

Coping with COVID in Adolescents—a lifestyle approach

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Adolescents will succeed during the many challenges of the COVID pandemic and into adulthood by focusing on Integrative Health and Lifestyle factors. Learning about the 7 core areas of self-care: spirituality, resiliency, nutrition, movement, sleep, relationships, and environment at this early age is invaluable. Recognizing that all 7 areas are interconnected and that changes in one area has a positive impact on them, all is life changing. Developing goals and engaging in self-care practices as teenagers has multiple positive benefits, including coping with COVID (surviving the unexpected), prevention of chronic illness, and enhancement of well-being and physical health. Adolescents become empowered to improve their daily lives, thrive during difficult circumstances, and are uniquely prepared to handle future challenges.

Spirituality is rarely explored with adolescents. However, it is a key to longevity and leading a happier and healthier life (Diener et al., 2012; Hill & Turiano, 2014). It is important to help teenagers identify their purpose and determine what centers them. This subject is distinct from religion or views in a higher power. Questions for the teenager to consider include: What is important to you? What makes you proud of yourself? When things are hard, what helps you survive? What really excites you? (Craigie, 2010) The answers the adolescent gives to these questions will help shape and define their purpose. Adolescents who explore and nurture their purpose tend to do better than those who do not (Burrow, Sumner & Netter, 2014). The knowledge of purpose will fortify the adolescent because it has been associated with a clearer self-identity (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010), significant maturity (Hill & Burrow, 2012), and greater positivity and life satisfaction (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Bronk et al., 2009).

Experiencing stress is a normal part of adolescence. Learning how to have an optimistic outlook, to manage anxiety, and to bounce back from adversity boosts physical health and well-being, prevents multiple chronic illnesses, and can be continued into adulthood (Cohn et al., 2009; Hermann et al., 2011). Having pets and spending time petting them reduces anxiety and enhances mood (Grajfoner et al., 2017). It should be noted that a healthy diet, exercise, quality sleep, and nurturing relationships also contribute to lowering stress. The following techniques help the teenager become resilient and can be learned and practiced: being flexible, a positive mindset, humor, gratitude journaling, letting go, breathing exercises, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and tai chi. (Benson et al., 1975; Harvard, 2011; Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Each individual needs to try different approaches and figure out what is most personally meaningful and effective.

Adolescents benefit from education about nutrition. It is a great time to introduce the Anti-Inflammatory Diet and explain how it reduces the inflammation in the body, which leads to chronic disease (Weil). AI concepts most meaningful for teenagers include: to drink mostly water, minimize juice and soda, since they are full of sugar and empty calories, to eat fast food very sparingly, since it is full of fat and excess calories, to eat mostly whole foods and few

processed foods, and to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables (organic when available) with every meal, ideally more vegetables (4-5 servings per day) than fruits (3-4 servings per day) (Weil). Adolescents should also be encouraged to decrease their refined sugar intake since it is known to increase the risk of multiple chronic illnesses including fatigue, anxiety, depression, obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and others. Following a healthy diet will give teenagers energy and strength and improve focus and mood. Additionally, early introduction of a healthy diet leads to a lifetime of healthier eating (Rocha et al., 2017; Beckerman et al., 2017).

Adolescents often get inadequate exercise. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day for 6 to 17-year olds (US Department of HHS, 2018). During the pandemic, when so much time was spent inside sitting at a computer, it became essential to walk outside and spend time in nature. Exercising in nature boosts mood and reduces anxiety more than indoor physical activity (Mitchell, 2013; Thompson et al., 2011). Walking, hiking, running, swimming, dancing, and playing sports are some of the great options available. Adolescents need to explore and discover what type of movement they enjoy, so they can continue the practices into adulthood. Exercise will afford the adolescent the positive benefits of energy, focus, reduced anxiety, strength, and higher health-related quality of life (Knox & Muros, 2017).

Adolescents frequently do not get enough sleep. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night for 13 to 18-year olds (Paruthi et al., 2016). Adequate sleep is essential for teenagers' concentration, recall, academic performance, functioning, mood, mental and physical health (Paruthi et al., 2016). Keeping a consistent sleep schedule, even on the weekends, is necessary for optimal sleep. The following sleep hygiene measures will lead to better quality sleep: avoiding caffeine, large meals, and sugar before bed. Wear blue light-blocking glasses to filter blue light and reduce glare, turn off all screens 1 to 2 hours before bedtime, and keep no screens in the bedroom. Develop nighttime routines that are calming, such as reading a book and taking a warm bath or shower. Sleep in a cool, dark room with few distractions. A sound machine or nature sounds clock is helpful to mask noise and decrease intrusive thoughts. Spraying lavender or jasmine essential oils on the pillow or rolling them on pulse points is also calming and sleep-inducing. Low-dose melatonin is considered helpful and safe in teenagers for short-term use (Esposito et al., 2019). Improving sleep is necessary in adolescents and important for good focus, lowering anxiety, and overall mental and physical well-being.

Relationships with peers is paramount in adolescence. Relationships with family is typically secondary. Early on during the COVID pandemic, there was concern about the decrease in social contact and its effect on adolescent well-being and development (Orben et al., 2020). Developing strong relationships with peers is protective for teenagers' mental health and improves resilience (van Harmelen A-L et al., 2017). Cellphones and the ability to call, video call, text, email, and use social media made it easier to stay in touch without physically being together. During the pandemic, school shifted to an online format, and although not optimal for learning, teenagers still were taught lessons, connected with their teachers, and interacted with their peers in break-out rooms. Studies on youth behavior indicate that the essential elements of adolescent in-person

social interactions, including the sharing of information, reciprocity, and social reward and support, are present during online communication. (Yau & Reich, 2018). Extracurricular activities were sparse, affording more free time for communication by phone and video with family from out of town. Maintaining connections with family and friends is fortifying and protective for adolescents and lowers anxiety, boosts mood, and prevents mental and physical illness.

Educating adolescents about the environment is important. The environment where adolescents live has a significant impact on their health and well-being. If the neighborhood is safe, there is little traffic, there is a low level of air pollutants, and adequate street lighting, an adolescent can comfortably be outside on their own (Ferguson et al., 2013). Teenagers thrive when spaces are neat and clutter-free. Keeping their rooms clean and discarding things they no longer need biannually will help them stay organized. Adolescents should also be encouraged to spend more time in nature, since it is good for mental and physical health (Bowler et al, 2010; Maller et al., 2006; Townsend & Weerasuriya, 2010). Applying sunscreen should be encouraged to avoid skin cancer, and it is essential to learn at an early age. Adolescents should also be educated about the many negative effects of BPA and advised to use glass or stainless steel water bottles instead of plastic ones (Rubin, 2011). These simple environmental measures will afford the adolescent peace of mind, improved focus and concentration, and prevent chronic disease.

The subject of this article is personally meaningful to me because I have two adolescent children who had many frustrations and disappointments during the COVID pandemic. My kids learned about and engaged in the 7 core areas of self-care: spirituality, resiliency, nutrition, movement, sleep, relationships, and environment. They discovered the areas are all interdependent, and improving each one has the impact of improving them all. The kids have already benefited greatly from their lifestyle changes, and if they continue their self-care practices, they will be afforded protection against chronic illness, enhanced well-being, and physical health into adulthood. My kids have emerged from the COVID pandemic more grounded and resilient than they were before it began and are equipped to handle future challenges with more ease. I want to share this information with other families, so their children can similarly benefit.

The targeted audience for this article is parents of teenagers and their teens, and planned publications for submission are Psychology Today and Prevention Magazine.

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