

COVID-19 and Stress: Guidelines for Discussing with Patients (DRAFT)

PURPOSE: During these unprecedented times, much of the population will experience emotional distress. The COVID-19 pandemic not only presents fear and worry for personal health, but also introduces public health guidelines that restrict daily life and can affect socioeconomic factors such as personal finances, housing, transportation, food supply, childcare, etc.

Most health care conversations now take place remotely via phone or online platforms and these guidelines are suggestions for areas to assess each time you interact with your clients, including being used as a wellness check for high-risk clients. These high-risk clients could include frail elderly and those with chronic diseases or pre-existing mental health and/or substance use concerns. However, as this pandemic affects everyone, all your clients will have both practical and emotional concerns that should be assessed and addressed during every healthcare encounter.⁽²⁻⁷⁾

Mental Health ^(2-16,12-18)	Many people are experiencing stress and anxiety due to multi-factorial concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While anxiety, generalized anxiety disorders, uncertainty and depression are common, also consider worsening OCD and contamination fears. This section provides suggested screening questions to assess the needs of your clients and supporting counselling suggestions and resources.
Sleep ⁽⁸⁻¹¹⁾	Assessing sleep is important as it affects our daily functioning. Sleep affects your mood, the way you think, and impacts your behaviours and body. Lack of sleep can make it harder to concentrate and make decisions. This can be due to excessive worrying, nightmares or intrusive thoughts and can be a sign of ill-managed anxiety. Excessive sleep should be assessed for underlying conditions such as depression or sleep apnea.
Social Isolation and Safety ^(2, 12, 19-24)	Many groups may be experiencing isolation due to the public health guidelines. Help identify any areas of concern such as ability to access food and medication, loneliness, social disengagement, cognitive decline and decline in function and mobility. It is also important to assess the safety of your clients as with the physical distancing restrictions many face increased stress, restricted movement and physical separation from family and supports. Intimate partner violence and child abuse can increase during a crisis and it is important to assess personal safety.
Substance Use ⁽²⁵⁻³¹⁾	According to BC Coroners Service ⁽²⁵⁾ , there were 175 suspected deaths from illicit drug use in June 2020. It was a 130% increase from 76 cases identified in June 2019. We know that other substance use is often triggered or worsened with stress. Healthcare providers should proactively reach out to clients to screen and identify the change in amount of substance intake. Through assessment, healthcare providers need to identify clients needs and provide care to address the individual needs.

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	Screening Questions	Resources
Mental Health ⁽³¹⁾	<input type="checkbox"/> How's your mood generally? <input type="checkbox"/> How much is everything weighing on your mind right now? <input type="checkbox"/> How is your appetite? <input type="checkbox"/> How strong is your social network right now? <input type="checkbox"/> Are you still doing things you enjoy? <input type="checkbox"/> Are you able to share your feelings? <input type="checkbox"/> How bad does stress feel for you right now? <input type="checkbox"/> In the past couple weeks, have you had thoughts about hurting yourself or that life is not worth living?	Coping with COVID-19 Concerns ⁽²⁻⁴⁾ COVID stress syndrome ⁽⁶⁾ Self-Test screening ^(14,16) Tips for Managing: ^(3,4) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social connections via phone/social media/etc. 2. Stay Active – good for brain and body. Relieves stress 3. Try relaxation practice – yoga, meditation, deep breathing, regular walks 4. Eat a healthy diet 5. Limit checking news and ensure reliable sources Having a “buddy” for support ⁽⁴⁾ Tips for Talking to Someone in Crisis ⁽³²⁾ Mental Health Access ^(14,16) Depression Screening ^(14,17) Remote Psychological First Aid ⁽¹²⁾ 9-1-1 in emergency situations
Sleep ⁽³¹⁾	<input type="checkbox"/> How did you sleep last night? <input type="checkbox"/> How long did it take you to fall asleep?	Sleep deprivation ⁽⁸⁾ 4 Ways Sleep Affects your Mental Health ⁽⁹⁾ Tips for Getting a Good Night's Sleep ⁽¹⁰⁾
Social Isolation and Safety	Ask about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Connecting with people despite physical distancing. <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to access food and medication in a safe manner <input type="checkbox"/> Financial concerns/ employment/housing affected by COVID <input type="checkbox"/> Access to healthcare during pandemic <input type="checkbox"/> Access home environment for safety concerns such as violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue to connect and get support from people. Look for formal support if needed.^(22,33) ▪ Food security and medication refills^(19,22) ▪ Socioeconomic concerns – personal finances, job security, housing loss/concerns, social isolation ▪ Able access to healthcare, supports in place for assistance in home or accessing supplies^(19,22,34) ▪ Assess safety at all ages – child abuse, domestic and intimate partner violence^(20,21,23)
Substance Use ⁽²⁵⁾	<input type="checkbox"/> Have you ever felt you ought to cut down on your drinking or drug use? <input type="checkbox"/> Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking or drug use? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you felt bad or guilty about your drinking or drug use? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you ever had a drink or used drugs first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?	CAGE Substance Abuse Screening Tool ⁽²⁵⁾ Stress as a trigger ⁽²⁶⁾ Harm reduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get Trained to Use a Naloxone Kit⁽²⁷⁾ ▪ Naloxone Saves Lives⁽²⁸⁾ ▪ Supplies for harm reduction in BC⁽²⁹⁾ Online substance use relapse prevention supports for clients and families ⁽³⁰⁾

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