

Tips for CC staff during COVID-19 Pandemic

In these unprecedented times of health uncertainty due to the virus pandemic, the challenges of working in congregate care (CC) as residential staff or therapists are increasingly challenging. Most all youth in CC have histories of complex trauma. Your youth are at high risk for being triggered into traumatic memories, thought distortions, as well as reactive emotions and/or behaviors during this time of heightened anxiety about their health and future. Their normal campus routines, off campus activities, and family visits have likely significantly changed to reduce health risks. However, for our CC youth these changes have more than likely heightened their anxiety and led to increased emotional and behavioral dysregulation.

Research and experience tell us that our youth, who have experienced trauma, often feel they are powerless to protect themselves and are unable to believe adults can keep them safe. They likely worry they will get sick and potentially die from the Coronavirus because they believe only “bad” things happen to them. This victim mentality from their past trauma creates recurring internal negative self-talk, which can quickly lead to intrusive thoughts such as:

- “I know I am going to get the virus.”
- “I know I will infect everyone else.”
- “I will have to leave this placement, not knowing where I will go next.”

Our youth are not likely to communicate these thoughts, as they are too hard to verbalize, so instead behavioral symptoms increase such as isolation, self-harm, and/or aggression. Such behaviors increase the stress of other residents and staff. Such intense stress pushes everyone, youth and staff, into survival brain where it is difficult to think rationally and remain calm. As a result, everyone is likely to become more reactive.

As CC providers, the likely consequence of increased youth fear and reactivity is heightened stress for you. We all are human and vulnerable to the effects of stress. It is important to identify the thoughts and feelings you may be experiencing in hopes that by naming these stressors they can be tamed (Siegel, 2010), so that rather than becoming more reactive, you become more reflective. Some of the primary emotions and thoughts that you may be experiencing are fear, frustration, exhaustion, and your own self-protection. It is important in this time of intense emotion that staff are able to verbalize feelings, thoughts and underlying questions of their own health and safety. Through honest discussion CC staff can support each other in managing the current crisis and thus continue to provide the best care for youth in CC facilities.

Key strategies to empower foster/kinship parents in this pandemic crisis:

- 1) **Routines build psychological safety:** In this time of routine change, create a new daily routine so there is predictability as to bedtime, wake time, eating times, schoolwork time, recreation, and electronic time. Make the routine visible for youth and review the next day’s schedule prior to bedtime. The more unpredictability the day is for our youth, the greater likelihood of emotional and behavioral dysregulation.

- 2) **Too much news information can emotionally overwhelm and trigger our youth into fight/flight freeze responses:** Allow only a small amount of news information, depending on the age your youth. For older youth allow no more than 20 minutes of watching or reading the news per day. As you follow the changing news, ask youth if they have questions about what they read or heard. “I think you may be wondering... (Am I going to get sick with the virus now? What will happen if I get the virus?).”

- 3) **Promising youth what we cannot control creates distrust:** Promises most often make the adults feel better, but not our youth. Unfortunately, we can't answer many questions now like,

- “When will we go back to school?”
- “How many people will get sick/die?”
- “Will someone here get sick?” “Will someone I love get sick?”

What we can say is,

- “I don't know yet about school.”
- “We don't know yet how many people will become sick or die.”
- “The risk to youth is very low. Youth are the safest people in this time.”
- “We are here to care for you and if anyone gets sick in the residence, we will make sure they have the best care to get better.”

Older youth have more questions and deserve accurate information as to what is happening and its potential impact to them. Knowledge empowers our youth and combats their pervasive powerlessness. Further, a genuine, “I don't know, but I will try and find the answer to your question,” from staff communicates to youth honesty. Minimization by staff only heightens youth fear and reactivity.

- 4) **During times of high stress, everyone, regardless of age, emotionally over-reacts sometimes:** Be forgiving of the youth in your care. Be forgiving of yourself. Every minute is a new minute. Verbalize:

- “I know you are trying your best right now.”
- “It is hard to think and calm when we are worried or afraid.”
- “Even I am stressed now, so let's start again.”
- “Let's help each be calm so we can think.”

Teaching and modeling simple breathing techniques together may help significantly increase emotional and behavioral regulation. During this time they should be practiced frequently throughout the day. Exercise and activity help youth regulate. The youth in your care during this time will likely need you to be their “external regulator” (Purvis & Cross, 2014) now more than ever. They need you to be the calm in the midst of their own fear and internal storm.

- 5) **Communicate with the various systems:** Isolation increases stress. Be in constant communication with one another (resident staff-therapist-administrator) to minimize stress. Be in touch with youths' caseworkers for the most current directives from MDHHS on family visitation and individual youth plans. Communicate that you want to

stay in regular communication, even if it can only be by phone. Remind youth families and other systems that it is essential that youth have accessibility to their supports. Increasing the number of family calls per week can reduce youth stress when they are heightened by the current crisis.

- 6) **Stay connected with other foster/kinship parents:** Sharing our fears and difficulties with other CC staff is therapeutic. When people are in pain, connecting with another can physiologically reduce fear and worry, and help them function effectively again (Hallowell, 1999). Find ways to increase staff sharing across roles to break down isolation and strengthen community with CC facilities.