

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: Helping your children survive the 'new norm'

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We are all, by now, feeling the impact of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on our daily lives, which can lead to stress and anxiety. While most who contract the illness have only mild symptoms, it is a new virus, spreading rapidly, with no vaccine yet available. It can cause serious illness, usually in certain high-risk groups.

As adults, we are dealing with the disruption that COVID-19 is causing in our workplaces, our routines and the potential threat to our finances. However, this is an important time to remember that our children also struggle with the stress and anxiety of this 'new norm'. School is cancelled, there is constant news coverage which can be overwhelming for parents and frightening to our kids. However, there are things that parents can do to help both their children and themselves during this time.

It is important to talk with your child regularly. Ask what they have heard, how they are feeling and what questions they might have. Often simple reassurance can be all a child needs to feel safe, that adults are working on solving problems that will keep everyone safe.

Set up a daily schedule. The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes that it is important to keep a predictable routine at home, even though children are not in familiar routines of school, sports and friends. This includes a regular time to wake up and to go to bed, having meals at a set time if possible and designating hours for study and play. Make time for exercise. Make it a family activity for at least an hour a day and get outside for fresh air when possible.

Give children an opportunity to be part of the solution. Let children help create the schedule and put it somewhere they can see it each day. Remind your children of what they can do to help the situation ... wash their hands often, cough into a tissue or their sleeves, keeping chores done and getting enough sleep so they stay well.

Media time should be limited and closely monitored. Avoid having the news on all day as it can increase fear and anxiety in both children and adults. Talk with your children about what they are hearing and correct any misinformation you may hear from them.

Have dinner together as a family and discuss the day. Enjoy more family time in the evenings, playing, learning a new hobby, reading, watching a movie. Stay in contact with loved ones by phone or social media.

Finally, be a good role model and take care of yourself. Find healthy ways to relieve stress that fit into your life. For more help, never hesitate to contact your or your child's healthcare provider.

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