

Helping People with Disabilities Cope with COVID-19

Dawn Danner, Director of Developmental Services,
United Counseling Service, Bennington, Vermont - March 26, 2020

It is safe to say that we are all feeling stress and anxiety from the COVID-19 outbreak. We are now forced to live in a world we never would have imagined a few months ago and it is hard to keep up with the ever-changing headlines and regulations regarding this pandemic.

All of this is hard to understand and difficult to process for the majority of us. However, if you are someone with a disability, understanding all of this information can create even greater amounts of stress.

Here are a few things you can do to help alleviate anxiety for people with disabilities during this difficult time:

- Listen to concerns and validate feelings. Do not say “there’s nothing to be afraid of” because this is a scary time and people have the right to feel afraid.
- Explain things in simple, easy to understand language using the person’s primary mode of communication. Visit www.gmsavt.org for a plain language booklet to help people understand the virus and how to stay safe.
- Understand that those with disabilities do not always accept change easily and disrupted routines can cause more stress. Try to engage them in new activities to replace what they have lost such as going out with friends, eating out, and working. Keeping people busy helps to keep their mind off the stressors.
- Choose to not expose an individual with a disability to the news every night. It is likely too much to process and will just create more fear.
- Be patient. For those with a limited ability to understand what is happening right now, they may act out more or become depressed. For some, they may only know that everything they love to do has been taken away; and they may not understand *why*.
- Use social media and video apps to ensure the individual stays connected with those they are missing
- Caregivers need to ensure they are taking care of themselves as well. The current situation might mean less breaks for you and you can only provide great care when you are taking care of yourself.

People with disabilities may be at very high risk of catching the virus, especially if they already have underlying health conditions. They will likely need extra time to process and understand information and will need to know that the social distancing is not because they have done something wrong; but because we are all trying to do something right – a very hard concept for all of us right now.