



Communities + Generations + Innovations

Ten Coping Strategies for older Oregonians during COVID-19



Use a Trauma-informed Lens

If you are caring for family or grandchildren, you know: Hurts can hurt again. Maybe you live with the consequences of childhood trauma even in the best of times. You may have experienced trauma yourself. Now you must cope with the frightening upheaval due to the coronavirus outbreak. What can you do to blunt immediate trauma and reduce the risks of re-traumatizing yourself or your children?

Childhood Trauma: what is it?

From a psychological perspective, trauma occurs when a child experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to her or his emotional and physical well-being. Witnessing or being the victim of violence, serious injury, or physical or sexual abuse can be traumatic. Trauma can be the result of exposure to a natural disaster such as the coronavirus outbreak. Sadly, about one of every four children will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16.

Common responses to trauma

Children react in both physiological and psychological ways. Their heart rate may increase, and they may begin to sweat, to feel agitated and hyper alert, to feel “butterflies” in their stomach, and to become emotionally upset. These reactions are distressing, but in fact they’re normal — they’re our bodies’ way of protecting us and preparing us to confront danger.

However, some children who have experienced a traumatic event will have longer lasting reactions that can interfere with their physical and emotional health. Children who suffer from child traumatic stress have been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives. They may develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the traumatic events have ended. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, including intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms, anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with attention, nightmares, physical symptoms such as difficulty sleeping and eating, and aches and pains, among others. When a child is experiencing child traumatic stress, they interfere with the child’s daily life and ability to function and interact with others. Children who suffer from traumatic stress often have these types of symptoms when reminded in some way of earlier traumatic events.

Re-trauma responses may differ

Responses to new trauma in an individual child are intertwined with the child’s mental and emotional strengths and weaknesses and what kind of support he or she has at home and elsewhere. Two children who encounter the same situation, may respond differently. Children are unique individuals, and adults shouldn’t make sweeping assumptions about whether they will or will not experience ongoing troubles following a traumatic event.

Importance of a safe, stable environment

Children are not born with resiliency but it can develop over time through the strong and stable relationships with the important adults in their family and community. When important adults—you! —are perceived as unpredictable or threatening, trauma responses can be triggered. These triggers can include confrontations,

family fighting, substance abuse in adults, and the use of discipline methods that increase isolation. (For practical ideas on de-escalating conflict, see [our series of videos](#) on our sister website written for grandparents raising grandchildren in Oregon.)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers this guidance for how you can help your family cope with the coronavirus disease.

Preschool:

Reactions

- Fear of being alone, bad dreams
- Speech difficulties
- Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bed-wetting
- Change in appetite
- Increased temper tantrums, whining, or clinging behaviors

How you can help

- Patience and tolerance
- Provide reassurance (verbal and physical)
- Encourage expression through play, reenactment, story-telling
- Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements
- Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime
- Maintain regular family routines
- Avoid media exposure

School-Age (ages 6-12)

Reactions

- Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior
- Clinging, nightmares
- Sleep/appetite disturbance
- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches)
- Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest
- Competition for adults' attention
- Forgetfulness about chore

How you can help

- Patience, tolerance and reassurance
- Play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and internet
- Engage in educational activities (workbooks, educational games)
- Set gentle but firm limits
- Discuss the current outbreak and encourage questions, include what is being done in the family and community
- Encourage expression through play and conversation
- Limit media exposure
- Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify information

Adolescent (ages 13-18)

Reactions

- Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.)
- Sleep/appetite disturbance

- Agitation or decrease in energy, apathy
- Ignoring health promoting behaviors
- Isolating from peers and loved ones
- Concerns about stigma and injustices

How you can help

- Patience, tolerance, and reassurance
- Encourage continuation of routines
- Encourage discussion of outbreak experience with peers, family (but do not force)
- Stay in touch with friends through telephone, internet, video games
- Participate in family routines, including chores
- Planning strategies to enhance health promoting behaviors
- Limit media exposure
- Discuss and address stigma, prejudice and potential injustices occurring during the outbreak.

A gentle warning label here

This might not be a good sign: in March just as the coronavirus took hold in the US, sales of alcoholic beverages spiked 55% according to market research firm Nielsen. Sales of hard liquor, such as gin and tequila, increased by 75% compared to the same dates in 2019. "Quarantinis" became a thing. Marijuana stores ramped up home deliveries.

Relying on alcohol and marijuana to help control stress, anxiety and loneliness is playing with fire. Health wise, overuse can affect the general health of the body, make sleep choppy and troubled, and even weaken the immune system.

All of the strategies we've shared here can easily be undermined as one drink leads to another.

If you are dry and want to stay that way, local chapters of AA are utilizing Zoom meetings and the like. Details are shared [here](#). Online groups are available [here](#).

In the meantime, AA offers these online resources:

- [Videos/Audios](#)
- [Daily reflections](#)
- [AA YouTube Channel](#)