

WEEKDAY MAGAZINE – Tips for Helping Children Cope with Crisis Anxiety

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Tips For Helping Children Cope With Anxiety During Crisis

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, adults are facing new, unique challenges in their everyday lives. Adjustments have been made to schedules, jobs, finances and childcare – which demands focused attention all day, every day. These changes, and change in general, can lead to stress and anxiety. Children’s lives have been disrupted as well, but they deal with the anxiety in very different ways.

Experts agree that children may show their anxiety through excessive crying, worry, sadness, arguing, disobedience or regressive behavior such as bed wetting. They may be distracted and have problems paying attention. Teenagers may complain more about headaches or body pains and turn to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

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During this difficult time, parents are surely grappling with their own emotions and may feel unprepared to address their children's mental health needs. Here are eight steps that can help both parents and children cope with stress induced by the pandemic, and by any crisis going forward:

- 1. Take care of yourself.** The safety announcement prior to a plane taking off reminds us to put on our oxygen masks before helping our children. Similarly, we are better equipped to help our children cope if we have taken care of our own personal needs. Self-care activities such as exercise, healthy nutrition and time spent outdoors can have calming effects on you, and make it easier for you to help your children and family. It is important to remember that, as a human being, you are going to make mistakes, especially in new and difficult situations. Forgive yourself, learn from your missteps and move on.
- 2. Understand that children will feel better if you appear calm.** Children will feed off of both positive energy and anxious behaviors displayed by parents and guardians. It is okay to pretend that you are calm, even if you are anxious. It is also good to show children how to practice self-soothing behaviors such as deep breathing, relaxation and positive self-talk.
- 3. Listen to your children.** Encourage them to talk honestly about their feelings. Reflect back to them what you hear. For instance, "You seem worried that your friend will get really sick." They will let you know if you misunderstand. Accept what they say, ask further questions, listen intently and continue reflecting back until they express their feelings and concerns. Let them know they are not alone, that you worry sometimes as well and that you love them.
- 4. Help your children label their feelings.** Many children are still learning the language of their emotions. Help them to assign words to their feelings, such as anger, frustration and worry. At the same time, remind them of the positive feeling associated with safety, being loved, having friends and being together.
- 5. Answer their questions honestly.** Be willing to talk about the virus. Let your children know that you may not have all the answers but will do your best to provide information for them. You do not need to share more details than they request. Older children can handle more information and may be searching for answers on their own via the internet. Monitor this activity and talk to them about what they are reading, hearing and seeing. Ask them how they feel about what they learned.
- 6. Be clear, direct and simple with commands.** Children question their parent's authority all of the time. When they are worried, they are less able to understand complicated explanations. Provide direct commands like "Please pick up your room!" or "Stop fighting!" Keep your sentences short and direct and repeat until your children listen and obey.

7. **Be positive.** Children respond better when they feel good about themselves. Recognize and reward good behavior and be specific when praising your child. For instance, “You did a great job cleaning your room. Thank you!” or “I was impressed by how well you stayed calm. I am proud of you!”

8. **Seek help if needed.** These are challenging times for everyone, and more so for parents. Staying connected, even virtually, is important. Reach out to friends and family often, and do not hesitate to contact mental health professionals if you or your children needs additional support. If your child is struggling with their mental health, Astor Services for Children & Families is here to help. Please call us at our toll-free hotline: 1-866-ASTOR01. You will be prompted to leave a message, and a member of our support staff will contact you to help. For additional resources, you can also visit https://www.astorservices.org/covid_19/ or <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>. You are not alone.

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