

Communicating with Individuals with IDD About Coronavirus



It is important to talk to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities about why their routines have been disrupted, what is going on in the world around them, how they can protect themselves and others from the spread of COVID-19, and how we can all maintain a healthy mental and physical state during this unprecedented time. Here are some strategies for communicating with adults with IDD about this public health crisis.

Remain calm and reassuring.

Even though you may be concerned yourself, it is important to model calm when talking about the virus. Create an open and supportive environment and acknowledge the person's thoughts and feelings. Provide reassurance that there are many people working hard to keep everyone safe and healthy.

Help provide opportunities for individuals to feel a sense of control.

In uncertain situations, it becomes even more important to offer specific things they can do to feel in control. People tend to be more distressed and anxious when we feel helpless and passive, and more comfortable with taking action. Share with individuals that getting adequate sleep, eating a nutritious diet and washing their hands can help them stay safe. Explain that regular hand washing stops viruses from spreading to others.

Know and help communicate the symptoms of COVID-19.

There will likely be a lot of questions about what is happening. You may also find a social story with visuals helpful in explaining the virus, or using simple language such as, "The coronavirus is a kind of germ that can make people feel sick. It can be a lot like getting the flu. Some people feel just a little bit sick. Some people get a fever and a cough. Sometimes, the cough can make it hard to breathe easily." Understand that asking a question repeatedly may be a way for the person to seek reassurance.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection.

Explain how healthy behaviors can help them stay healthy and encourage basic hygiene habits, such as covering your mouth when you sneeze and cough, frequently washing hands in the proper manner, and keeping hands out of your mouth, eyes and nose.

Help find opportunities for leisure and boredom busters.

If individuals are not going to work, a day program, or school due to closures, provide opportunities for in-home leisure when able. Explain that sometimes people need to stay home to keep themselves and others safe. Plan activities to curb boredom. This may include activities such as having an indoor scavenger hunt, putting together a puzzle, craft projects, making thank you cards, or video chatting with friends and family. Explain how social distancing is also helping keep people safe.

Practice self-care.

Now more than ever, caregivers need to care for themselves, too. You may have worries for yourself and your family. Pay attention to your own emotional and physical health. Maintain adequate sleep. Engage in activities you enjoy. Practice gratitude, and employ coping strategies.

Additional resources are available on The MENTOR Network's COVID-19 Update Center at www.thementornetwork.com/coronavirus.