Index of Information & Resources

Talking to Kids

Help Children through Mindfulness and Play

Stress and Coping

Are You Feeling Lonely?

Managing Stress Associated with the Covid-19 Virus Outbreak

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT COVID-19

BACKGROUND

Although the number of reported 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in children remains low across the nation, it is important to communicate information to your children about diseases like the coronavirus. Parents, family members, school staff and other trusted adults can play an important role in helping children make sense of what they hear in a way that is honest, accurate and minimizes anxiety or fear.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The Department of Health (DOH) will continue to monitor COVID-19 and deliver updates to the public. The department is working with local, state and federal officials, along with health care partners, about the potential spread of the coronavirus.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

• **Make yourself available to listen and to talk.** Be sure children know they can come to you when they have questions or to express their fears.
• **Avoid large crowds and traveling.** We strongly encourage the suspension of large gatherings, events, conferences and traveling to recreational activities like gyms, movie theaters and shopping malls.
• **Continue to encourage healthy habits.** Practice good self-care to ensure your body is getting the proper nutrients from fruits, vegetables and getting enough sleep.

HOW CAN YOU TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN?

• **Remain calm and reassuring**. Children are often trusting with adults. It is important to lead by example and remain calm to not pass fear.
• **Teach children everyday actions to reduce the spread of germs.** This is an opportunity to create healthy habits. Remind children to cough or sneeze into a tissue or elbow and to wash their hands frequently while singing "Happy Birthday" twice, or for 20 seconds.
• **Keep it simple while providing accurate information.** Give children information that is truthful and appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child. Avoid making assumptions about who might have COVID-19.
• **Pay attention to what children see or hear on television, radio, or online.** Consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19. Too much information on one topic can lead to anxiety.
• **If you, your child in your family is sick, stay home until you are feeling better.** In addition, frequently clean commonly touched surfaces in your home such as countertops, light switches and cell phones.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

DOH – https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx
CDC – https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html
American Academy of Pediatrics – https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/#Information

Date Created: March 27, 2020

https://theconversation.com/stupid-coronavirus-in-uncertain-times-we-can-help-children-through-mindfulness-and-play-135317 April 3, 2020

"Stupid coronavirus!" I heard my six-year-old mumble while talking in her sleep.

Earlier that day her swimming and basketball lessons were cancelled, a birthday party postponed, and she had to race with me between several meetings before the university campus shut down. "Stupid coronavirus *indeed*!"

Hearing this reminded me these are strange and worrying times for young children. While we need to look after ourselves and others, we also need to consider how all this is affecting our kids, and how we can help them through it.

Kids and anxiety

Australian research found child anxiety diagnoses almost doubled from 2008 to 2013. It's difficult to say whether this is due to a true increase or we're simply recognising anxiety better in children.

Feeling anxious or worried sometimes is a part of healthy development. But at times, children may feel more anxious or worried than usual.

Climate change, the bushfires, and COVID-19 may have contributed to and continue to fuel increased anxiety. We need research to better understand the effects these crises have had on children's well-being.

We can support children during these times and also keep an eye out for when they might need more help than we can give. If their anxiety is interfering with typical childhood activities or family life, it could be time to see a GP, paediatrician or psychologist.

But there are many things you can do as a parent or caregiver.

Mindfulness for children?

Mindfulness is the regular and repeated act of directing our attention to the present moment. Mostly, our attention follows whatever is most interesting; mindfulness helps us to focus without judging ourselves when we can't.

It's commonly used to reduce stress, improve well-being, and address mental health, which it does reasonably well. In a broader sense, the goal of mindfulness is to help us to sit with our experiences whether they are pleasant, unpleasant, or somewhere in between.

Mindfulness practices have become more popular over recent years. Many people practise mindfulness in their day-to-day lives, often using apps (though we need more research to explore the benefits of these). Mindfulness programs are also run in workplaces and other settings.

Large numbers of parents, teachers, and entire schools are also turning to mindfulness.

But what does the evidence say about mindfulness for children?

The evidence is mixed

A recent review of over 60 studies of school-based mindfulness programs involving preschool to secondary students suggested gains in social-emotional and cognitive skills.

The researchers didn't observe similar gains in academic achievement or student behaviour. They noted the quality of research, much like that in adults, was not strong enough to make the claims many would like to make about the widespread benefits of mindfulness.

Short-term early childhood mindfulness programs and those delivered using audio-guided tracks have so far provided questionable results at best.

One small but promising study used classroom mindfulness activities (for example, listening to sounds), emotion coping skills (like "where in my body do I feel anger?"), and breathing techniques (such as breathing with a soft toy on the tummy).

At the end of the first year of this program, pre-schoolers displayed better learning skills. After two years, children displayed higher vocabularies and reading scores.

Our own pilot work teaching pre-schoolers about mindfulness found benefits too. While there was little difference immediately after the intervention, three months later, children who learned mindfulness showed significant benefits to their mental well-being compared with those who didn't.

Adapting mindfulness activities

Obviously, you can't ask a five-year-old to sit still and focus on their breath for 45 minutes. Techniques commonly used in adults just won't work with kids.

Mindfulness for children should be interactive, play-based, and focused on sensory and body awareness. It should use emotional vocabulary and sensory language (for example, talking about sounds, taste, textures and smells), be hands-on where possible, and most importantly, it should be fun.

Given the lack of strong empirical evidence for mindfulness on its own for young children just yet, we should integrate aspects of mindfulness-based activities with other components.

Think playful learning about emotions, like colouring in where we notice certain feelings in our bodies, or drawing how music makes us feel. These activities take from other well-known psychological approaches called cognitive behaviour therapy and psycho-education.

3 mindfulness activities for kids

1. Belly breathing with a "buddy"

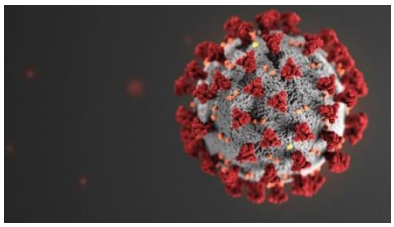
- find a favourite soft toy (with some weight is good), a plastic bath boat, or similar
- have your child lie down and place the object on their tummy
- get them to pay attention to it by looking and touching
- encourage them to focus on how the object moves up and down as they breathe (you can suggest calm and slow breathing might even put the toy or people in the boat to sleep)
- this activity can be great as part of bath time or getting ready for bed.

2. "Robot" child

- ask your child to pretend they are a robot lying on the ground
- use a remote control (you can make one from cereal box) and pretend to "shut-down" your child/robot's body
- begin with their feet/legs, move up the body to arms/hands, before getting to the face/brain
- ask "robot" if they can still feel any "electricity" in that body part after it's been shut down
- as your child gets better with this activity, you can get more detailed with robot body parts (for example, toes, fingers, noses, ears)
- a variation is to get your robot-child to tense and relax (and reset) each body part as you control it with your remote.

3. A mindful walk or "sensory countdown"

- go for a walk outside and try to notice or find: five different sounds, four matching colours, three different textures, two different smells
- add different sounds, sights, shapes, and textures to tick off on a bingo-style checklist
- this activity can be adapted for inside play.



Stress and Coping

Shared from CDC website at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Coping with stress will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger.

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. How you respond to the outbreak can depend on your background, the things that make you different from other people, and the community you live in.

People who may respond more strongly to the stress of a crisis include

- Older people and people with chronic diseases who are at higher risk for COVID-19
- Children and teens
- People who are helping with the response to COVID-19, like doctors and other health care providers, or first responders
- People who have mental health conditions including problems with substance use

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak can include

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

Need help? Know someone who does?
If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or others call:

- *Call 911*
- *Visit the Disaster Distress Helpline or call 1-800-985-5990 and TTY 1-800-846-8517*
- *Or text TalkWithUs to 66746*
- *Visit the National Domestic Violence Hotline or call 1-800-799-7233 and TTY 1-800-787-3224*

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms. Additional information can be found at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (https://www.samhsa.gov/disaster-preparedness) website.

Taking care of yourself, your friends, and your family can help you cope with stress. Helping others cope with their stress can also make your community stronger.

Things you can do to support yourself

- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- Take care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Make time to unwind. Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- Connect with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.
- Call your healthcare provider if stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row.

Reduce stress in yourself and others

Sharing the facts about COVID-19 and understanding the actual risk to yourself and people you care about can make an outbreak less stressful.

When you share accurate information about COVID-19 you can help make people feel less stressed and allow you to connect with them.

Learn more about taking care of your emotional health at https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp.

For parents

Children and teens react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with the COVID-19 calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. Some common changes to watch for include

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

There are many things you can do to support your child

- Take time to talk with your child or teen about the COVID-19 outbreak. Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child or teen can understand.
- Reassure your child or teen that they are safe. Let them know it is ok if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn how to cope from you.
- Limit your family's exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Try to keep up with regular routines. If schools are closed, create a schedule for learning activities and relaxing or fun activities.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members.

Learn more about helping children cope at https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html.

For responders

Responding to COVID-19 can take an emotional toll on you. There are things you can do to reduce secondary traumatic stress (STS) reactions:

- Acknowledge that STS can impact anyone helping families after a traumatic event.
- Learn the symptoms including physical (fatigue, illness) and mental (fear, withdrawal, guilt).
- Allow time for you and your family to recover from responding to the pandemic.
- Create a menu of personal self-care activities that you enjoy, such as spending time with friends and family, exercising, or reading a book.
- Take a break from media coverage of COVID-19.
- Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or concerned that COVID-19 is affecting your ability to care for your family and patients as you did before the outbreak.

Learn more tips for taking care of yourself during emergency response at https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp.

For people who have been released from quarantine

Being separated from others if a healthcare provider thinks you may have been exposed to COVID-19 can be stressful, even if you do not get sick. Everyone feels differently after coming out of quarantine. Some feelings include :

- Mixed emotions, including relief after quarantine
- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Stress from the experience of monitoring yourself or being monitored by others for signs and symptoms of COVID-19
- Sadness, anger, or frustration because friends or loved ones have unfounded fears of contracting the disease from contact with you, even though you have been determined not to be contagious
- Guilt about not being able to perform normal work or parenting duties during quarantine
- Other emotional or mental health changes

Children may also feel upset or have other strong emotions if they, or someone they know, has been released from quarantine. You can help your child cope.

Abilities *in Motion*

You're Not Alone!

Call AIM's **Social Connection** Line

610-790-9632 English
610-823-5237 Spanish
484-987-4393 Veterans' Line

Call Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Social isolation can take a toll. Connecting with others is important. It's nice to have someone to talk to! This call line is not for program services or emergencies. *We're here to listen. Let's connect!*

www.abilitiesinmotion.org

ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Managing Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak

Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Individuals and Communities

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak has the potential to increase stress and anxiety, both because of the fear of catching the virus and also because of uncertainty about how the outbreak will affect us socially and economically. There are practical steps you can take to improve your wellbeing.

Coping with the Stress of COVID-19

Dealing with stress reactions caused by the COVID-19 virus outbreak can improve your health, quality of life, and wellbeing. The following evidence-informed principles have been shown to be related to better outcomes in many adverse situations (Hobfoll et al., 2007). There are key actions within each element that might be especially helpful for those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak (Reissman et al, 2006; Gonzales, 2003). It's not necessary to have all elements in place but implementing some of the following suggestions may help you deal with the stress caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Increase Sense of Safety

Reduce anxiety with healthy actions that make you feel safer. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other experts suggest the following good hygiene habits to limit the risk of infection:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Properly dispose of used tissues.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, arm, or elbow if you don't have a tissue.
- Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing.
- Stay at home if you are sick.
- Avoid contact with those who are sick.
- Clean and disinfect objects or surfaces that may have come into contact with germs.
- Make plans for what will happen if someone in the home becomes ill or if quarantine or shelter-in-place measures are ordered.

Read more about prevention.

Stay Connected

- Seek support from family, friends, mentors, clergy, and those who are in similar circumstances.
- Be flexible and creative in accessing support via phone, email, text messaging, and video calls.
- Talk to your supervisor about the possibility of working from home temporarily.

Cultivate Ways to be More Calm

- Realize that it is understandable to feel anxious and worried about what may happen, especially when many aspects of life are being affected.
- If you find that you are getting more stressed by watching the news, reduce your exposure, particularly prior to sleep.
- While circumstances may be stressful and beyond your control, you can try to offset them with positive calming activities. Practice slow, steady breathing and muscle relaxation, as well as any other actions that are calming for you (yoga, exercise, music, keeping the mind occupied).
- Preparing for a range of possible scenarios and having adequate supplies should sheltering at home be necessary can help you feel more calm. For instance, you can put together a kit with supplies to last you and your family 3 – 5 days. Include supplies such as:
    - Water and food, vitamins, fluids with electrolytes, and food preparation items such as a manual can opener.
    - Prescribed medical supplies or equipment, such as glucose or blood pressure monitoring equipment; thermometer; medicines for fever, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen; anti-diarrheal medication.
    - Hygiene supplies such as soap and water, alcohol-based hand wash, soap, tissues, toilet paper, and disposable diapers if necessary.
    - General supplies such as a flashlight and batteries, portable radio, and garbage bags.

Read more about pandemic preparedness.

Improve Your Sense of Control and Ability to Endure

- Accept circumstances that cannot be changed and focus on what you can alter.
- Modify your definition of a “good day” to meet the current reality of the situation.
- Problem-solve and set achievable goals within the new circumstances in your life.
- Evaluate the absolute risk of contracting the virus and recognize the benefits of accepting a certain level of risk in order to maintain as much of your normal routine as possible.
- Those who have been faced with life-threatening situations recommended the following strategies:
    - Quickly recognize, acknowledge, and accept the reality of the situation.
    - Make a plan for dealing with feelings of being overwhelmed or overly distressed. Preparation can make you feel more in control if these feelings arise and help you move through them quickly.
    - Combat unhelpful emotions by using distraction or staying busy---both mentally and physically.

- Avoid impulsive behavior.
- Get organized.
- Increase positive coping behaviors that have worked in the past.
- Shift negative self-statements to statements that allow you to function with less distress. Try changing "this is a terrible time" to "this is a terrible time, but I can get through this."
- Rather than getting discouraged, focus on what you can accomplish or control.
- Seek out mentoring or information to improve your ability to make decisions and take actions when necessary.
- Try to engage in the situation as a challenge to be met, which can increase your ability to act both creatively and decisively (Gonzales, 2003).

Remain Hopeful

- Consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective.
- Look for opportunities to practice being more patient or kind with yourself, or to see the situation as an opportunity to learn or build strengths.
- Celebrate successes, find things to be grateful about, and take satisfaction in completing tasks, even small ones.
- Give yourself small breaks from the stress of the situation by doing something you enjoy.
- Draw upon your spirituality, those who inspire you, or your personal beliefs and values.

Resources

- Tools to help with symptoms are available—see Resources for Survivors and the Public Following Disaster and Mass Violence on our website: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/resources_disaster_violence.asp
- If you need help right away call 1-800-273-8255
  Press "1" if you are a Veteran.

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Gonzales, G. (2003). Deep survival. Who lives, who dies, and why. True stories of miraculous endurance and sudden death. W.W. Norton & Company. New York.

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