

MANAGING COVID-19 RELATED STRESS AND ANXIETY IN OURSELVES AND IN OUR CHILDREN AND TEENS

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Introduction: We are in the midst of an unprecedented struggle to cope with the serious health threats posed to all segments of our society by COVID-19, a novel and, for some, potentially lethal coronavirus for which at present we have no preventive vaccine or medicinal treatment. Fortunately, a few behavior changes, if conscientiously practiced by all of us, can help dramatically slow the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.

These mandated behavior changes include: 1) social distancing, which means keeping a distance of six or more feet from others; 2) group avoidance, which means not joining in gatherings of more than nine others; and 3) hand washing or sanitizing, which means doing so right after coming home from outside, as well as after touching surfaces, doorknobs, shopping cart handles, or money that may be contaminated with COVID-19.

The life saving consequences, social distancing and crowd avoidance come at a cost. For example, they have caused real economic hardship as nonessential businesses, such as many factories, offices, restaurants, malls, museums, theaters, arenas, and baseball stadiums throughout the US have closed for the time being. In some instances, employees can work from home. In many instances, they cannot. The federal government is, among other things, rushing to put an economic safety net in place for unemployed workers.

Another unsettling spin-off from social distancing and crowd avoidance is that education has shifted from the classroom to the home dining room. Students of all grades and ages, from nursery school through college, have been told to stay home and attend virtual classrooms on the Internet. What will be the effects of prolonged Internet learning on academic progress? Will an extended reliance on chat rooms and other social media platforms provide the same opportunities for social learning and bonding as classrooms, cafeterias, dorms, libraries, gyms, and playgrounds?

Customary habits and routines that give predictable structure and flow to daily life are being upended. We are being asked to adjust rapidly to changes everywhere we turn as we learn what it means to practice social distancing and group avoidance as part of a concerted world-wide effort to halt, or at least slow, the spread of COVID-19. Increases in anxiety and stress are normal responses to such profound uncertainty and widespread change.

A Need for Acceptance: One certainty in our topsy-turvy world is that more life altering changes will be coming in the days and weeks ahead. Another is that frustration and stress levels will mount if we react to them as personal inconveniences, or worse, as if they are unjustified limitations to our personal freedom and happiness. Let us instead try to accept the changes recommended by our national and state health authorities and political leaders as the life saving adjustments they are intended to be. Let us imagine that members of our family, our friends, neighbors, coworkers and classmates may be among those whose lives are saved, if for the time being we act responsibly and practice social distancing, crowd avoidance, and hand washing.

Be an Authoritative Role-Model: This document has been prepared to help parents and other child caregivers provide support and guidance to children and teens as they collectively navigate through these unsettled times. As captains of their respective ships, it is vitally important for parents and other child caregivers to display a reasonable amount of confidence in their ability to steer a course through this turbulence that will eventually bring their ship safely to shore. In this regard, statements in the presence of children and teens such as "I'm doing my best;" and "I may not have all the answers, but I'm listening to experts who I believe can figure this out;" are preferable to "I wonder if this will ever end;" and "There's so much confusion, and nobody knows what they're talking about."

The following may sound trite, but it is nonetheless true: As role-models, particularly in times of uncertainty and threat, parents and other child caregivers have a fundamental responsibility to set an example that will fill children and teens with hope, inspire trust, and motivate them to face their COVID-19 frustrations and fears with optimism, courage, and determination.

During these unsettled times, parents and other child caregivers are more likely to reduce COVID-19 stresses and anxieties in children and teens by adopting an authoritative style of communication and leadership. Authoritative parents and authoritative child caregivers patiently explain why changes are necessary and how they are in the best interests of a child or teen. Further, they lead by example, which is to say that, for the most part, they follow the rules, too. In addition, they listen compassionately to children and teens. They may "bend" a little to a child or teen's reasonable objections, but they do not "break" or give in when they are confident that their rules and regulations will in the long run promote the health and welfare of a child or teen.

Example of an Authoritative Response to a Child's COVID-19 Concerns: It is important that we take time to understand how children and teens are reacting to the changes to their lives brought about by the efforts of national and state health officials to push back against COVID-19.

A fifth grader recently told me that the closing of schools and the suspension of National Basketball Association games was unnerving and worrisome. An avid video

game player, the child imagined the coronavirus as an invading alien force intent on inflicting mayhem. The term "Apocalypse" was mentioned by the child in this connection. A patient, nonjudgmental response was used in addressing these worries. At no time were they dismissed, minimized, or ridiculed.

In addressing the child's concerns, we stayed mainly in the realm of reality. Accordingly, the child was informed about the preventive benefits of hand sanitizing, social distancing and large crowd avoidance. In this context, we also talked about how the virus was sneaky, in that it is a silent and invisible invader, but not so smart, in that it could not transport itself to or aim itself at a target.

Using a bit of humor, we discussed how the virus had to be sneezed or coughed into the air by an infected person and then breathed in by someone else standing close by for an infection to occur. It was pointed out that all we have to do to prevent or reduce the spread of infection is step back and keep a distance of six feet or more from others. It was noted, too, that the consequences of this precaution could mean fewer or no play-dates, movie outings, enrichment classes, etc. To offset any sense of social isolation, face-timing, group chats, and Internet group game play were mentioned as alternatives to direct contact with friends. The discussion ended by reflecting on the scientific work being done to develop vaccines and medicines so that we can eventually return to normal social activity. In the meantime, the practice of social distancing as a way of showing we care for others was emphasized.

Be an Informed Parent or Child Caregiver: The following information is based on facts about COVID-19 derived from the website of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus with lethal potential, is currently spreading in the US and around the world. As of this date, we have no vaccine or medical antidote for the flu-like illness COVID-19 produces.

We do know, however, that the virus is most likely spread from person to person. For instance, when an infected individual coughs or sneezes in close proximity to an uninfected individual, say within less than six feet. Chances of infection increase when interpersonal proximity of less than six feet is sustained for several minutes during which coughing and sneezing are repeated. Under these circumstances, uninfected people can inhale airborne droplets that contain the COVID-19 virus, causing them to become infected and a potential source of contamination to others.

Although not as likely as person-to-person transmission, COVID-19 can also be contracted from contaminated surfaces. This can occur when an uninfected person touches a contaminated surface and then, without washing their hands, touches their face, especially their eyes, nose, or mouth. Hand washing with soap and water before touching one's face is an effective preventive measure for this mode of transmission.

Signs of COVID-19 infection, such as fever, congestion, cough, and chills do not show immediately. So, a person may not know that she or he is infected until about four days

after they contract COVID-19. Therefore, it is important that we all practice social distancing, large crowd avoidance, and frequent hand washing.

During the incubation period, when symptoms are not noticeable, an infected person can unknowingly spread the virus to others. While all uninfected persons are susceptible to contagion, there are degrees of vulnerability. The elderly (70 and older) are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 infection, as are individuals of any age with a pre-existing medical condition such as asthma, diabetes, heart problems, or compromised immune systems.

Persons in the most vulnerable categories need special protection from COVID-19 infection, as for them it can be life-threatening. We practice social distancing and other safeguards, not just to protect ourselves, but also to protect the most vulnerable. Social distancing is a way to show we care and that we respect all of life's diversity.

For those who are less vulnerable to contagion, COVID-19 infections are more likely to parallel symptoms of a mild-to-severe flu, resulting in fevers, chills, coughs, and congestion that last about two weeks. Any person with flu-like symptoms should immediately self-quarantine and seek medical advice regarding COVID-19 testing and other healthcare procedures. Call ahead before going to an ER, a doctor's office, or a hospital.

Use Reliable Sources: As mentioned, the latest information about COVID-19 can be found at the website for the Centers of Disease Control (CDC). Those searching for COVID-19 information on the Internet should carefully consider the source. The CDC website along with websites for the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are reliable. Websites associated with leading hospitals, universities, and major news sources can also be regarded as reliable. It is also advisable to check in with local websites posted by states, counties, towns, nearby hospitals, and schools.

Additional information regarding the management of COVID-19 related anxiety and stress can be found at the CDC website, as well as the website of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association.

Be careful to avoid information overload and limit exposure to social media, where unfounded rumors that either catastrophize or minimize COVID-19 can circulate. Opinions are not all alike. Those from informed sources should rank over others.

Why Manage a Child's or Teen's COVID-19 Anxiety and Stress?: While anxiety and stress are normal reactions to uncertainty and change, it is important that levels be managed. Too much anxiety and stress can:

- Interfere with learning, concentration, planning, and logical thinking;
- Trigger a "fight-flight-or-freeze" reaction that in turn may cause irritability, aggressive acting out, avoidance/withdrawal, or immobility.
- Result in shortness of breath, palpitations, headaches, stomach distress, and muscle cramping

How to Manage a Child's or Teen's COVID-19 Stress and Anxiety:

- Normalize their rate of breathing.

- Teach diaphragmatic or belly breathing: the stomach expands on each inhalation to increase oxygen intake to the lungs and eventually to the brain.
- Teach muscle relaxation: open hands, wiggle fingers and encourage letting go of tension in other parts of the body, i.e., feet, legs, abdomen, chest, arms, neck, jaw, face, and forehead.
- Stay calm while thinking of ways to resolve fears and frustrations.
- Ground thoughts and emotions in reality.
- Moderate the rate of speech.
- Consider consequences before acting on impulses.

Here's some of what we gain by managing stress and anxiety:

- We enhance our logical thinking and planning,
- We improve our concentration and our ability to learn,
- We promote responsible behavior, and
- We avoid physiological distress.

Togetherness: To help children and teens manage their COVID-19 stress and anxiety, parents and other child caregivers should encourage them to practice the self-regulation/relaxation skills mentioned above. Parents and other child caregivers should also talk with children and teens about how they are integrating these self-regulation/relaxation skills into their own daily lives and the benefits they are experiencing by doing so.

In addition, to prevent the buildup of anxiety and stress during the day, parents and other child caregivers should, at various times, invite children and teens to take a "belly breath" to open their hands, relax their muscles, and make sure their feelings and thoughts are reality based. Use this opportunity to discuss any issues.

Furthermore, parents and other child caregivers should encourage children and teens to use self-regulation/relaxation skills such as "belly breathing" and open hands:

- Before discussing COVID-19 topics or any other matters that might trigger stress and anxiety.
- During all phases of homeschooling, including study time, test taking, etc.
- Before going to sleep.

Final Suggestions: Here are a few more steps parents and other child caregivers can take to help manage COVID-19 related stress and anxiety in children and teens:

- Limit access to social media to avoid exposure to bullying, peer pressure, false information, and confusion.
- Educate children and teens about efforts malevolent cyber hackers make to stir up COVID-19 anxiety and stress by creating and circulating false information.

- Encourage the use of reliable, authoritative sources for COVID-19 news.
- Provide reassurance about the effectiveness of social distancing, crowd avoidance, and sanitizing in limiting the spread of COVID-19.
- Show confidence in efforts of scientists and others to create vaccines to prevent COVID-19 and discover medicines to treat it in the future.
- Remember to be reasonably self-assured and compassionate when discussing COVID-19 related topics with children and teens.
- Hold family meetings to discuss issues related to COVID-19.
- Break the ice with humor, have some fun, breathe diaphragmatically, be flexible, play some family games, watch movies together, make plans for a post-COVID-19 future, be creative and, above all, be thankful for your health and that of your loved ones.