



Anxiety During COVID-19: Support for Kids, Teens and Families

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Our routines and schedules have been turned upside down during this extraordinary time. We are surrounded by messages of danger and threat.

How Parents May Be Affected

Parents carry a great deal of responsibility for their family's health and wellbeing in multiple areas—school, social, activities—while also juggling their own jobs, finances, caring for elderly relatives, etc. That responsibility is now exponentially increased, as they are trying to keep their families safe and healthy, while coping with drastic changes in life and routines. Parents may feel like they can't keep up with the ever-evolving situation. They may struggle with information overload—do I need to read it all? Will I miss something important? They have to reorganize lives and routines abruptly. Suddenly, there's no school; they have to become their children's teachers, while being parents, and doing their jobs from home in many instances. They're finding it hard to keep their children or teens off their screens without getting into arguments. Many may be worried about finances or job losses. Perhaps there are family members or friends who have the illness, and there is fear about their recovery. The already delicate balancing act of parenting has become more precarious.

How Kids May Be Affected

Elementary and middle school children may at first be happy that there's no school. Many do not understand the implications because young children don't have as much of a future orientation. After the novelty of not going to school wears off, children may be restless and want to play with friends. It's hard for them to understand why they can't. Those involved in sports are used to being physically active and suddenly have a lot more time on their hands, and miss the energy of their sports and teammates.

With regard to school, kids whose anxiety is triggered by the many challenges of the school day and environment. They may actually be much less anxious at home

Toddlers and preschoolers need to move a lot, so they feel frustrated about being cooped up while their parents are working or managing other challenges. After a few days, it's easy to get on each other's nerves, and sibling squabbles may be exhausting. Irritability, crying, defiance and withdrawal are signs that your child is struggling with the changes.

How Teens May Be Affected

Some teens are relieved to not have to deal with social and academic challenges, but others feel frustrated that they can't hang out with friends. High school students are particularly affected by cancellations of college entrance tests, and may worry about their grades and college applications. Graduating seniors in high school and college feel the loss of their senior year and of graduation celebrations. Teens and college students who are healthy may also feel more invincible and therefore frustrated by some of the social distancing restrictions. Teens may seem callous when they joke about the situation, but that is a normal way in which teens may interact with each other to cope with difficult situations.

The 4 C's of What We Can Do:

One of the things I often say to families is: We are all braver than we think we are! We can rise to the challenge and find out that we are stronger than we imagined.

We can focus on all the things we can't do, or we can channel that energy in a positive direction to take charge of what we can do. Crisis can bring out the best in us. We can get through this together! Let's make some good come out of this challenging time.

1. **Calm:** First things first. It's hard to problem-solve when highly anxious. Kids pick up on parents' anxiety.
 - a. Parents, model calmness for your family. Ask yourself—What's my *Feeling Temperature*? If you are above 7 on the Feeling Thermometer (scale of 1-10), take a few minutes to calm yourself first using breathing, mindfulness, meditation, quiet time, etc. Our planning, problem-solving and decision-making skills work best when we are calm.
 - b. Accept the situation, rather than deny or resist: Acceptance will free you up to plan, problem-solve and find the positive.
 - c. Tag team with your spouse to give each alone time to regroup and calm.
 - d. Encourage your child or teen or adult family members to take a calming break if upset.
 - e. Download a free copy of the *Feeling Thermometer* at [COVID-19 Resources](#)

2. **Consistency:** Create a new routine and structure for yourself and your family. A balance between work and play are important.
 - a. Set expectations, rules and limits about school work, sleep, and screen time. Predictability and routine are necessary for kids and teens. Wake up at a regular time, get dressed, have breakfast. Then comes virtual learning or other academic task—before playtime or screens. If you are waiting for the school to provide online learning, seek your own in the meanwhile. Create your own academic goals and tasks for your child. Fill the gaps with homeschooling resources or many wonderful free online resources and classes such as Khan Academy.
 - b. Catch up on sleep! There's no rushing for the bus or the workplace each morning. Enjoy the luxury of catching up on sleep in the time you would spend commuting. It's important to keep a consistent sleep schedule with 7-8 hours per night for adults, and 8-11 hours for children and teens.
 - c. Ask each family member to be a helper with the family's daily needs and activities—cooking, cleaning, laundry, play with or care for younger siblings, yard work, cleaning out closets etc.
 - d. Turn screen time into a positive: Limit video games and surfing the net; instead, create educational screen time with “virtual field trips” to museums, zoos, aquariums, and parks, nature websites, and social experiences with “virtual play dates,” classes, “virtual sports practice” and activities.
 - e. Cultivate interests and hobbies: Art, music, sewing, knitting, gardening, hands-on creative projects.

3. **Containment:** While we do our part to contain the virus, let's also contain our anxiety and frustration.
 - a. Follow the disinfecting and distancing instructions given by your trusted health professionals.
 - b. Limit the news and discussion to once or twice per day to reduce information overload.
 - c. Validate your feelings: You may be anxious and overwhelmed. Allow yourself to experience these feelings rather than suppress them, but express them in a way that doesn't make your child concerned—share them with a loved one or friend instead.
 - d. Validate your child or teen's feelings: Some children and teens may have little anxiety about the COVID-19. Follow their lead and don't give them anything new to be anxious about. They may be more upset about being cooped up and not allowed to play with friends or go out. Teens may be frustrated because they feel isolated from friends and their social plans are thwarted; graduating seniors may be sad about missing out on their last semester, and possibly their graduation events. Allow your child or teen to talk about and label feelings, rather than acting out.

- e. Schedule one or two daily check-in times (or call it “question time” or “worry time”) for 10 to 15 minutes per day with your child. Start with “What’s your *Feeling Temperature*?” Ask what they have heard, what’s on their mind, and what questions they have. Answer with matter-of-fact information suited to your child’s age. For preschool and elementary children, it’s enough to know that people are getting sick from germs, and we can help by washing our hands and staying away from others.
 - f. Ask your child to jot down worries or questions in a journal at all other times. Giving “on-demand” reassurance throughout the day only turns it into a vicious cycle of anxiety.
 - g. If in therapy, continue with telehealth therapy, if possible: While it might not seem the same, it may be more helpful than you realize. Exposure exercises can often be done more effectively in the client’s home environment, where the triggers may be via telehealth.
4. **Caring:** For yourself and others. It’s time to reflect on what’s important in your life. What do you value? Shift your perspective; focus on the things that matter most.
- a. Strengthen relationships: Once in a new routine, many of us may find we have more quality time together because we’re not rushing to the next activity or because our daily commute is gone. It’s an opportunity to strengthen bonds with shared family activities such as games, cooking, home projects, relaxing together and talking.
 - b. Stay active: If allowed, engage the outdoors (while practicing physical distancing). Go for a walk, ride a bicycle, or play ball. If you aren’t able to go outdoors, find creative ways to be physically active indoors. Online exercise or dance videos and apps can make it fun.
 - c. Find strength in spirituality: Make time to reflect, engage in your spiritual practices or connect with faith groups online to sustain a sense of community.
 - d. Channel compassion: Engage your family in helping others (while following distancing rules). “Social distancing” is only physical; technology can actually bring us closer. Reach out to someone who’s alone, an elderly person, or someone you’ve lost touch with. Donate online or volunteer remotely to help those struggling and in need.
 - e. Gratitude: Despite these challenging times, we can each take a few minutes a day to remind ourselves of all the things for which we are thankful. We actually have the time to stop and notice.