

# Assess your stress

## Pay attention to your mental and emotional well-being

BY SANDRA STRIEBY

Uncertainty. Isolation. Disrupted routines. Economic instability. COVID-19 has generated all of those stressors, and for most of us, that's causing at least an undercurrent of anxiety.

This article will explore the effects of the pandemic on our inner lives – effects that are often hard to see and understand – and offer some coping strategies and resources.

### COVID-19 effects and responses

Uncertainty is the biggest driver of our mental and emotional states during this time, according to Barbara Tennant, a Licensed Mental Health Counselor Associate with Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare (OBHC).

"It makes us anxious," said Tennant. "What we're seeing in the Methow is anxiety about when things are going to be normal, what normal will look like, and how to negotiate areas of uncertainty."

What does all that anxiety look

like? Methow Valley Elementary School Counselor Tracie Powney speaks to how children may be affected: "There may be more irritability and acting out," she says. "Children are learning how to control emotions; it is really hard for many of them and our current situation makes it harder."

Warning signs include emotional reactivity – a reaction out of proportion to what you normally see – anger (usually masking fear), difficulty sleeping, and lack of focus or avoidance of tasks.

Among adults, responses to the mental and emotional effects of COVID-19 may include increased substance use, mental distress and suicidal thoughts, along with irritability and sleep disturbances, according to Katherine Kirner, a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner with Family Health Centers in Twisp.

Adds Tennant, "We have not seen traumatic stress disorder, but I'm sure there are people who are traumatized by the uncertainty, financial challenges, effects on their families, and lack of social functions."

### Coping strategies

COVID-19 is likely to be affecting our psyches for a long time. Structure, connection and physical activity are key to coping, says Kirner. Her

recommendations:

- Reach out to a friend or mental health specialist and talk about how you're feeling.
  - Establish a daily routine with regular sleep, bathing and meal times.
  - Get some physical activity every day.
  - Engage your mind in something that interests you.
  - Limit the amount of news you consume.
- Tennant adds that focusing on

the here and now "can be very helpful in dealing with uncertainty and anxiety. Find what you can be certain of – even something small, like a favorite coffee cup that you use every day."

Both the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) suggest practicing mindfulness – actively paying attention to the present moment – as a COVID coping strategy.

"Mindfulness practices, when done

### COUNSELING RESOURCES

**Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare:** <http://www.okbhc.org/>; (866) 826-6191 or (509) 826-6191

**Family Health Centers Twisp Medical Clinic:** <https://myfamilyhealth.org/twisp-medical-clinic/>; (509) 997-2011

Tracie Powney and Liberty Bell School Counselor Erika Spellman are available to provide support and referrals to counselors. See the link below for their contact information

**The Methow Valley School District's Counseling page lists counselors serving children and adults, and contact information for school counselors:** <https://methow.org/parents-students/counseling-support-services/>  
**Phone support for anyone experiencing stress**

**due to COVID-19:** Washington Listens, (833) 681-0211 from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Self-help tips are available on <http://www.walistsens.org>

**Room One offers resources to support mental well-being:** <http://www.roomone.org/#/mental-health-support/>  
If you or someone you know needs immediate help, the resources below are free and available 24/7

**Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare crisis line:** <http://www.okbhc.org/>; (866) 826-6191 or (509) 826-6191

**Disaster Distress Helpline:** call (800) 985-5990 or text Talk-WithUs to 66746

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** (800) 273-8255  
**Crisis Text Line:** text HOME to 741741



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OORI SILBERSTEIN



KATHERINE KIRNER

regularly over time, help our body and mind to relax,” says mindfulness and self-compassion teacher Oori Silberstein. Mindfulness “increases our ability to have a larger perspective on whatever is challenging,” he adds.

According to mindfulness instructor and mentor Sharon Cohen, with mindfulness training, “we can learn how to calm

down emotional reactions, and work out our best response.” OBHC’s web site includes links to a series of mindfulness practices at [www.okbhc.org/mindfulness-series](http://www.okbhc.org/mindfulness-series). Find other mindfulness resources at <http://mindfulmethow.com> and [www.mindfulnessnorthwest.com](http://www.mindfulnessnorthwest.com).

With children, start by paying attention. “In the moment, make sure you listen to your child,” says Powney. “Try to help them get to the bottom of what is really upsetting them so they can talk about it. Feelings tend to get bigger when you fight them.”

When a child is upset, “Slowing down the breath can help the nervous system calm down, Powney says. “Grounding exercises are helpful as well. One of my favorites is asking someone to describe five things they see, four things they hear, three things they can feel, two things they

can smell, and one thing they can taste. The key part of this is to have them really tune in to their senses.”

Like adults, children can benefit from time outside, exercise and connection with family and friends. Play is important, says Powney: “Young children need play to make sense of their world. They will often process difficult feelings through play.”

#### Getting help

While there’s a lot we can do to help ourselves, none of us can weather the pandemic without support. A first step may be recognizing our need for care. For many in the Methow, says Tennant, addressing the basics of life has taken priority over seeking emotional support. “For those so negatively affected financially, it’s a challenge to focus on mental well-being,” she says.

When is it time to reach out? “If stress is interfering with your functioning, it’s time to seek professional help,” says Kirner. “It’s never too soon to talk about your concerns or stressors. If you have thoughts of death or suicide you should reach out immediately.”

Knowing when children need a helping hand can be especially difficult since they may not have developed the awareness and skills to convey their feelings effectively. Powney says that “difficulty sleeping, irritability and emotional reaction beyond what is normal are signs that someone is struggling. It is important to pay attention when a child withdraws or shows little interest in previously enjoyed activities.”

Finally, Powney adds, “For some, it is difficult asking for help. I think it is really important right now more than ever to ask for help.”



*Relax  
with your  
favorite things.*

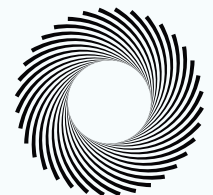
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