

More than a Meal:

Facts, Stress, & Coping Information for Home Delivered Meal Volunteers (HDM) during COVID-19

As a HDM volunteer, YOUR work with the older adult population is having a monumental impact on their lives. They are the demographic most heavily hit by this pandemic, and through your caring and giving nature, YOU are providing human connection and promoting life through home delivered meals.

FACTS

HOW IT SPREADS:

Many older adults are canceling in-home services, and caregivers may be hesitant due to concerns about spreading COVID-19. However, caregivers can do concrete things to support older adults in need. Here are some guidelines that may be helpful:

Protect Your Health to Protect Your Loved Ones

- There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19.
- The best way to prevent illness is to avoid exposure to this virus.
- The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person:
 - Between people who are in close contact (within about 6 feet).
 - Through respiratory droplets from a cough or sneeze by an infected person. These droplets can then be inhaled by others.

When caring for older adults, be sure to physically distance yourself adequately

STRESS

WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW

Fear and anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions and reactions. *Those who receive delivered meals ARE having stress reactions right now.* With new restrictions in place for the services seniors rely on and for their visitors, it is highly likely they feel even further isolated than usual. This, combined with their increased risk when exposed to the disease, makes it more likely you will see increased mental health symptoms.

Seniors you encounter may be feeling anxiety, worry, or fear related to:

- Their own health status.
- Monitoring themselves or being monitored by others for symptoms of the disease.
- The challenges of securing things they need such as groceries, medication, personal care items.
- Concern about being able to effectively care for themselves, pets, or others in their care.
- Uncertainty or frustration about how long they will need to remain in this situation, and uncertainty about the future.
- Loneliness associated with feeling cut off from the world and from loved ones.
- Anger if they think they were exposed to the disease because of others' negligence.

CREDIBLE RESOURCES

Center for Disease Control & Prevention:

1-800-CDC-INFO
(1-800-232-4636)
<https://www.cdc.gov>

World Health Organization Office of the Americas:

202-974-3000
<http://www.who.int/en>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration :

1-877-SAMHSA-7
(1-877-726-4727)
<https://www.samhsa.gov/>

- Boredom and frustration because they may not be able to engage in their typical routines and regular day-to-day activities.
- Uncertainty or ambivalence about the situation.
- A desire to use alcohol or drugs to cope.

WHAT TO EXPECT: SIGNS OF STRESS³

Some of the normal stress reactions you will see in seniors during an infectious disease outbreak are:

- Changes in energy level, sleep patterns, and eating habits.
- Increased irritability.
- Crying more frequently.
- Blaming others for everything.
- Difficulty finding pleasure or having fun.
- Headaches and digestive issues.
- Difficulty concentrating; feeling confused.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH SENIORS

As an HDM volunteer, YOU are in a unique position to notice a senior who is struggling at a moment where support is most needed.

- If possible, listen and allow extra time for them to express their feelings and thoughts.
- Validate their experience with simple, reflective statements such as: “You feel afraid and that makes sense.” Or “You are feeling a lot of anxiety right now.” Or “This situation feels new and scary and out of your control.”
- Use a calm, even tone of voice. People often unconsciously imitate our level of energy and tone of voice. Your calm tone may help a senior stay calm.
- Ask them what they need and direct them to resources as appropriate.
- Encourage them to engage in the stress reduction and self-care tips listed here.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH TROUBLE OR SUICIDE

Don't be afraid to connect with seniors about their mental health and suicide—asking directly is helpful and needed! Be on the lookout for:

- Symptoms of depression: feelings of hopelessness, changes in appetite or hygiene, sleeping too little or too much, and difficulty concentrating that persist for 2-4 weeks.
- Death of loved ones.
- Financial or legal hardship.
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or medications.
- Worsening of chronic health symptoms.
- Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): intrusive distressing memories, flashbacks (reliving the event), nightmares, and being easily startled.
- Statements about wanting to die or harm themselves. For example: “My bags are packed ... I'm ready to go.” OR “I just wish it would end.” OR “It's hard to go on.” OR “You shouldn't be worrying about me when there is so much going on. I don't matter as much.”

If you notice a senior experiencing any of these reactions, encourage them to contact their health care provider or one of the hotline resources on this tip sheet.

HOTLINES

SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline Toll-Free:

1-800-985-5990

(English and español)

SMS:

Text TalkWithUs to 66746

SMS (español):

“Hablamos” al 66746

TTY: 1-800-846-8517

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Toll-Free:

(English):

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

(español):

1-888-628-9454

TTY:

1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

SELF-CARE FOR HOME DELIVERED MEAL VOLUNTEERS

Things you CAN control include your self-care and health practices²:

- Move your body safely. One way to release stress and anxiety is through physical movement. Find ways to move, stretch, or exercise that are safe for you!
- Take deep breaths—deep breathing can help you manage anxious feelings.
- Stay hydrated, work on getting enough sleep, and do your best to eat nutritious food.
- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or pray, or engage in activities you enjoy.
- Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking; consider keeping a journal where you write down things you are grateful for or that are going well.

Notes:

1. “Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): How to Protect Yourself,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, March 18, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html>
2. “Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health During an Infectious Disease Outbreak: Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation.” Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health During an Infectious Disease Outbreak: Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.
3. “Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks.” Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

Contributors:

Hannah Carter, B.A. | Brittany Jones, M.S.W. | Madison Lord, B.S.
Laura Shannonhouse, Ph.D. | Mary Chase Mize, M.S. | Matthew Fullen, Ph.D., M.Div.