

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Oh COVID-19, I am so tired of you. Sadly, we are not done yet, the battle continues and we need to find strength to endure. Living through this major historical event is taking all the positive coping skills we have ever learned. We are needing to teach ourselves and our children how to stay the course so we can remain mentally well.

At the end of August, Northern Gateway Public Schools, with Alberta Health Services and the Mental Health Capacity Building Team, offered for all NGPS staff an information session termed “We Are ALL In This Together”. It highlighted strategies necessary to support each other while supporting students.

That phrase brings to mind a poem by Damien Barr about weathering storms. The analogy depicts that though we are in the same storm, we are each in a different boat. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just one oar, and so on. I think of this illustration often as I work with each school, supporting students with varying circumstances and levels of resilience. Some are home schooling, some are online/at home, others are face to face. Some students and families are immune compromised, others are struggling with job loss, poverty, addictions and neglect. Some are thriving academically while others are struggling mentally. Some are directly impacted by COVID-19, others don't know anyone who has tested positive. Regardless of the situation, we all need to survive the storm together.



Image Credits: Barbara Kelley

As COVID-19 carries on and we become more weary, it is important that we can recognize when mental distress becomes mental illness, when we need self care and when we need professional help.

[MENTAL DISTRESS vs MENTAL ILLNESS \(teenmentalhealth.org\)](https://teenmentalhealth.org)

Mental Distress: symptoms do not last long; normal reactions to an abnormal situation (like a pandemic!)

Mental Illness: symptoms present for 1-3 months. Impacts day-to-day functioning.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

Indigenous people, LGBTQ2S+, older adults, those living in poverty, those with chronic health conditions, previous mental illness, persons with disabilities, or those with a restricted income.

RED FLAGS

- Change in eating habits/weight
- Loss of interest
- Guilt
- Taking lots of time off school/work
- Conflict in relationships
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Isolating themselves
- Feeling very busy, hurried
- Physical changes
- Memory or attention problems
- Increase in drinking/smoking/vaping

Anxiety is contagious... and so is calm.

HOW TO HELP?

The **Five Essential Elements** I learned in *Psychological First Aid* is a great place to start:

1. **Promote Safety**: Wearing masks, floor signage, handwashing for example reassures our physical safety and something as simple as providing accurate information fosters psychological safety. .
2. **Promote Calm**: feeling anxious is normal. Practice controlled breathing, mindfulness and meditation to remain calm.
3. **Promote Self and Community Efficacy**: carry on regular activities as much as possible. Look for ways to connect with the community. It boosts our confidence that our community can recover.
4. **Promote Connectedness**: get creative in how to connect with others such as online concerts, physically distanced walks or outdoor visits.
5. **Instill Hope**: envisioning a realistic and “normal” future can inspire hope and optimism.

To be healthy and successful we need to feel connected, safe and in control

Self care means different things to different people, but mostly, it is about cultivating a compassionate inner voice.

- Make small changes in daily routine/tasks
- Regular physical activity
- Focus on what you can control (your attitude, what you eat, what you watch/listen to, what you spend your money on)
- Actively reduce and manage the stress in your life: organize that junk drawer, write up a budget, complete that to do list. Things that give you a feeling of accomplishment.
- Punitive responses to problem behavior can lead to further trauma
- Deep breathing
- Be creative: paint, decorate, garden, knit, woodworking, etc
- Set boundaries with toxic people, family, friends, and social media.
- Keep structure and routine of the day if you have chosen at home, online learning

We are all in this COVID-19 storm together. Regardless of the boat we are in, we need to believe that we will soon find safe ground. Each of us is seeking to survive this worldwide crisis as unscathed as possible. Let us navigate our route with respect, empathy, courage and responsibility. Throw a lifeline to the ones who are struggling, accept a lifeline if someone reaches out. We are ALL in this together.

[For Mental Health Support](#) Mental Health Help Line 1-877-303-2642, Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to promote success in school. Tammy advocates for students and families, providing a link to the community programs. Tammy has been a registered social worker for more than 20 years and is a mother to 4 teenagers.