

Anxiety and Coping With the Coronavirus

childmind.org/article/anxiety-and-coping-with-coronavirus

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We're all on edge because of the coronavirus. Our daily lives have been disrupted, we aren't sure what tomorrow may bring, and for many of us the nonstop news and social media coverage isn't helping.

Our experts say that dealing with your own anxiety can be the most powerful way to make sure your kids feel secure. If you or your children are feeling worried, learning how to deal with that anxiety in a healthy way can help the whole family be more resilient, both now and when the pandemic is finally over.

Tolerating uncertainty

"The treatment for anxiety isn't to make the fear go away, it's to manage the fear and tolerate uncertainty," explains Jerry Bublick, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "So for the kids who've been in treatment for this, it's almost like they have an immune response or they're vaccinated against uncertainty. They've been training for this and now they're able to put their skills in place and for many of them the coronavirus is not affecting them as much as those of us who aren't used to dealing with uncertainty on a daily level."

Many parents are having a harder time dealing with COVID-19 than their children, and some of the anxiety that kids are experiencing may be inadvertently passed on by worried parents.

As parents, we need to be modeling for our kids how to react to stressful times by coping with anxiety in healthy ways. "I think we have to be mindful of the present and stay focused on what is actually happening and not let ourselves go to worst case scenarios," Dr. Bublick recommends. "If we're showing our kids catastrophic thinking and head-in-your-hands worry, and crying and fear, then they're going to learn that's the way to handle the times now."

How to stay calm

Be smart about what you're reading. While we should make sure we are informed about how best to keep our families safe, we should also be thoughtful about what we are reading online to make sure it's actually helpful. It is easy to inadvertently get sucked into reading

every update as it comes in, or clicking on, in Dr. Bubrick's words, "the doomsday apocalypse kind of stories, which I would consider to be 'mental health fake news.'"

Consider putting a limit on the number of articles you read, or for how long you will read about the coronavirus each day. If you're consuming media that is making you anxious — pictures of lines at stores, people hoarding supplies, celebrities getting diagnosed — take a break. Being informed is one thing; being overexposed is another.

Focus on what you're doing right now. Remind yourself that you are doing your part to minimize the risks by practicing social distancing and keeping your hands and your home clean. While it is sensible to be prepared for the future, Dr. Bubrick recommends "focusing on making sure we're in the moment, and dealing with things in the present."

Stop yourself if notice that you are getting carried away with "what ifs." It will help if you can set aside time to regularly practice mindfulness, which is a tool to help people stay grounded and calm in the present moment — not caught up in the future or the past. Parents can practice mindfulness alone or with children.

Rely on routines. Establishing a routine that involves exercise, regular meals and healthy amounts of sleep are also crucial to regulating our moods and our worries. If your old routine is no longer possible because of COVID-19 precautions, look for ways to be flexible and start a new routine. Remind yourself that life *is* still continuing, and ground yourself by doing things like making agendas and setting goals.

Checking in with kids

When kids are feeling anxious, it may or may not be clear to parents. "We shouldn't be looking for just one thing," says Dr. Bubrick. "We should be ready to handle a variety of different expressions of anxiety." Anxiety could look like:

- Reassurance-seeking (Are we going to be okay? Is grandpa going to be okay?)
- Reluctance to separate from parents
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Moodiness and irritability
- Tantrums or meltdowns
- Trouble sleeping

Kids may not always be able to express how they are feeling. For younger children, Dr. Bubrick suggests using a feelings chart instead of saying "Tell me how anxious you are." With a feelings chart, which you can find on the internet, you can ask kids to point to the feeling they are having now. Parents can also use a traffic light chart to help kids share how intense their feeling is — a red light means they feel overwhelmed, a yellow light is medium and a green light is okay.

For kids who are more able to articulate how they are feeling, Dr. Bubrick says it is better to ask what psychologists call “forced choice questions.” “If you ask a vague question you’re going to get a vague answer,” he says. “So instead of asking ‘How was your day?’ which is pretty vague, maybe ask, “Did your anxiety get in the way of you having a good day today?” he suggests.

If you’re wondering about a teenager, Dr. Bubrick recommends talking about yourself first. “You can say something like, “I saw this article today and it made me wonder about this and that. Did you see something like that? What’s your reaction to it?”

Helping anxious kids

Structure their day. As parents we often think that setting boundaries for a child is a way to make our lives easier, but in fact kids thrive on them, too. It is easy for children to get bored or fretful if they are facing a day without structure, and anxiety can thrive under those circumstances.

Make sure that you are structuring their days when they are cooped up at home. Alternate chores or schoolwork with more fun activities and periods of free time. Make sure kids are still getting the chance to exercise and socialize with friends via video chats and social media if they are on it.

Avoid giving too much reassurance. For kids of all ages, Dr. Bubrick recommends avoiding getting into a cycle of providing too much reassurance. Kids can come to rely on the reassurance and want to hear it more and more often — and when a parent *isn’t* able to give them complete reassurance their anxiety can worsen.

Instead, remind kids of the things they are doing to take care of themselves (like washing their hands and staying indoors) and encourage them to focus on being in the moment. They can practice mindfulness activities alone or with you.

Model calm yourself. Don’t share your worries with your children, and if you are feeling anxious, find a way to ground yourself. “After this crisis is over, your kids are going to walk away from this having learned things,” says Dr. Bubrick. “What will they have learned from you in the way you handled this? Will they look back and say ‘Wow, I’m really impressed with how mom and dad held it together?’ Or are they going to walk away and think the world is a scary place?”

Look for the positive. Finally, Dr. Bubrick recommends looking for the silver linings. “I spoke to a family this morning on Skype and they said, ‘You know, our kids are all together for the first time in months and they’re playing games together and they’re laughing together and we’re spending time together.’ So there are silver linings, you just have to look for them.

