

ADVISORY FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT & MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION OF UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

An effective, robust and stimulating psychosocial environment is fundamental to learning and progress to attain one's objectives in life. With the emerging needs and concerns of students coming from diverse backgrounds, different needs and aspirations, a holistic and comprehensive guidance system in the form of counseling services for mental health and well-being of university/college students is imperative. The aim of such services is to ensure students live their lives effectively and productively and become resilient over time with the help of life skills, even in the face of challenges, hard times and roadblocks.

Daily exposure to news about COVID-19 (Coronavirus) may result in a range of responses, particularly for students who have either been personally affected by the virus or are getting emotionally affected through their loved ones. Reactions can be emotional, somatic, and/or behavioral, and can impact mental and physical health of the youth country-wide. '*Manodarpan*' is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to provide Psychosocial Support for university/college students, parents and the faculty to deal with the current circumstances and sudden changes in life as a result of this pandemic.

Psychosocial Impact of COVID-19 on students

With many universities suspending the classes and closing the campuses for safety reasons, students had to suddenly leave the campus, face unexpected changes in their academic and social life with greater feelings of uncertainty and dissatisfaction due to classes being held online for extended period of time and diminished opportunities for experiential learning whether within the campus or outside the campus in the form of internships. The unusual and abrupt changes in life following the global pandemic outbreak, challenges the conceptions of stability, structure, and normalcy as many students would feel that they are not getting full value from their education, with limited to no opportunities for work once they graduate.

Challenges & Typical Reactions to Expect During COVID-19 Pandemic

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations particularly an infectious disease outbreak that requires social distancing and/or self-isolation. Going through such experiences as described below is quite natural, but if they are too overwhelming, in the sense, if such emotions and experiences begin to cause any hindrance to one's normal daily functioning, it is better to seek help timely and recoup.

- Concern about one's own health status
- Concern about effectively managing one's life demands while choosing to isolate for one's own safety and safety of others
- Loneliness associated with feeling of being cut off from the world and from friends and family
- Stigmatized or singled-out
- Anger and frustration about not being able to accomplish your tasks or finish one's course or dissertation on time
- Boredom and frustration because of not being able to work or engage in regular day-to-day activities
- Uncertainty or ambivalence about the situation
- A desire to use unhealthy coping behaviors that interfere with normal routine such as excessive late nights and over-eating
- General worry and concern about the pending exams
- Concerns about the marking system under current circumstances and the grades
- Worries about data collection for research students
- Submission of final research work and the result
- Concerns about extension of research period and degree completion
- Losing opportunities for learning and experience in terms of undergoing training in companies/industries during break
- Losing out opportunities for placement in companies and worry about repayment of student loan
- Tension about the pending result of a job interview

There is a need to acknowledge the effect of prolonged stress on emotional health of students, conduct activities that can help them deal with the same and identify the best way forward to enable learning, psychosocial wellness and physical health. Some of the tips and resources given below for psychosocial support might be useful in finding out the best way to cope and recoup:

SUGGESTIONS & PRACTICAL TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- **Identify, Label and Accept Your Feeling:**
It's important to know and observe yourself to understand how your thoughts and emotions are impacting you so that you know when to seek help
- **Learn to Communicate Effectively:**
Most of our life, we communicate with our self (self-talk) and this is dependent on the tape that runs in our heads. If we do not make an effort to keep away from negative

events and ideas, we are bound to communicate the same negativity to others through our thoughts, mood and behaviour

- **Connect and Interact with Your Family:**

Share your concerns with anyone in your family and discuss your thoughts and concerns freely. It is important to take other's perspective too, to know if we are perceiving things the way they are

- **Ensure Balanced Diet and Nutritious Food:**

Eat healthy balanced diet and keep yourself well hydrated. Eating well is important for both body and mind. Deficiency may show mood and sleep changes also. Therefore, choose healthy and homemade food

- **Set an Everyday Me-Time:**

Work on strength-based skills for a living. Keep an eye on your areas of improvement but do not let them over ride you

- **Avoid Excessive Exposure to Media:**

Double check the news you read or hear. Avoid misleading news and rumours.

- **Maintain A Routine and Take Care of Your Body:**

- Stick to a scheduled routine for sleep, study, recreation and nutrition.
- Eat healthy and avoid excessive use of caffeine, alcohol, or other substances

- **Infuse Some Variety Into Daily Activities Like:**

- Read a book of your interest
- Stay connected with professors by email and keep up with class work and assignments
- Monitor time spent on social media
- Engage in or develop a hobby

- **Identify Your Strengths:**

Remind yourself that you have been through difficult times before and you have accomplished many things. Think back to the difficult times in your life and your past successes with compassion and an open heart and reflect on what you learned about your unique strengths

- **Work On Social Support:**

Build rewarding connections with individuals and groups. Stay connected with your family members however difficult it may seem.

- **Follow Safety Tips:**

Learn about the facts and information from reliable sources and find out the tips to keep yourself and your family safe. In case, you find the situation too overwhelming and out of control, talk to a counselor and seek help

- **Ask for Professional Help:**

Connecting with a counsellor does not mean that you have a mental health issue. You are only trying to live an effective life and yes, everyone needs help in one area or the other at some point in their lives

- **Use Self Help Guides Like:**

- Booklet/video on mindfulness practice
- Worksheet on stress management exercises
- Online courses available, for example: the science of well being
- Small modules on life skills
- Guided therapy exercises video

- **Create Support Groups:**

- Student can join any available peer support programmes online to support and emphasize with other students who are going through stress or facing difficulty in coping due to this pandemic.

- **Check the university website often daily:**

Visit the website regularly for any updates about xams, assignments or any assessment. You may also find other useful resources for help, which you might access if needed.

SUGGESTIONS & PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities, particularly those with severe or multiple disabilities, may not be able to understand why their daily routines and contact with other people have changed. This can be very upsetting and can also lead to many challenging behaviors. They may have a general feeling of loss of control over their lives and may become anxious about big changes, such as going to new places or the possibilities of having to stay at home for a long period. Therefore, the following practical tips and suggestions can be used to make them aware, feel well-adjusted and help them to adapt to the changes due to COVID-19 pandemic situation:

- **Let them know they are not alone** by using extra words of reassurance from time to time
- **Provide explanations** or adapted explanations about the events and how important it is to take self-safety measures. Explain to them in detail the various ways in which they can feel better and involve them in some recreational activity each day
- **Help them in planning** their work and day and assist them in developing ways to adapt to new routines and create timetables
- **Support them** in making decisions and express your feelings and emotions towards them, for example using written words, pictures or symbols
- **Share with them about any upcoming changes well in advance:** Explain any upcoming changes to routine before they happen and help them to plan and come up with solutions
- Look out for any changes in their behavior that may help you to understand their emotions as well as any symptoms
- **Plan about how to access resources for any emotional or medical help:** Some people with disabilities who also have a mental health condition might find the current uncertainty particularly difficult. If they are more stressed, their behavior and mental health needs might change. Plan in advance to connect with their existing therapist or any doctor if ever the need arises

SUGGESTIONS & PRACTICAL TIPS FOR FAMILIES

- **Maintain dignity & respect privacy:**
Allow privacy & space as your ward is a grown up now and needs his/her own space. Communicate with respect to create a healthy environment at home.
- **Know the warning signs:**
It can be difficult to ascertain whether your ward is dealing with a serious concern or not, but there are certain nonverbal cues and signs you can watch out for. Some signals include restrained eating, oversleeping or exhaustion, extreme mood swings, to mention a few.
- **Stay connected with your ward and talk with them about their apprehensions:** Talk openly about emotional health concerns with your ward, which is the best way to build trust. Talk openly to your ward about issues, and let him/her know that it's okay to speak up about what they're going through.

- **Encourage your ward to express and help them to cope:**

When your ward opens up about their struggles, be patient, and let her/him know that any crisis or failure is just about a difficult phase, which will pass.

- **Engage in Healthy Lifestyle Practices:**

Encourage your ward and other members in the family to involve themselves in healthy practices such as physical exercises, yoga or mindfulness meditation.

- **Have a healthy home environment:**

While it is difficult for all to deal with their respective challenges, it is vital for everyone's emotional and physical health to have a peaceful atmosphere at home.

- **Keep yourself well informed:**

With too much of information floating on the news channels and social media, it often becomes difficult to understand which information to believe or which to ignore. In such cases, it is always good to access authentic sources and keep yourself updated.

- **Stay socially connected:**

While during these times, it is not advisable to connect with others in person, it is always possible to connect with your loved ones through internet. Keeping in touch always helps to uplift your mood and feel connected.

- **Download authentic apps:**

Follow the guidelines and suggestions given by the government and download ArogyaSetu App to know about affected areas as well as people who might have chances to spread the illness based on their travel information .

SUGGESTIONS & PRACTICAL TIPS FOR FACULTY

- **Plan and define your work:**

The change in the style of working to online mode may be a bit challenging for many of us and the work environment not so suitable to our needs,. However, we need to accept the current way of working and plan our schedule to balance professional work and domestic work.

- **Use information wisely:**

Each day is a chance to learn more. Schedule your daily activity and see what new holistic information you can digest today. Boredom at times leads to addiction and related unhealthy coping.

- **Stay well connected:**

Update your students with all the latest information and guide them about the online resources or any latest information being posted online about their academics, exams, assignments etc. Ensure whatever information you disseminate goes through a single platform and does not float through multiple channels of communication.

- **Enquire students' wellbeing on regular basis:**

Ask your students from time to time about how they are feeling and if they need any help for psychosocial support. Share with them the sources from which they can get help.

- **Maintain a good lifestyle:**

Too many changes in work schedule, work environment and managing tasks at home while completing multiple assignments of work may be exhausting. Make sure you take care of your own physical and emotional wellbeing.

- **Work on social support:**

Build rewarding connections with individuals and groups. Stay connected with your family members however difficult it may seem.

- **Encourage & empower:**

Empower your students and others to seek help for distress and mental health support without any stigma.

Note:

The university experience can be a time of substantial growth for students, filled with changes, challenges, and new decisions. It is not uncommon for students to experience periods of stress, crisis or confusion. The Student Counseling Center will continue to offer psychosocial support to its students with the counseling services and range of resources available on university's website, to help students navigate life challenges, resolve psychological concerns and develop a life-long orientation toward resilience and mental wellness.
