”, 20 Questions, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit or have your family create an original game.
- Plan time to go outside for fresh air and family activities.
- Connect with spirituality and religion, if appropriate, through technology. Many religious institutions are becoming creative with video conferencing worship services and other youth activities.
- Work on promoting independence and teaching functional living skills by assigning daily living tasks such as cleaning, laundry, basic cooking skills etc. • Be kind to yourself as a parent or family member. Take breaks throughout the day. Create a self care routine.



COVID-19 Mental Health Wellness Tips and Strategies to Reduce Stress

Whether you are an essential worker stressed by the increased risk of exposure or a responsible community member stressed by managing the new normal of staying home and juggling multiple roles, West Bergen has some stress reducing tips for you. Let's start with some basics:

- **Sleep** - Ample, consistent, quality sleep is paramount. If you already have set bed and wake times, (being mindful of enough hours based on each person in your home's age and health profile), be sure to stick to those. If not, then this is a great time to establish wellness oriented sleep habits.
- **Nutrition** - It is important to keep up the best nutrition possible during stressful times. Think of food as fuel. Fueling everyone's systems with an optimal balanced combination of the food groups and nutrients assists in staving off the unhealthy physical effects of stress. Be sure to eat well and at regular intervals.
- **Create structure your environment** - Create a "new normal" by setting up school, work, play and other spaces in your home to enhance each family member's new stay at home experience. For time management, you can create individualized schedules. Get creative in how to make your daily schedules visible and then stick to them. Consider using your phone or tablet reminders for transitions in schedule and timers to assist in tracking amount of time allotted.
- **Movement** - When it comes to stress busting, the importance of moving cannot be underscored. If you already had an exercise routine, try to stick to the former schedule, time allotted and intensity as you adapt the location and means. If exercise is not part of your routine, this is a great time to build an exercise regimen into your schedule. In addition to exercise, be sure to add movement of any type across your day.
- **Stillness** - Incorporating stillness into your daily routine is an absolute stress reducing "must." When stressed, we tend to shift our mind's focus from the here and now to the past or worry about the future, using up mental energy that could be better spent in the present. Our brains are most efficient when singularly focused. Taking breaks to singularly focus on the present while being physically still is like a spa treatment for your brain.
- **Nature** - Nature is a natural de-stressor; be sure to get a daily dose. Combine your movement or intentional stillness with taking in nature. Or perhaps pause at a door or window to take in the beauty of the outdoors. Notice the colors of the sky, ground, trees; any changes in past few days? Listen for the birds that have returned north. Tune into your senses and let nature restore you.