

Perspectives on COVID-19 from a Pediatric Psychologist

With covid-19 now a pandemic all of us are called upon to change our personal and collective behavior. It is understandable that many will experience fear, anxiety, and anger in the coming days and weeks. This is normal and certainly a typical reaction to a crisis. However, whether we respond to this crisis with grace or with terror is within our individual and collective control.

It is normal in this situation to be afraid. It is OK to acknowledge that fear and to take steps to cope with this anxiety. Consider the following:

1. Fear of the unknown is normal and we are each subject to feeling a host of emotions such as anxiety, worry, irritability, sadness; but also to experience poor sleep or appetite, trouble with concentration, a tendency to withdraw from other, and perhaps even feeling hopeless. These can be normal reactions to the situation, and it helps to recognize this in ourselves and in others. For example, recognizing that your spouse or child is uncharacteristically moody or snappish may mean that they are feeling overwhelmed and need support. Certainly, anyone feeling suicidal should need immediate attention.
2. Seek reliable information: There is much that we do not know currently and that alone increases fear and anxiety. Gaining reliable information is key to addressing this uncertainty. There is much misinformation readily available, but there are excellent sites for the latest information. Reliable sites include the CDC, NIH, WHO for the latest on COVID-19. Sites for good psychological information related to COVID-19 includes the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association.
3. Practice Self-Care: Recognizing that we are all susceptible to emotional distress, it becomes more important to take care of ourselves physically **and** emotionally. This may be complicated by social distancing given that social activities are commonly used by people to cope. We may not be able to attend religious services, go to work or school, the gym, shopping, and so on; however, we can adapt and remain connected. Many churches are having online services, you can exercise at home using YouTube classes, and so on. A few things to keep in mind:
 - a. Maintain a typical routine as much as possible. Try having your kids do schoolwork at home at the times they would at school; try the same if you are working from home.
 - b. Take a break from the media. Depending on what you read or watch this event is either the world's biggest hoax or the end of the world. Neither is true so get good information and take a break from all the chatter.
 - c. **Social distance does not mean social isolation.** We may not be able to go out, have play dates or travel, but we can maintain contact with family and friends via Facetime and other platforms. This is especially critical for our most vulnerable family and friends, those that must be on isolation because of health concerns, such as the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions.
 - d. Consider volunteering in some way. The simple act of giving to others has been shown to reduce distress in the giver. It is gratifying to see on social media people organizing food drives and other activities to support their communities.
 - e. Find way to maintain your spirits. A good sense of humor goes a long way. Our Italian brothers and sisters are singing from their balconies in defiance of their isolation. People are amazing, find your path.

4. Be a role model: Our children are watching how we react in this crisis, what do you want them to see? Children and teens rely on the adults in their lives to model and teach behavior. Their coping to a large extent relies upon our coping. Now is the time to teach resilience, compassion, self-sacrifice, and healthy coping. These will be lessons they will carry and pass on the rest of their lives. This calls upon us, the adults, to manage our emotions and fear, and be the leaders they need us to be.

5. Our children are responding to this crisis as well and need support during this time. How children cope and what they need varies by their age and level of development. For example, small children respond to the distress around them, they need comforting and security. School aged children, tweens, and teens need information that is tailored to their age (younger children need the basic facts, older kids can deal with more detail and abstraction). Recognize that a change in behavior may be a sign of distress and opportunity to engage and support. Consider:
 - a. Maintain a typical routine as much as possible. This can include bedtimes, mealtimes, but also a typical time to do schoolwork.
 - b. Give age appropriate information and answer questions honestly.
 - c. Monitor use of TV and other media, particularly if your child is constantly looking at COVID-19 related content (remember, bad information is scary).
 - d. Provide opportunities for kids to give and contribute: help them organize a food drive, video chat with nursing home patients, and so on. This promotes a sense of engagement and teaches resilience.
 - e. Manage your own emotions. Remember, our kids are watching – what do you want them to learn.

6. Grief: Many of us are experiencing loss and uncertainty and it is OK to acknowledge that fact. As this process unfolds, we may lose people we love, jobs that we depend on, perhaps even that sense of safety that we may have enjoyed. Coming to terms with loss is necessary and healthy. Now is the time for each of us to reach out as individuals and as a community to support one another, in small ways and in large.

7. Look for the Lesson. Trauma, tragedy, crisis brings an opportunity for growth and this pandemic is no different. Perhaps we can encourage ourselves, loved ones, and patients/clients to be open and seek that lesson.

In this crisis, as psychologist, we have a unique opportunity to be of service to those we serve be they patient, client, student, or broader community. We must be stewards of accurate information, providers of good care, researchers engaged in meeting these new challenges, mentors to our younger colleagues, and advocates for the voiceless. Psychology has much to offer, and this is our opportunity to share our knowledge and strengths and maximize the health and well-being of others. Best wishes to all of you as we meet this challenge.

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