

Mental Health Thoughts for Early Care & Education Professionals Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis

by Dr. William Mosier

The future mental health of our society depends on the ability of adults to support the mental health needs of young children. Research in neurobiology clarifies the extent to which the interaction between adults and young children shape the brain architecture that impacts mental health. Social-emotional development tends to receive less recognition than the cognitive issues related to academic readiness; however, early childhood experiences are linked intimately to mental health in adulthood. Our early childhood experiences are organized in the brain and characterized as positive or negative. By the age of three, 90% of a child's brain has developed. A young child's mental health is directly related to the quality of relationships the child experiences with the significant adults in his or her environment. Our interactions with young children provide the scaffolding for all the adaptations to stress that young children will have when they become adults. A stable, responsive relationship with at least one adult is necessary for a young child to have the foundation for optimal mental health. Therefore,

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Reducing your stress response during these difficult times

Stress in our lives cannot be avoided, your stress level is never zero. Besides the fact that stress is unavoidable, there are two other aspects of stress that you should understand: 1. Stress provides the energy necessary to sustain human life and 2. Humans are stress-seeking beings. The human body reacts to stress in a predictably physiological way. Stress creates an emergency discharge of adrenaline in our bodies. These chemical reactions lead to changes that speed up heart function and impact our digestion. To the human body, it doesn't matter whether our stress reaction is from joy or fear; the physiological response is the same. Our stress response is the condition we experience when the body is creating excess energy. The biological surge you feel is the non-specific response to stress. In order to deal with your stress response, you must know how you

habitually react to stress. The key is to become aware of your typical pattern of coping with stressful situations.

The sources of stress in our lives are physical, psychological, and/or environmental. Our stress responses create a release of cortisol from your adrenal glands. This adrenaline surge increases heartrate and respiration and slows down digestion. Chronic release of stress hormones weakens your body's immune response and reduces your resistance to viral infections. Since stress is a normal part of our lives, this raises a very important question: Is the problem really stress? The answer is no. The problem is our response to stress. The real problem is distress and each of us has her or his own unique way of responding to distress. So, consider the following outlets for coping with your body's stress response:

1. Engage in regular physical exercise. When you are in a state of distress and want to feel better physical exercise can help. The physical release of energy is important in constructively controlling our stress response.

2. Be kind to yourself. Believe in yourself.

Remember, you are a worthwhile person and you have many strengths. Hanging on to negative feelings is unhealthy. Modifying your interpretation of the stressful situation can help you to overcome the negative effects of toxic stress (distress). The more tuned-in you are to the signs of your stress response, the greater your ability to stop the distress from becoming overwhelming.

3. Recognize that you can change yourself more easily than you can change the world around you.

How you manage your feelings will determine how well young children are able to manage their feelings. To change negative/destructive feelings, you have two choices: You can try to change the things that are beyond your control or you can choose to change things that are within your immediate control. Focus on problems that you can solve, not on what you cannot change.

The key to coping effectively with the stress caused by COVID-19 is to maintain a positive attitude, stay physically active, eat healthy, take deep breaths, laugh a lot, and smile for the sake of the children.



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This article was made possible through a partnership between the Southwest Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children (swoaeyc.org) and the Lynda A. Cohen Center for the Study of Child Development (laccscd.org).



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