



Understanding COVID-19 and the Pandemic

This post was authored by [Roxanne J. Chang, Esq.](#), Plymouth, Michigan. She brings years of direct care, clinical psychology and therapeutic program consulting to [her special needs/elder law practice](#). She serves on SNA's Board of Directors.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed our lives, and it appears that it will be some time before we return to what we know as “normal.” It is important for all of us to know how to do our part to prevent the spread of this virus and to protect our communities and the people we love.

Understanding, discussing and coping with these changes, however, is challenging. If you are trying to explain these already complex topics to a loved one who has intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments, or is a “non-traditional” communicator, it can pose yet another layer of challenges.

The virus is a very new, and we’re learning more about it daily. Everyone has different capacities to understand and absorb the information that is out there about COVID-19. Nevertheless, there are some topics that may be especially helpful to discuss, including:

- How is this virus different from others?
- What are the symptoms and how long do they last?
- How likely is someone to get COVID-19?
- What can we do protect ourselves and others?
- What should you do if you get sick??
- Why can't we see our friends and family, take part in the same activities, or go into the community like we used to?
- When can go back to the way things were?
- What can we do to better adjust to the changes we are facing now?
- How can we help each other during this difficult time?

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to effective communication, and you may need to tailor your discussion to the abilities and needs of the individuals involved. That being said, here are some tips that may help everyone understand the situation better:

- Use plain language, and explain unfamiliar terminology related to the virus (for example, “pandemic” and “social distancing”);
- Don’t overwhelm. Adjust the level of detail based on the individual’s ability to absorb it.
- Use a calm voice and be aware of your facial expressions and body language;
- Acknowledge emotions;
- Actively listen and provide opportunities for questions;
- Seek input and share suggestions with each other for ways to find routine, comfort and joy;
- Provide regular opportunities to discuss concerns, fears, and updates;
- Provide reassurance that everyone is working together and as quickly as possible so we can go back to our pre-pandemic lives;
- Use multiple methods to communicate (e.g., visual aids, print materials);
- Limit access to news and other media sites if the topic creates too much anxiety or depression;
- Acknowledge and reinforce any and all efforts to stay healthy and help others stay safe.

The good news is, there are a number of wonderful resources that are already out there to help everyone better understand these complicated topics.

Resources Developed by Self-Advocates

- [COVID-19 Information by and for People with Disabilities](#)
- [Coronavirus Plain Language Glossary](#)
- [What in the World is Going On? Plain talk for Pandemic Times](#)
- [Plain Language Tips for Working with Staff During COVID-19](#)
- [Playlist of brief videos about how to stay safe from COVID-19](#)
- [Coronavirus Tips for Staying Healthy \(YouTube\)](#)

Social Stories

- [Coronavirus Questions](#)
- [COVID-19 Social Narratives](#)
- [Anxiety and COVID-19](#)
- [Let's Beat COVID-19](#)
- [My Coronavirus Story](#)

Other Resources

- [Talking about Change: A Story about the Coronavirus](#)
- Important Things to Know about COVID-19

We all have an important role in helping each other stay safe and healthy during these difficult times. If we can all work together, we will be able to tell our stories in the future of how we played our part to beat this virus.

About this Article: *We hope you find this article informative, but it is not legal advice. You should consult your own attorney, who can review your specific situation and account for variations in state law and local practices. Laws and regulations are constantly changing, so the longer it has been since an article was written, the greater the likelihood that the article might be out of date. SNA members focus on this complex, evolving area of law. To locate a member in your state, visit [Find an Attorney](#).*

Requirements for Reproducing this Article: *The above article may be reprinted only if it appears unmodified, including both the author description above the title and the “About this Article” paragraph immediately following the article, accompanied by the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Special Needs Alliance – www.specialneedsalliance.org.” The article may not be reproduced online. Instead, references to it should link to it on the SNA website.*