

Coping with COVID-19: Managing Anxiety and OCD Aureen Pinto Wagner, Ph.D.

The rapid development of the COVID-19 situation has been a mega-exposure event that has pushed us all out of our comfort zones in a big way. With the four U's—unfamiliar, unpredictable, uncontrollable, uncertain—it's the perfect recipe for anxiety and OCD.

It touches people with anxiety in many ways: Those with fears of contamination, disease and catastrophe may panic that their worst fears have come true; those with intrusive thoughts might be inundated with disturbing images they can't get out of their minds. Those with scrupulosity might be plagued by doubts that they were careless and inadvertently spread it. And for those with perfectionism and just-right OCD, well-controlled schedules and routines have gone out the window.

We have a choice. We can worry about all the things we can't do, or we can take charge of what we can do.

The 4 C's of What We Can Do:

1. **Calm:** First things first. It's hard to problem-solve when highly anxious. Kids pick up on parents' anxiety.
 - a. Model calmness for your family. Ask yourself—What's my *Feeling Temperature*? If you are above 7 (on a scale of 1-10), take a few minutes to calm yourself first (mindfulness, meditation, quiet time, etc.) Our planning, problem-solving and decision-making skills work best when we are calm.
 - b. Download a free copy of the *Feeling Thermometer* at www.anxietywellness.com
2. **Consistency:** Create a new routine and structure for yourself and your family. Kids and teens may be happy there's no school, but routines and a balance between work and play are important.
 - a. Set expectations, rules and limits about school work, sleep, and screen time.
 - b. Ask each family member to be a helper with the family's daily needs and activities.
3. **Containment:** Not just of the virus, but also anxiety.
 - a. Follow the cleaning and distancing instructions given by your trusted health professionals.
 - b. Limit the news and discussion to once or twice per day.
 - c. 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*?" and open-ended questions, and provide matter-of-fact information suited to your child's age.
 - d. 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.
4. **Caring:** For yourself and others. What's important in your life? What do you value? Shift your perspective; focus on the things that matter most. Crisis can bring out the best in us. We can get through this together!
 - a. Relationships: It's an opportunity to strengthen bonds by spending time in shared family activities such as games, cooking, home projects, relaxing together and talking.
 - b. Physical activity: If possible, engage the outdoors (while practicing physical distancing). Go for a walk, ride a bicycle, or play ball. Alternately, find creative ways to be physically active indoors.
 - c. Spirituality: Make time to reflect, or connect with faith groups online to sustain a sense of community.
 - d. Compassion: Channel anxiety by helping others as a family—remotely. "Social distancing" is only physical; technology can actually bring us closer. Reach out to someone who's alone or who you have 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.