

Five Tips to Navigate Coronavirus Anxiety with Your Children

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Forced school closings. Quarantines. Daily death tolls. Pandemic. These are big scary words populating news headlines everyday regarding the coronavirus. Many parents are trying to balance enforcing healthy habits to keep their family safe without fueling their children's fear and anxiety. Below are five tips on how to navigate the coronavirus with your children.

MODEL CALM: The number one thing you can do for your family during the coronavirus is to stay calm and logical. Children are great observers of our actions, especially in times of stress, and they take our lead on how to act and react. If you let the fear of the ever-changing pandemic hijack your brain, your logical thinking will check out as your emotions take over, limiting your ability to effectively communicate important information with your family. If your children sense that you are freaking out, anxious, or fearful, they will pick up and do the same.

- [Check out this video](#) to understand the difference between your logical and emotional/fear brain. To stay logical, use stress management strategies such as taking deep belly breaths, exercise breaks (even just 10 push-ups), yoga, journaling, or getting outside in nature - do whatever you can to model calm and planned over panic.

LIMIT MEDIA: It is proven that our thoughts become part of our DNA, and the quantity of fear thoughts that you put into your brain about the Coronavirus have a direct impact on your stress level. If you are keeping CNN on 24/7 for every breaking news update, not only will your thoughts about the coronavirus be more fearful, but you will unknowingly increase the cortisol and adrenaline in your system, and therefore increase your stress. The good news is that you can choose what thoughts you focus on by limiting your media intake and not filling your brain with the constant stream of updates.

- Stay up to date once a day by checking the coronavirus CDC updates so that you are informed and safe. [\(link\)](#)
- You should be your child's best source of their information about the coronavirus as the situation evolves. Encourage them to come to you with their questions instead of listening to sensationalized fear videos or friends that may be escalating the situation.
- Stick to the facts and tell them just what they need to know to manage their safe behaviors without too much information, too often.

HYGIENE: Best practice from the CDC is to adopt these new habits: frequent hand washing, covering your cough with an elbow, not touching your face and appropriate distancing from friends and family members during this pandemic. These new rules have to be non-negotiable. It is critical that you introduce these preventative steps to your children in a way that will help you avoid power struggles and arguments in times of stress. Your children are more likely to get onboard with these new rules if you:

- First set a time and place to talk to them in a serious way about them. Try to refrain from yelling at them to wash for 20 seconds or minimizing by just sending a text. Have a planned conversation.

- When you sit down as a family, calmly explain how important these national rules are for everyone, detailing **why** it is important for them to do their part to stay healthy and stop the spread. Keep it short and direct. Don't over explain or under explain. Lead them and stick to the facts you know.
- Involve them. Let them help generate ideas to create fun new routines and reminders to help everyone comply with new rules, like using this [handwashing app](#) to remember when and how long to wash or fun ways to help them remember to not touch their face- maybe make up a silly song, or place post-it notes on the bathroom mirror or change their screen saver to the 4 rules.

LOOK FOR THE SILVER LINING: You will likely be having more forced family time at home as events, work and school get cancelled. There may be disappointment of missing planned events your child or family have been looking forward to all year, and it is important to validate their feelings of loss or sadness. Let your child process their feelings and listening to them closely, and then validate their feeling by showing empathy and comfort. Once they feel heard, you can help them move on by focusing on what they can control by planning something fun to do together. Again, stick to the facts and help your family look for the silver lining and try to make the best of newfound time together.

- Pull out a deck of cards, board games, art projects and play!
- Watch old family videos or go through photos - make new memories by looking at old ones.
- Replace friends' sleepovers with family sleepovers and binge watch a series and make popcorn.

You will always remember this major event, just like we remember other national events, so try your best to create some good memories in the face of the difficult emotions. Control what you can control ...which is how you make the most of family time.

STAY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT: When there is something as big as a pandemic, it is easy to go down the "what-if" rabbit hole, which fuels our panic and fear. Staying in the present moment is an important calm strategy, but this takes extra intention and practice in stressful times. Healthy distractions like reading a book, singing, playing a game, or practicing gratitude are ways to ground yourself and your family in the here and now. If your child is caught in the "what-if" future coronavirus spiral, teach them this easy grounding mindfulness strategy called 54321.

- Have them name 5 things they see, then 4 things they feel with their body, then 3 things they hear, next 2 things they smell and finally 1 thing they taste. Then they repeat. This is a simple way to help them focus on what is right in front of them, get out of a spiral of panic thoughts about the future and come back to the present moment. Hey, it may help you as well.
- Remember this too shall pass. Try your best to stay calm, informed and prepared. And at any time, if you or your child are having trouble with distress management or panic, reach out to a school counselor or therapist, or call **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)**,