

# Combating stress and anxiety in family life during COVID-19

March 25 2020, by Kimberly Allen

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Work as usual? Probably not. This is a whole new time and we are all working toward a new normal. When asking others how to describe these

times, I hear things like "stressful," "difficult," "frustrating"—all forms of stress.

The only consistency is that transitions are hard, and transitioning to this new normal makes this a stressful time for all. There are three types of [stress](#) we can experience:

- **Positive Stress:** This is the day-to-day stress we need to get out of bed and write a blog post or do whatever it is we do on a daily basis.
- **Tolerable Stress:** My guess is that this is where the majority of people are as they transition to the new normal. This is serious stress that is temporary and buffered by supportive relationships in our lives.
- **Toxic Stress:** When people have chronic stress that happens without supportive relationships, it is toxic. Prolonged toxic stress results in compromised immune systems and is generally bad for people's health and well-being as it massively increases in cortisol (good in small doses; bad in large doses). Toxic stress makes us lose our body's ability to shut down the stress reaction and can make us sick.

The truth is, stress impacts us all differently. Some of us can easily pull through stress and change, while others of us have more difficulty. Not good or bad, but just different.

What is most unique about this stressful time is that it includes isolation. Since we are socially distancing, we might have to work intentionally to keep those important connections with others. It is also noteworthy that those with a history of anxiety or depression can be more at risk during this transition.

The good news: While stress is the new norm, there are several things we

can do to reduce stress and anxiety.

## Key Strategies for Stress Reduction

Some of the more familiar evidence-based strategies include eating healthy, exercising and sleeping.

In addition to those, there are a variety of mental and social strategies that have also been found to be effective at combating stress and anxiety, including:

- **Having Healthy Relationships:** Anyone that knows me knows I love talking about what's called the 5:1 ratio for building healthy relationships. If we want to be happy, this is a great time to start increasing our positive to negatives in all of our relationships. Emotion regulation is also critical; learning to stay calm during stress can be the difference in building resilience and happiness. Here are a few resources on healthy relationships:

1. [Gottman Institute's video on the 5:1 ratio](#)
2. [Bene Brown's video on empathy](#)
3. [Daniel Siegel's video on emotion regulation and flipping your lid](#)

- **Practicing Mindfulness or Meditation.** This includes deep breathing. Seems simple, right? The trick is remembering to stop and take a deep breath when we start to see the signs of stress in ourselves. If you just ground yourself for about 60 seconds, you can focus wholly on deep breaths in and deep breaths out. If you are really feeling stressed, you can also tense your muscles as you breathe in and relax as you exhale. Calming your mind while focusing on breathing can be a part of meditation.

## When There are Children in the Home

These strategies work for both adults and [children](#). For families with children in the home, times can be challenging as we try to balance work and family responsibilities. Don't believe me? Try teaching a class with a four-year-old in the next room. Or even a 14-year-old.

Balancing remote working can be a challenge not only for those with kids at home but even for those who have to share space with their partners. Families that are not able to work from home can face different stressors—that of balancing finances or of losing a job. These are stressful times in family life.

What happens when parents get stressed? More often than not, they pass that stress on to the children, sometimes directly and often indirectly. Stress can get bad, and when it does, it can really impact the well-being of children. Just ask my children.

I'm the first to admit that my children feel my stress. It is not just adults; children are likely to have feelings of anxiety due to all the changes they are experiencing as well. Prolonged stress can have an effect on a child's development, making it so important that we implement strategies to help combat the negative impact of stress and anxiety.

## Recommended Parenting Strategies

If you have children, I encourage additional strategies, including good old-fashioned positive parenting:

- Set expectations with your children.
- Make sure your expectations are developmentally appropriate.
- Catch your kids practicing [good behavior](#) and give them lots of

attention.

- Model positive behaviors.
- Set limits in calm ways and focus on children's positive behavior.
- Create structure by establishing a sleep routine and a school schedule, as well as times for exercise, chores, play and being outside. You can also set limits around screen time.

I've loved the outpouring of support we have seen from youth-serving organizations to help with schooling during this pandemic. I'm sure this could be more inclusive, but [here is a list](#) of current resources that can help with finding school support and resources for creating structure.

## Strategies Especially Relevant for COVID-19

Even with all the positive parenting, there is still a need for strategies specifically relevant to the COVID- 19 pandemic. Let's face it, children and youth know something has changed. As parents, we need to be cognizant of how— not if—these changes are impacting our children:

- Offer reassurance. It is very likely that your children are going to act out or respond negatively to the changes in their lives. That is how they express negative emotions (truth moment: me too!). Rather than berate or punish, this is time to offer reassurance. Children need additional affection, cuddles, empathy, understanding, and love. They need to know everything is going to be OK—that we will get through this stressful time together. If you keep "flipping your lid," try watching the Dan Siegel [video](#).
- Limit media and explain what is happening in age appropriate ways. While children and teens know there is a change, they might not completely understand those changes. Keeping the news on excessively can add stress; it is best practice to limit exposure to media and news outlets and, instead, use age-appropriate language to explain what is happening. There are

plenty of resources for navigating those conversations in this [handout](#).

- Have fun together. Think about your best day in the past few weeks. What made it great? Did you have fun? Even in the most normal of times, children need attention, and they are smart about getting it. If we give it to them when having fun, we will see fewer bad behaviors. Even better, the more fun we have with them, the more resilient they become. True even for teens! Laughter is the best medicine. As L.R. Knost said, "Everyday in one hundred small ways, our child asks, 'Do you see me? Do you hear me? Do I matter?'" Their behavior often reflects our response."
- Get help when you need it. During this stressful time, it could be that stress becomes too much, and we need additional support. This can come in a variety of ways, but might be therapy, coaching or education. Watch for signs of stress and respond according. Signs include things like separation anxiety, excessive fear or worries, sadness or sleep changes. Sometimes stress and anxiety can take the form of aggression or hyperactivity as well.

Bottom line, you know yourself and your family better than anyone does. Do what works for you and your family. We are just starting the new normal and practice makes improvement. After all, who needs the stress of perfectionism?

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