

# Managing anxiety and parenting during a pandemic

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Anxiety disorders are the most commonly occurring mental health conditions in the United States. These disorders are typically

characterized by difficulty tolerating uncertainty. The current public health crisis has introduced much uncertainty into the lives of Tennesseans. Increasing COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths will only add to these heightened negative emotions.

Kristy Benoit Allen, a [psychology professor](#) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, studies the intergenerational transmission of [anxiety](#) and how parenting behavior affects children's anxiety. The goal of her research is to develop and refine prevention and intervention approaches, particularly for the children of anxious parents.

With Tennessee extending its stay-at-home order through the end of April, and schools systems are closed through the end of the academic year, many parents are trying to work from home or cope with the stress of unemployment, while also homeschooling and caring for their children.

Helping anxious parents cope with these challenging circumstances, for the sake of their own mental health as well as that of their children, is of utmost importance.

Allen discussed the significance of parent-child relationships during this uncertain time and highlighted key strategies that parents feeling the strain of anxiety can use to help their children cope.

## **Do not avoid the conversation**

"Avoidance is the hallmark of anxiety," Allen said. "You might be scared to talk to your kids about COVID-19 and are avoiding it as a result. This may unintentionally worry kids even more. Bring it up with your kids. Ask them what they know and what questions they have."

Answer your kids honestly but stick to only necessary details. This might

mean giving them a brief overview of what is going on in the world, highlighting how we can do our part to help contain the spread, and instilling a sense of hope. Keep it simple and give them information from trusted sources like the Knox County Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control. Stay away from using social media as your primary source.

"Model calmness in your voice and words," Allen said. Avoid seeming outwardly upset and be understanding of their worries. Focus on what you can do to keep your family safe. Stay inside and keep washing your hands.

## **Control the things you can, but give your children space**

Often in uncertain situations, anxiety commands us to take control.

"You cannot control what is in the news, but you can control how much of it you and your children are exposed to," Allen said.

You also cannot control how firmly others adhere to social distancing guidelines, she added, "but you can do your part to keep your family and others safe." Highlight that children can exercise their own control by washing their hands, keeping distance from others, and getting plenty of rest.

When parents are in a heightened state of anxiety, they have a tendency to be controlling and intrusive with their children. This is not a good time to try to exercise control. "Try not to be a helicopter parent," Allen said. "Let your children do tasks that are developmentally appropriate and safe. Provide them with assistance when needed, but don't be afraid to let them experience failures or setbacks. Children are resilient.

Allowing them to continue to grow in their independence will help ensure that they come out of this pandemic feeling no less confident in their abilities."

## **Take stock of your emotions**

Sometimes when anxiety and fear are upon us, we can become disconnected and dismissive of those we love the most.

"Try to monitor yourself in this regard," Allen said. "Periodically take stock of where you fall on a cold to warm scale of 1–10 throughout the day."

When slipping into uncomfortable territory, parents should try to give some extra attention or affection to their children. On a tough day, give them some extra evening snuggles or spend some one-on-one time with them. Apologize if you snap at them and make a note to do better.

On the flip side, do things as a family that will make you feel good. Write thank-you letters to [health care workers](#), create sidewalk chalk messages of hope at the park, cook something for your neighbors, donate to people who are especially in need, spend time calling and connecting with older relatives, etc.

## **Cut yourself some slack**

Parenting, homeschooling, and working from home full time are incredibly difficult. Hang in there and do the best you can, even when you feel impatient.

"Using these suggested strategies consistently is hard under the best of circumstances," Allen said. "You're not going to be perfect and nobody

expects you to be. Try to model as much calmness and reassurance around your children as you can."

But it's perfectly OK if you have to find a place to unload your stress at the end of the day. Spend quality time with your significant other. Call a family member or friend to process what you're going through. Schedule a teletherapy session with a therapist or counselor (see below for resources for both yourself and your [children](#)). Engage in self-care as much as you can to stay healthy for yourself and your kids.

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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