

Resilience

during the COVID-19 crisis:

SUPPORTING
VULNERABLE FAMILIES



boscoville
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RESILIENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us into a state of imbalance and has tested everyone's adaptive capacities in different ways. People working in essential services are more impacted given the greater risk of contamination, reduced staffing, and vast reorganization of service provision. This is the case for community workers who are continuing to support vulnerable families. These families tend to require psycho-social support and are currently at greater risk in the face of this difficult and unprecedented situation.

Given the exceptional circumstances we find ourselves in, workers should focus their interventions on three areas: 1) Safety first. Ensure there are no emergencies or immediate dangers present within the family. 2) Preserve the health and basic functioning of the family. 3) Support family resilience and help with adaptation to the current circumstances.

This guide is organized around the key factors (practices and behaviors) that are associated with resilience, which families can use to help them through this period. The guide provides a lens through which you can view family interventions and keep them focused on the prevention of adversity, the creation of a supportive family unit, and the enhancement of factors relating to resilience. You can use these key factors to guide your professional observations. Depending on the needs of the families you are working with, you can choose to work on one factor at a time, whether you are meeting in person or over the phone.

1. THE PREVENTION OF EXPOSURE TO ADVERSE EVENTS

Beyond social distancing and other measures imposed as a result of COVID-19, the challenges of meeting basic needs are multiple (ex. food, housing, hygiene, clothing). Many families have lost their usual landmarks or routines; others will have experienced events that influence their capacity to meet their needs, such as job loss, the loss of a caregiver, or the closure of support services. It is therefore suggested that you take the time to speak individually with each member of the family to find out about their basic needs and what resources they have available.

Advice, tips, and tricks

Keep in regular contact

By calling families at a fixed time on a regular basis you are providing a predictable timeframe, maintaining your therapeutic alliance, and offering help and support when it is most needed. Currently, many families will have a much smaller network of support available to them and may even have lost loved ones. You are a key source of support. To help strengthen this weakened network, you could help them come up with a list of people and services that are available online or via telephone.

Ensure the fulfillment of basic needs

Meeting basic needs is a central intervention priority. Check-in repeatedly and continuously as the family situation can change very quickly in the current context. Do not hesitate to ask clear, direct questions, for example; 'Have you lost your job?', 'Do you need help filling out government forms?', 'Do you have enough money to pay rent this month?', 'What have you eaten today and what is the plan for meals this week?' etc.

2. STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY UNIT

The family itself is an important form of social support for its members. The goal for the moment is to strengthen families' capacities to support one another and help to clarify roles and responsibilities to maintain balance in the face of current upheavals.

2.1 Encourage the family members to support one another

How a family responds to stressful events depends greatly on its level of cohesion and mutual commitment. Healthy family engagement is marked by an expressed concern for the needs and interests of other family members, respectful relations, emotional safety and a spirit of collaboration. For vulnerable families, these ways of being are not normally optimal. In a period of confinement, disputes need to be put to one side so that the family can function comfortably and respectfully at the most basic level.

Advice, tips, and tricks

With the family, identify their desired environment and living conditions during confinement

The family climate is likely to be strongly impacted by the physical proximity and multiple stressors brought about by COVID-19. In family meetings you can take several approaches: ex, ask the family to name things that they do not want to experience (bickering, shouting, lack of privacy) and facilitate a solutions-focused discussion about how to respond to these fears/stressors (creation of a climate of respect, practice strategies for patience, collaboration and mutual aid). You could also facilitate a conversation about fundamental shared values, asking each member what respect, support, and recognition means to them. This builds common understanding. Be sure to remind the family that although the efforts they are making are hard, the period of confinement will not last forever.

Ask each family member to name how they are going to contribute to a positive climate.

The more a positive family climate is maintained, the more the commitment of the family will be consolidated. A general commitment to a positive climate should be solidified by asking each person to commit to a specific set of behaviors. For example; 'I commit to speaking at a reasonable volume and to expressing my frustration and anger in a healthy way' (exercise, journaling, etc.).

2.2 Clarify roles within the family

A family is a team, and like any team, roles need to be assigned to each person in order to fulfill the goals of the whole group. Distributing roles to family members will help to foster mutual support and will ensure that everyone's strengths are harnessed.

Advice, tips, and tricks

Clarify the leadership roles of parents

Parents can use the current crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their leadership roles by taking responsibility for the safety of the family. Encourage parents to be role models concerning such things as sanitary measures (ex, cleaning door handles), taking care of their physical health, and regulating their own emotions (ex, taking a short time alone to calm down, taking walks, virtually connecting with friends and family).

Help the parent delegate tasks and responsibilities to other family members

Parents should not try to do everything themselves! Delegating tasks contributes to family harmony, the development of autonomy, a spirit of collaboration, and a sharing of the load. You can support parents in the distribution of roles that are simple, realistic, and helpful. Tasks should be limited to the fulfillment of the essential functioning of the household during the period of confinement. Parents need to be equitable about the assigned tasks and provide clear expectations. It is important to set tasks at the appropriate level of development for the child in question. A good way to limit interpersonal conflict is to depersonalize the task. For

example, the child is not helping his mother by doing the dishes but contributing to the family. Explain that the reorganization of daily life is an opportunity for children to develop responsibility and contribute to family loyalty.

3. ENACT THE KEY FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH FAMILY RESILIENCE

The enactment of factors of family resilience will allow them to limit the negative repercussions of confinement and ensure that the difficulties they are facing do not become overwhelming. The goal here is to use the opportunity to build skills of family organization, conflict resolution, and communication.

3.1. Consolidate family organization

The most notable characteristics of the family organization lie in the expression and enactment of rules, routines, and boundaries. When these components are well defined and somewhat flexible it allows families to move through crises while preserving healthy family functioning.

3.1.1 Identify some essential rules essential to family wellbeing

Family rules function as either explicit or implicit guidelines about the range of permissible attitudes and behaviors. In general, any intervention relating to the development of family rules aims to 1) establish clear, concrete and consistent family rules, 2) enforce reasonable behavior expectations that are adapted to the child's developmental stage, 3) engender the capacity to effectively teach and communicate family rules. In the context of a crisis (such as COVID-19), priorities need to be reviewed and circumscribed.

Advice, tips and tricks

Identify with the family the essential rules of good family functioning

In the context of social distancing, certain government directives need to be fulfilled. You can suggest that families emphasize some of these essential activities and relax their rules on other behaviors. For example, parents might limit the focus of their behavior interventions to aggressive behavior and allow other forms of behavior to pass in favor of family harmony until the confinement period is lifted. This type of 'planned ignoring' will give more space for a positive family climate and help improve family organization.

Support parents in expressing the rules and expectations in a positive manner

To diminish the stress levels at times of crisis, the home should feel physically and psychologically safe. Safety is enhanced for youth and children when behavior expectations are clearly defined. Parents should be encouraged to state the rules in positive terms. For example, rather than stating that running and jumping in the living room is banned, it can be stated that the living room is a place for calm games. Emphasize that rules should be simple, easy to remember, age-appropriate, and regularly stated. Perhaps most importantly, when the child respects the behavior expectations they should be praised and encouraged!

3.1.2 Consistent but flexible routines

Routines structure family life. School and other external activities can be an important source of structure and safety for vulnerable children and youth. COVID-19 has shaken up everyone's routines, but youth and children who are used to chaotic family life with little or no structure are at higher risk than most. The sudden loss of routine and predictability may have an impact on their functioning, their sense of safety, their behaviors, and their general well being.

Advice, tips, and tricks

Sensitize parents to the importance of routines for healthy child development

Unpredictability and the absence of routines can be very destabilizing for some people. Explain to parents that routines help their children to feel safe and regulated. A predictable routine encourages the child's sense of autonomy and decreases the incidence of challenging behaviors.

Support parents in the creation of flexible and adapted routines

You can explain the importance of routines to parents, emphasizing how they contribute to safety and behavior management. Nevertheless, routines need to be flexible and responsive to the emerging environment. **No one routine applies to all families.** You can help the parents design a routine that respects the family's rhythm during confinement (considering online work, changes to the usual timeframes, etc.). Additionally, you can guide the parents to design age-

appropriate routines adapted to the child's need for support or level of autonomy. The younger the child, the more structured the routine should be. On the contrary, adolescents tend to respond better to subtle or invisible routines.

Sensitize parents to the energy needs of children

Explain to the family that when planning the routine, it is essential to consider the individual energy needs of the children. You can give them examples by explaining that certain moments are more favorable for expending energy (sports or outdoor activities, games, etc.), such as after periods of schoolwork. Other moments are more suitable for calm and soothing activities, for example before bedtime (drawing, reading, etc.). Tell them that some children will require more physical activity during the day, while others will prefer calm activities. Given the stress caused by the crisis, additional relaxing activities can be added to the schedule: Reading a book, taking a nap, playing calm games (drawing, Lego, puzzles), listening to music, doing yoga, sports, meditation, etc.

Plan for positive family moments in the routine

You can explain to parents that children who receive positive attention regularly are more likely to comply with demands and engage in family unity. Suggest that the frequency and times when the parents give attention to their children should be during the daily routine; ex. special moments with the parent without cell phones or other distractions, can be put into the schedule (e.g. family dinner, family games or video games, family sports, family cooking, etc.).

3.1.3 Set boundaries of privacy and personal space for each family member

Setting boundaries in an environment where many people live close to each other is an essential element in conflict prevention, family organization, and the maintenance of mental health. For all family members, privacy is a basic need that must be preserved to foster family resilience. Family boundaries refer to the degree of openness that regulates intergenerational, interpersonal, and outside contact.

The growing need for privacy in adolescence makes this period of confinement even more difficult for teens. In adolescence, people are particularly sensitive to anything that can threaten what allows them to differentiate themselves from their family and develop their autonomy. While an adolescent is distancing themselves

from their family, they will get closer to their friends and sometimes to a romantic partner. The quarantine restrictions do not allow young people to develop this autonomy in a normal or optimal way, which could result in more oppositional behavior. Respecting the adolescent's need for privacy and autonomy is essential for their well-being.

Advice, tips, and tricks

Raise awareness of the importance of respecting boundaries

Respect for boundaries is part of accepting the difference of other family members. You can explain to family members that personal boundaries refer to the personal bubble and its physical space (e.g., the bedroom or the objects in it). They also refer to the fact that everyone can have their own beliefs, ideas, emotions, etc.

Support the family in respecting boundaries

Helping the family create clear boundaries and ensuring that they are respected will help meet the need for personal space and privacy. To do this, you could suggest that personal spaces be identified and planned, where everyone has the opportunity to be alone. Each family member could also have the chance to express their need for space and solitude to others, whether spontaneous or scheduled. The need for space must be adapted to the developmental age of the children. For example, a teenager could have time alone in the bedroom, while a child could play alone near their parents.

Support the family to meet the adolescent's need for privacy

You can explain to parents that in adolescence, young people usually need to have a personal physical space where they can be alone without the presence of siblings or parents. They will be able to chat with their friends or romantic partner in private, as they would if they went to school or were outside. If the home does not allow the young person to have their own room, you could suggest that certain agreements be made. For example, allow the child to use the shared room individually for 2 hours a day.

3.2. Work on communication and conflict resolution

The family's resilience is greatly associated with their communication and conflict resolution skills. The constant and prolonged proximity of confinement contributes to the risk of generating conflicts in the family unit. It is more essential to speak openly and manage interpersonal problems or clashes since flight or avoidance is less possible in the current situation.

3.2.1 Adopt clear and open communication

Communication is a component that influences the whole family functioning. It has a concrete impact on the ability to organize while providing an explicit response to the basic emotional needs of family members. It includes both the functional communication of everyday life and emotional communication, that is to say, the emotional aspects of family life. Good communication improves resilience in times of crisis.

Advice, tips, and tricks

Guide family members to have clear and direct discussions

You can sensitize parents to the fact that the clarity of exchanges limits the misunderstandings and improves general family functioning, such as the management of daily tasks, routine, and respect for rules and boundaries. Direct exchanges reduce dissatisfaction and feelings of persecution or injustice that can arise when a message is passed on by a third party. You can give simple advice that can help the family to communicate better: speak using "I", direct messages directly to the person you want to talk to, choose a time when he/she is available by consulting with them, speak about one issue at a time. These basic principles should be given special attention during confinement.

Underscore the importance of asking clarifying questions

To help family members communicate with each other, ask clarifying questions, and rephrase your understanding of their message in your own words. This will allow them to clarify their words and more adequately convey messages to their family members when the time comes. Also, encourage family members to repeat this step with one another. This will reduce misinterpretations and perception issues.

Remind them that respect during exchanges is essential to preserve family unity

Explain that respect during discussions will mean, among other things, the use of constructive language free from insults. Point out that being respectful will help preserve the personal appreciation of all, as well as increase their desire to invest and commit to being unified in a positive climate. It is important to put our words in the positive (what we want, rather than what we do not like). You can also suggest other signs of respect: speak one at a time, listen to the other until the end of their message, affirm each other, avoid negations and generalizations, apologize if you interrupt the other, etc.

3.2.2 Maintain healthy emotional expression

Children develop, learn, and thrive the context of healthy and positive relationships with the people who matter in their lives. Healthy emotional expression is an effective way to avoid conflict. It means emotional sharing, showing warmth, emotional support, and empathy. The stronger the emotional ties in a family, the more secure and confident family members feel, and the more the family will manage to overcome the difficulties inherent in this current crisis. This family cohesion leads the family to become more involved in forming a team and facilitates conflict resolution.

Advice, tips and tricks

Encourage expressions of affection

Human warmth and contact are reassuring and soothing. You can suggest some ways to offer this type of affection: physical contact, a compassionate hand on the shoulder, a hug, a kiss on the forehead, a smile, or just sitting in close physical contact with one another. Explain that this also brings a feeling of well-being, attachment, a decrease in anxiety, and reactivity to the impact of stress during a period of crisis.

Raise awareness of the importance of mutual listening

Explain that a healthy emotional expression strategy is to listen respectfully and sincerely. Explain to the family that everyone can express themselves differently, experience different emotions from one another, and have different opinions on situations. Everyone needs to be listened to and heard in order to strengthen the emotional bonds that unite family members. When children know that others are paying attention to what they have to say, they are not afraid to express themselves and talk about their emotions. Emphasize that listening to each other helps maintain a balanced emotional climate during the crisis.

Help the family recognize and reduce negative emotions

You could help the family recognize and understand the difference between problem behaviors (or attitudes) and behaviors (or attitudes) related to stress or any other negative emotion experienced. Certain more negative behaviors displayed by the children are a way of expressing that they are unable to effectively manage the stress generated by the current context. Educate parents about how, while the behavior may be inappropriate, the emotions experienced by the child are legitimate. The goal is to encourage and validate the healthy expression of emotions, both positive and negative. In addition, avoid repressing or prohibiting the expression of these emotions. For example, ignoring the child when they are crying, telling them to stop shouting without naming that they have the right to be angry, etc.

Encourage children to regulate their emotions

Children need to learn to take care of themselves and explore strategies to regulate their emotions. Encourage parents to offer children opportunities to express their emotions and to support them in exploring ways that suit them. You could give parents examples of ways to regulate emotions: walking, listening to music, sitting outside, drinking tea, taking a moment alone, writing, making mandalas, contacting to a loved one, limiting exposure to the media, etc. Certain digital applications can be supportive of children in learning how to meditate. These are also available in French: Calm (for adults), Stop, Breathe & Think (for teenagers), or Breathe, Think, Do Sesame (for children, English version only).

Support parents to respond sensitively to discussions

Encourage parents to emotionally regulate themselves. Sensitize parents to the fact that the way they react emotionally needs to be adapted to the subject and the context (Ex. not to shout or to have intense emotions for too long, or disproportionate to the situation). The ability to emotionally regulate on the part of the parent is sometimes difficult to master, especially since parent stress levels are increased during the current context. Remind adults to take care of themselves so that they will be more available to listen to their children and support them with their own emotions. Ex. by comforting their children, listening to them with attention and interest, validating their emotions, and by naming and expressing their own emotions clearly and calmly.

3.2.3 Resolve conflicts quickly

One factor that increases resilience is the family's ability to recognize and solve the interpersonal problems they face. In the current context, conflicts may be more frequent than usual, even in families that do not normally experience a conflict dynamic. The stress generated by the crisis can manifest itself in different ways. Some people will take refuge in denial or in anger, others will become anxious and embark on a lot of projects. There is no right or wrong way to react, however, these different reactions can be a source of tension.

Advice, tips and tricks

Normalize the stress experienced

Normalize what families experience by explaining that high stress and increased closeness through confinement can increase conflict and that this is experienced by all families in the same situation. These are normal difficulties when faced with an abnormal situation. The emotional level experienced by everyone is also higher than usual, possibly causing tension. Explain that it is possible to contextualize conflicts to play down situations when they arise.

Sensitize the family to the general principles of conflict resolution

Certain guiding principles allow for more effective, positive, and cooperative conflict resolution. You can explain to parents that conflict resolution is all about acceptance: being open, tolerant of conflicts, accepting disagreement, and being open to compromise. It is also important to establish a balance of power, respecting everyone's ideas, to ensure that there is a motivation to resolve the conflict.

Accompany the family in its application of the basic steps to resolve a family conflict

When family conflict arises, you can coach and model the family through the main stages of conflict resolution. Explain that conflicts often arise from different perceptions which can cause unpleasant feelings between family members. You can remind the family of the importance that family members agree on the desired climate in which to face the confinement and name the importance of not accumulating conflict or unsaid grievances. To do this, getting each member to name their lived perceptions and emotions is essential. Once we are heard and considered, we become more open to the perceptions of others and are more likely to adopt a constructive posture of finding a solution. In addition, everyone should take part in the search for a solution.

Encourage the family to find solutions for themselves so that they can mobilize and develop their adaptive capacities and resilience. The following steps must be carried out as a family: (1) Recognition of the problem (2) sharing of the perception and emotions experienced in connection with the problem (3) search for solutions (4) evaluation of options (pros and cons) and choosing the best solution (5) action plan to implement the solution, where everyone has a responsibility and (6) evaluation of the solution.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that the current situation requires workers to majorly adjust their interventions to ensure support and the continuity of services for vulnerable families and young people. Bear in mind that this time is stressful for us all. This crisis affects each of us both professionally and personally. Given the context, it is essential to adjust our expectations of what is possible. While caring for others, please do not forget to look after yourself.

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