



Native Women's  
Association of Canada  
L'Association des  
femmes autochtones  
du Canada

# RESILIENCE AS MEDICINE: BALANCING MENTAL HEALTH AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

## Fact Sheet

The COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts it has on our lives are continuously shifting. We have learned to live with a new type of trauma created by this pandemic, which has compounded the mental health crisis that already exists in many of our communities.

As we try to cope with our ever-changing reality, our mental wellness can become unbalanced. There are many things that we can do to help bring balance into our lives and to nurture our physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being.



"The pandemic has taught [people] to sit quietly and reflect on their well-being. Nature will slow you down for a reason. This is a time for everyone to look at themselves, the environment, how we treat one another. Mother Nature is saying 'take a look at what is going on and make changes'."

– Elder Roberta Oshkawbewisens



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## STRESS AND ANXIETY

Staying informed on the COVID-19 pandemic, including infection and hospitalization rates, can be helpful. But too much information may also cause harm. Limit the time you spend on checking for COVID-19 news to once per day—less if you can. Set aside some time to unplug from electronics and social media.

It can also be helpful to identify problems that need to be solved or addressed and which are just worries that are not always grounded in reality. **High levels of stress and anxiety are often fuelled by how we think.** For example, you might be having thoughts such as “There is nothing I can do” or “I won’t be able to cope.” These thoughts can be so strong that you believe them to be true. However, not all our thoughts are facts; many are simply beliefs that we hold. How do we know if our thoughts are true or are just beliefs we’ve grown used to?

- Challenge your worries and anxious thoughts with reasoning and logic. Making lists to identify these areas and brainstorming ways to reduce them can be helpful.
- Know that sitting with anxiety and discomfort for a short period of time and avoiding toxic positivity is important to fully process worries.
- Engage in culture and traditional wellness activities.

## SUBSTANCE USE

Some people use substances, including alcohol, cigarettes, or vaping, to negatively cope with stress, anxiety, and depression. This may appear to help reduce stress initially, but it can make things worse in the long run. The brain and body develop a tolerance to these substances, and the body compensates by needing more and more. This creates dependence and addiction, and may lead to additional harm. Substance use may often delay recovery from the initial stress.<sup>1</sup>

- Try to find healthier outlets for coping, such as fitness, meditation, participating in ceremony, going out on the land, and connecting with your community.
- Seek out professional help if you can’t do it alone. It’s important to have self-compassion and recognize when we need another person’s support.

## COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND GRIEF

It is normal to be fearful or anxious. There have been so many changes since the onset of the pandemic, and we are still learning what all these changes mean for ourselves and our

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<sup>1</sup> CAMH. (n.d.). “Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic.” <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19>.



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communities. The pandemic resulted in many forms of loss for people other than death. You may have experienced loss of employment/income, relationships, and connection to ceremony and culture. It's important to make space for ourselves, to reflect and heal from these difficult changes. **Be gentle with yourself.**

- Practise self-compassion and gratitude by journaling. Find something to write about every day that's joyful, no matter how small.
- Your routine and lifestyle have changed since the pandemic, but there can be good things from this. As an NWAC Elder stated, "**nature will slow you down for a reason.**"

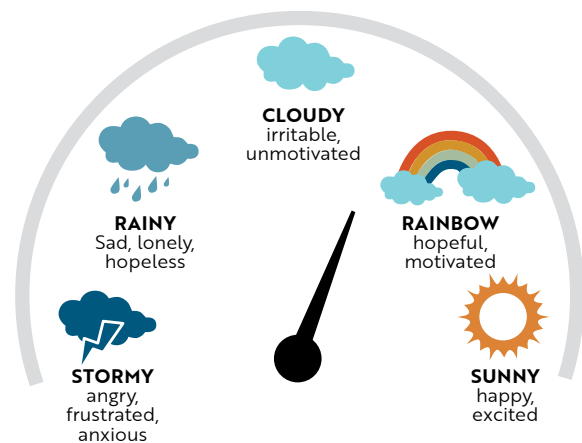
### HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY?

- Check in with yourself and the COVID-19 risks in your community and weigh the pros and cons of attending an event.
- Mitigate your risk. Get the recommended vaccinations against COVID-19, wear the recommended type of facemask in public spaces, limit close contact with others who are not vaccinated or have COVID-19 or been in contact with someone who has, and practise physical distancing in public when possible.
- Follow provincial and territorial public health recommendations.

- Now is a great time to reset or reconnect to your Indigeneity and renew your respect for Turtle Island and Sky Woman.

## SOCIAL ANXIETY AND GETTING COMFORTABLE GOING BACK TO YOUR SOCIAL LIFE

When we haven't had a chance to use our social skills for a long time, it's natural to feel anxious about getting back out there. Communicating and socializing take practice, just like other skills we use. If you feel apprehensive about getting back to your social obligations, ease back into it and start with smaller groups or spend one-on-one time with a close friend or family member at first.





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### **SOME HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES TO SHIFT YOUR EMOTIONAL WEATHER:**

- Exercise, get outside for a walk if you can or do a home workout.
- Practise meditation. Try a short, guided meditation video on YouTube if it's your first time.
- Watch your favourite feel-good movie or TV show.
- Our thoughts impact how we feel. Practise positive self-talk and avoid falling down a rabbit hole of negativity. You are not your negative thoughts.
- Sometimes the best thing to do is rest, reset, and try again tomorrow!

### **CREATE AND MAINTAIN A ROUTINE FOR WELLNESS**

- Create and stick to a schedule for work, leisure, chores, meals, physical activity, and sleep. Keeping a consistent sleep and eating routine can help maintain a healthy mood and good energy levels. It is hard to feel good if your basic needs are not being met!
- Try to stay connected with your community, virtually or in-person (when safe to do so). Take part in traditional activities and engage with local Elders and Knowledge Keepers.
- Consider reaching out to your neighbours and the people in your life who may need extra support. Helping others can be an excellent way to connect when you feel you have the capacity.
- Don't stop doing the things you love. Keep up with your hobbies or start new projects (for example, crosswords, puzzles, reading, dancing, beading, listening to or creating music).





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## RESOURCES

### **NWAC Elder Support**

Our team of in-house Elders are here to support you, offering support and building resiliency. They are available Monday–Friday, from 9–11 a.m. EST and 1–3 p.m. EST.

Elder Roberta Oshkawbewisens

Toll Free: 888-664-7808

**Hope for Wellness Help Line** (available in Cree, Ojibway, Inuktitut, English, and French) at 1-855-242-3310 or the online chat at [hopeforwellness.ca](http://hopeforwellness.ca). It's toll-free and open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

### **Talk 4 Healing**

Service languages: Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Cree, English, French

Provides 24/7 culturally sensitive counselling, advice and support to Indigenous women.

1-855-554-4325

Online service at [www.talk4healing.com](http://www.talk4healing.com)

\*Funding for this document is provided by Indigenous Services Canada. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Indigenous Services Canada.