

Parents' guide to coping with the pandemic



How to support the mental health of your kids and yourself while at home during coronavirus

It has always been challenging to maintain the juggling act between taking care of work, yourself, and your family. The coronavirus pandemic has made it that much harder. So much is out of our control. It may be difficult to simultaneously home-school your kids, provide full-time child care, do your job as usual, and support your mental health. As you navigate the next weeks and months, here are some tips rooted in the science of human behavior to help you and your kids stay grounded.

How to help your kids: The rapid spread of COVID-19—and the unprecedented measures being undertaken to contain it—is evoking a range of difficult emotions for people. Kids are feeling the stress, too. Here are effective ways to help support your children through this uncertain and stressful time.

Supporting children and teens:

1. Create a new schedule

- Kids need structure and routine...but it's OK to relax your usual set of rules and expectations.
- Shift things around to create a new structure that helps your kids adjust but also helps you balance your work obligations.

2. Listen and give validation

- If your kids feel happy about being off from school, refrain from scolding them—these feelings are normal.
- If they're feeling sad and lonely, tell them you understand. You might even share that you're feeling a little lonely, too. Help them engage in good coping strategies like mindful distraction.
- If they're worried about their health or yours, let them know that it's normal to feel anxious right now, but reassure them that everything will be OK.
- Give your kids a sense of safety and security by being as calm as possible.
- Remind them that you're here to love and take care of them and will continue to do so.

3. Help kids sort fact from fiction

- Be mindful that children may have an irrational worry that, if they are bad, they'll get sick.
- Create opportunities to talk about what your kids are hearing from their friends or the news.
- Answer their questions in a way that reassures kids they will be OK.
- Yes, some people have died, but the risk of dying from COVID-19 is very low—particularly if we take good care of ourselves.

4. Help your kids manage feelings of stress

- Go for walks, have a dance party, or teach them fun ways to practice mindfulness.
- Help younger children to practice mindful breathing by letting them blow bubbles; if their breath is too rapid or shallow, the bubbles will pop or won't form.

- Teach children deep breathing by having them lie down with a piece of paper on their diaphragm; as they inhale, they watch the paper rise; as they exhale, they watch it fall.

5. Encourage creative activities

- Create cards, letters, and pictures for school friends or family members.
- This fun and engaging activity can help children work through feelings of worry.

6. Encourage video chats with friends

- Socialization is an important part of mental health for children of all ages.
- If your teens aren't already, encourage them to video chat with friends.

7. Help them practice gratitude

- Ask them to identify things they like about the current situation (e.g., getting to sleep in, spending more time with mom).

8. Encourage self-care

- Anything that gets you moving can be a terrific mood booster. Go for a walk together, teach them some yoga poses, or have a pillow fight.
- Suggest that your teen spends 10 minutes a day practicing mindful breathing, taking a soothing bath, or experiencing the cortisol-reducing effects of petting your cat or dog.
- Try using distraction strategies if your child is stuck in a cycle of worry. Distraction acknowledges worry but allows your mind to take a break. Try playing a game together, listening to some music, or watching a show.

Supporting yourself:

If you're not in good mental shape, it will be even tougher for you to support your children. Here are practical ways to promote your well-being.

1. Practice self-compassion

- First, acknowledge that things are tough, without judgment.
- Allow whatever thoughts and feelings show up to be, without trying to fight or suppress them.

2. Prioritize self-care

- Maintain a daily routine—including a regular sleep schedule, eating well, exercising, and taking breaks.
- List 2-3 things that will help you mentally or emotionally.
- Reserve time in your schedule to allow yourself to enjoy them.

3. Connect to your core values

- Consider writing a list of your top values.
- Describe how you intend to live by them.
- Put this reminder somewhere visible so you can refer to it often.

4. Slow down

- If you notice that your mind is busy with worry and anticipation, take a few minutes to slow down.



When to seek extra help:

For yourself

If you notice a persistent change in mood or functioning (for example, if you're eating all the time, you've stopped sleeping, you can't concentrate on work, or the pressures of work and parenting feel unmanageable), it may be time to get some extra support.

For your child

You're the expert when it comes to your child. If your child is continuously worried about COVID-19 to the point where it's affecting their ability to concentrate, engage with you, or they are having trouble sleeping or eating, seeing a therapist may be beneficial.

Consider connecting with professional support, which could include finding a therapist through your health plan, accessing counseling through your employee assistance program (EAP), or talking to your HR team about wellness benefits that may be available.