

COVID-19 – Information and Tips for Anxious Minds, Big and Little

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COVID-19 has been declared a global pandemic by the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) and serious concern about the spread of this disease is on everyone's minds. Families should be advised to consult the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), as well as strictly follow the latest recommendations for reasonable precautions, including social distancing and necessary travel restrictions.

Medical and behavioral health professionals are also urging us to consider the big picture—it is good news that our state and local governments have acted swiftly to close schools, daycare centers, and all non-essential businesses, as well as strongly urged all of us to limit social contact as much as possible. These heavy precautions will all work towards preventing the kind of largescale outbreak that we have seen in other countries.

We know that anxiety can serve to protect us from danger because it motivates action to move away from or mitigate the threat. In a situation such as this one, *a certain amount of anxiety is normal and even helpful*. Worry about getting sick or infecting others drives us to follow the recommendations of the CDC and mandates issued by our government leaders. However, the COVID-19 pandemic can also trigger too much anxiety, which often leads to panic or a response that does not match the actual threat.

Forearmed with this information, parents and caregivers may find several strategies helpful to manage their child's anxiety (and their own):

- **Set a good example for self-care.** The most important thing you can do to take care of your family is to take care of yourself. Children, in particular, will take your cues regarding how to respond to this public health crisis and how worried they should be. Make sure that you and your family are prioritizing a regular sleep schedule, eating healthy meals, and maintaining (or beginning) an exercise routine. Give yourself permission to feel anxious during this uncertain time; however, consider whether 1) it may be best to seek outside support from your friends and adult family members, and 2) discuss your own concerns away from your child/adolescent, so you may speak freely.
- **Talk to your child or adolescent.** Speak with your kids to learn about their specific concerns. Validate that this is an uncertain time and that many people are feeling scared and reassure them that you will get through this experience as a family. Share your factual knowledge with your children (see below for resources). Much of the anxiety about our present situation with COVID-19 comes from uncertainty and misconceptions about the virus. Children and adolescents are being bombarded by frightening images in the media and misinformation from peers and the internet about the lethality of this disease. For example, many young people mistakenly believe that the unprecedented measures being taken mean that if they contract the virus they will die. Instead, it could be helpful to explain to your child that the primary purpose of social distancing is to protect vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and/or those with underlying medical conditions. See [this comic](#) that explains coronavirus and how to handle these strange, uncertain times in kid-friendly terms. You may also find it helpful to read this [article from PBS about how to talk to kids about coronavirus](#).

- **Share accurate health information about COVID-19.** As noted above, it is important to consult reliable sources of information when informing loved ones of the situation and any developments over time. It might be helpful to identify a small number of trusted sources to obtain the most current health information, such as the [CDC](#), the [WHO](#), the [Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center](#), and this helpful parents' guide from the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#). In addition, consider limiting the amount of time that you and your family are spending consuming news and social media each day. It is far better for your household's anxiety and overall well-being to "unplug" and devote the majority of time engaging in valued activities and self-care.
- **Stick to a routine (as much as possible).** Most kids rely on structure in their daily lives for a sense of safety and well-being. Although the closure of schools and childcare centers in our communities are an essential precaution to reduce the risk for spread of infection, the loss of a predictable routine can be particularly disorienting and trying for younger people. Following a schedule like [this one](#) can go a long way to helping your child (and you) feel more grounded.
- **Keep up social interaction – virtually.** Use technology to help your kids stay in contact with their friends, teachers, and other important people in their lives that they would typically interact with face-to-face. Use video chat whenever possible to enhance their connection with one another. Consider including video chat time as a part of their daily routine (e.g., when they otherwise would have a chance to hang out with friends, like during recess, lunchtime, or after school).
- **Maintain house rules and set limits on kids' behavior.** During times of stress, parents sometimes relax typical expectations for their kids' behavior and skip following through on natural consequences or rewards. Continue to enforce limits as much as possible. This will help kids feel a sense of normalcy. At the same time, recognize that stress and worry sometimes results in unusual behavior and acting out. Children often express anxiety in different ways (e.g., body aches, irritability), so it is important to notice these changes and talk to your kids about the feelings underlying their behavior (see above). Consider implementing a reward system for younger kids to help them stick with their new routine(s) and praise them whenever possible when they are doing the right thing.