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RESOURCES FOR CONGREGATE CARE STAFF

The links below offer helpful resources and tips for congregate care staff to support the emotional well-being of youth in their facilities as we continue to face challenges associated with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

- Resources to Support Youth and Families During the Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak: <https://youth.gov/feature-article/covid-coronavirus-resources>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network has created the *Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/factsheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf
- Child Trends has recently released *Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic*: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- The Children's Bureau offers a variety of COVID-19 Resources: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/covid-19-resources?utm_campaign=covid19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=covid19031920
- Western Michigan University's Children's Trauma Assessment Center is able to respond to questions regarding the intersection of COVID-19 and trauma. Please use the following link, click on "Contact us" and email your question(s): www.wmich.edu/traumacenter
- Western Michigan University's Children's Trauma Assessment Center offers the following information and guidance:
 - Many youth in care have experienced significant trauma; it is not uncommon for a time of heightened anxiety and fear about the future to trigger traumatic memories, thought distortions and reactive emotions or behaviors in youth.
 - Research indicates that youth who have experienced trauma often feel powerless to protect themselves and are unable to believe adults can keep them safe.

- Youth who have experienced trauma may believe that only “bad” things happen to them. This mentality may create recurring internal negative self-talk, which can quickly lead to intrusive thoughts such as: “I know I am going to get the virus;” “I will infect others here;” or “I will have to leave this placement and do not know where I will go next.”
- Youth are not likely to communicate these thoughts as they are difficult to verbalize; instead, behavioral symptoms such as isolation, self-harm, and/or aggression may increase.
- Feelings of heightened stress, fear, frustration, exhaustion, and self-protection are not uncommon for congregate care staff to experience during a time like this, particularly when compounded with increased fear, reactivity and behavioral challenges from youth. It is important to identify and name your thoughts and feelings in order to effectively address them and become more reflective, rather than more reactive. Your well-being is critical in helping the youth under your care and supervision.
- It is important in a time of crisis to verbalize genuine feelings, thoughts, and questions as they are normal. Honest dialoguing with among staff regarding your questions and concerns allows for self-reflection that can help you manage this crisis while continuing to care for and support the youth under your care and supervision, who will likely need you to be their "external regulator" now more than ever.
- **The following tips may be helpful for congregate care staff to consider during this time:**
 - ✓ **Routines build psychological safety:** In this time of routine change, create a daily routine for predictability of wake-up time, bedtime, eating times, schoolwork time, recreational time, and electronic time. Make the routine visible for youth and review the next day’s schedule in advance.
 - ✓ **Too much news information can emotionally overwhelm and trigger children into fight/flight freeze responses:** Allow only a small amount of news information, depending on the age of the youth. For older youth, 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? Will you keep me if I get the virus?, etc.)”
 - ✓ **Promising children what we cannot control creates distrust:** Promises most often make adults, not youth, feel better. Unfortunately, we can’t

answer many questions now, such as “when will we go back to school?” “how many people will get sick/die?” “will someone I love get sick?” What can be said are things such as “I don’t know about school yet,” “we don’t know yet how many people will become sick” or “I am here to care you. If anyone in our facility gets sick, we will make sure they have the best care available 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 answers to your questions” from staff communicates honesty and support. Minimization by staff heightens youth fear and reactivity.

- ✓ **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 be calm when we are worried or afraid,” “even I am stressed now; let’s start again,” “let’s help each other be calm so we can think.” Teaching and modeling simple breathing techniques together may help significantly increase regulation. Exercise and activity also help regulation. These practices should be used frequently throughout the day.
- ✓ **Communicate with the various systems:** Isolation increases stress. Be in constant communication with one another (resident staff, therapist, administrator, etc.) 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 would like 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 crisis.
- ✓ **Stay connected with other staff and supportive individuals:** Sharing our fears and difficulties with other committed staff and support persons is therapeutic. When people are in pain, connecting with another can physiologically reduce fear and worry, and help them function effectively again. Find ways to increase staff sharing across roles to break down isolation and strengthen community within congregate care facilities.