

Emotional Support Suggestions for Families During School Closing

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1. Anxiety management:

- Know that you are not alone. Scores of millions of adults are managing anxiety at this time along with you, whether clinically diagnosed or situation-based (i.e., coronavirus-related concerns).
- A global pandemic can make anyone's mind race, regardless of their level of anxiety.
- You can bring calm to your nervous system and quiet your racing thoughts by stopping in your tracks, standing still, and taking three slow, deep breaths. A long exhale also physically relaxes the arousal response in the brain.
- You can help bring your mind back to the present and not get lost in future fears this way: Choose any of your five senses and focus on what you are experiencing in the moment.

For example, sight: Think of a color and look about your surroundings. Try to find ten things of that color. Or try to find something for every color in the rainbow.

- Sing! Sing to yourself; sing to your children; sing with your whole family.
- Put on uplifting music while you clean. Engage your child in a cleaning task with you, and sing together.
- If anyone in your family has a therapist, remember that Governor Baker has ordered insurance companies to provide Telehealth for outpatient therapy. Contact your therapist for information.

2. To help break isolation:

- Neuroscience shows that altruism chemically impacts the brain, resulting in an uplift of mood.

- The more we reach out to our neighbors and think of others' needs, the better we will feel. Such mood elevation increases our capacity to support ourselves and our children. We also become more aware of our community connection in managing this crisis together.
- If you must see friends, do so outdoors, and be six feet apart (as recommended by health officials).
- Call your neighbors and people in vulnerable populations (e.g., elders, people with compromised immune systems). See if anyone needs anything. You can drop items off at their doorstep.
- If you see your neighbors outside, stop and ask how they are doing. Share with them how you are doing. Connection helps us feel less alone, less anxious.
- Call friends / loved ones rather than text or email. Appreciate the sound of others' voices. Share jokes on the phone; find ways to laugh. Laughter also releases mood-uplifting chemicals in the brain.

3. Media consumption balance:

It's hard to escape coronavirus-related news, whether via print, radio, TV or digital media.

- Try to strike a balance between staying informed and avoiding information overload, which can be overwhelming... which reduces your emotional stamina.
- Pay attention to how your body and mind feel as you are taking in the news - especially your breathing. If you notice your muscles tensing, or If you notice yourself feeling angry, anxious, despairing, overwhelmed, etc., take a break from the news.
- In between news consumption, put your brain on a different channel by doing something creative (alone or with family): art, listening to or playing music, writing, dancing, etc.
- Make a list of family movies that you love or that you haven't seen yet, and then choose one a day to watch together. Some of the "oldies" from your own youth or 1940's musicals may be great for sharing with your kids.
- Or have DEAR time (Drop Everything And Read) -- everyone in the family set aside a 30-minute period to read quietly.
- Maybe you have a project the whole family can do together. Have you been waiting to paint a room, rearrange the furniture, build a new bookcase?

4. Parents of young children (or any age; you know your child best): Make a daily schedule for your children:

Many children will feel anxious being away from school for so long -- missing the structure, their friends, their teachers, classroom learning, community, etc. And children naturally thrive on routine. You can help your child by establishing a routine that works for your family. For example:

Morning:

1. Breakfast.
2. Play / activity.
3. Classroom activity time (sent from teachers).
4. DEAR time.
5. Call a friend or neighbor to connect / check in.
6. Go outside for a walk, hike or bike ride.

Afternoon:

1. Lunch.
2. Listen to music while drawing.
3. Outside time.
4. Classroom activity time (sent from teachers).
5. DEAR time.
5. Face time with grandparents.
7. Dance time.

Evening:

1. Supper.
2. Family game.
3. TV time.
4. Play/activity.
5. Bath.
6. Bed time story.

You can create the time frames appropriate for your family.

5. Parents of older children / teens:

- Older kids will need to connect with friends. Talk with parents of your kids' friends about setting up a Zoom or Facetime call among your kids so they can connect.
- Older kids will also be riveted to their phones/devices in absence of physical engagement with their friends. And digital communication is important for them to do right now; that is teen-world reality for this generation.
- At the same time, older kids' anxiety about the virus is more palpable for them than young children's is, due to their pre-existing concerns about other national and global crises, such as gun violence, climate change, xenophobia, gender oppression, etc. They are less insulated from coronavirus news than younger children. And parents have less control over their teens' media consumption than their young children's media consumption.
- And so try to keep your teen engaged in non-digital ways as much as is reasonable in your family; e.g., doing activities together (board games, reading, cooking, being outside, etc.).
- To directly support your teen with their emotions, be aware that the most effective methods of engagement tend to be those with minimal eye contact: driving together; chopping vegetables side by side; cleaning together; drawing together; walking together. Kids will feel less vulnerable opening up to you when there is a buffer activity to which they can return their attention or the conversation.

6. Washing hands with community mindset:

It's common for people to feel the energy of anxiety as we wash our hands. We can invert that energy with a community mindset:

- Visualize millions of us around the globe washing our hands in support of each others' safety, health, and well-being.
- As you wash your hands, recite a poem with themes of compassion, love, community, sharing.
- Sing a song that makes your heart feel open.
- As you wash, do little dance moves with your hips, legs, feet.
- Say to yourself, "Washing my hands helps keep myself, my family, and the community safe."

- Thank the healthcare workers who are doing so much for our safety; name those whom you know personally.
- Encourage your kids to do the same. Or model these actions by washing together.

7. Fresh air, sunshine, exercise!

- Thankfully, we live in a region where we are not dealing with snow and ice. We can reduce cabin fever and take care of our health by going outside.
- Walk, bike, hike with friends, family, other loved ones - but six feet apart, as recommended by health officials.
- Your whole family can make things beautiful now. Rake the yard, pick up the fallen branches, prepare your garden beds or flower pots, prune some bushes or trees. You can even wash windows to let the sunshine in!
- Sunshine, nature, and exercise all contribute to mood elevation in the brain.

8. And finally, here is a little story found on facebook that might serve you well if your child is having trouble understanding why you need to stay home:

"....Tonight I tried to explain the “coronavirus thing” to our nine year old. She was bummed that a spring break mini-vacation was canceled and I could tell that she was worried that she would get sick or, even worse, that she’d have to be tested for sickness (the idea of a throat/nasal swab is absolutely abhorrent to her).

We are, in all likelihood, going to be fine. But no matter how I put it to her, her concerns did not go away.

Until I told her this:

Imagine that the whole world was suddenly dumped into a swimming pool. Lots of us can swim. Some of us have floaties on our arms (evidence does suggest that children are more resilient than most to this particular disease). But there are some people who can’t swim well and need to be saved. The big challenge is that there aren’t enough lifeguards to save everyone and there are too many people in the pool, so it’s hard to see who needs help.

I told her that the best thing we can do is to get out of the pool. Just go to our towels and sit down and have a popsicle and reapply our sunscreen.

And she looked at me strangely and said, “That makes more sense than anything else you’ve said tonight.”

(...more)

David Sheehan