

# How families can cope with pandemic stress

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How do families cope with the emotional upheaval caused by COVID-19 without falling apart?

It is possible to keep [personal relationships](#) from crumbling under stress by choosing how to react, said Adam Galovan, a University of Alberta

expert in family dynamics.

"Many people are going to be upset or angry because of job losses or cutbacks and all that that might mean. Most social engagements are also being cancelled. Unfortunately, we don't have a clear picture of when this will end, which can lead to a lot of anxiety. Because of this, it's important for people to acknowledge how they feel, whether it's angry, fearful or sad.

"They can't control their [negative feelings](#), but they can control how they respond to those [feelings](#)."

That means working to avoid "ineffective coping" like eating a whole bucket of ice cream or an entire pizza, or snapping at the kids or each other, Galovan advised.

"If we can recognize and understand our feelings, we will likely be able to think of other, more healthy ways to cope."

Galovan said that when we're stressed, we tend to go to our baseline coping tendencies; some get agitated, others shut down.

And there's often a pursuer-avoider pattern in relationships, he added.

"One person wants to address an issue and tackle it head-on, while the other partner wants to ignore it. During stressful times, this can become more pronounced."

Pursuers should monitor their feelings and consider outlets for reducing their anxiety and tendency to seek control, like exercise or meditation, Galovan suggested.

Avoiders may need to ask themselves if they can be coping more

effectively.

"It can be helpful to journal their feelings, and then talk with their partner about how they're feeling.

"Often, just voicing our feelings, having that conversation, helps relieve the tension and helps us feel less stressed. It also opens up dialogue to get a better perspective on what's going on with one another," said Galovan.

And when partners can't agree on how to handle something like a money issue, having some empathy for the other person is a good place to start to address the issue, Galovan said.

"It's key to say it's us against this problem, rather than me versus you. For instance, if one person wants to keep a cable TV subscription because they find it helps ease their stress, then maybe they can find another way to cut costs. If we can put ourselves in our partner's shoes and have some empathy for what they're experiencing, then we can talk through it and find another solution."

Even though work and school have been upended by COVID-19 lockdowns, Galovan said establishing a routine at home eases stress.

"Get up at the normal hour you did before, eat meals at a set time. We are creatures of habit, especially kids, so if we can do some things consistently when other things are up in the air, it helps us all feel more grounded."

## **Don't forget about the kids**

It's important that parents not allow their own stress to spill over to their children.

Galovan said being aware of our own stress is also helpful so we don't react to those feelings by treating our children in a harsher way. For example, he said, parents might have less patience and snap at their children, or spank them when we usually don't.

Instead, parents can take a timeout.

"Most situations with a child don't need to be handled right away, so take a break and calm down, then come back to it," he said.

"And if you have responded more negatively than you should have, apologize. It might be helpful to explain some of your stresses. Kids are usually very understanding."

It's important to really listen to your kids and try to understand them, he added.

Children's routines have been disrupted, and they are likely to experience higher stress as they adjust, Galovan said, adding that it's key for parents to allow their children to share their feelings without being criticized.

"Some of the fears and worries kids have might seem trivial to adults, but their feelings are real. Simply acknowledging that something is difficult, frustrating, or scary can help a child feel heard and understood. That reduces the likelihood that they'll react negatively to their feelings of stress," said Galovan.

He suggested parents talk to their kids about how to deal with [stress](#) in healthy ways.

"It's OK for a child to be angry, upset or frustrated, but it's not OK for them to hit a sibling or break something. So parents can talk about what

their kids can do when they feel that way. Maybe they need to hit a pillow. Maybe they need to go exercise or play a game."

## **Hold on to hope; seek help**

Galovan said it helps to recognize the big things in life like having [good health](#) and loved ones, and also focus on the small positive things that bring happiness into our lives, like listening to a favourite song, sharing a story with a child, appreciating a sunset or connecting with a family member over the phone.

"Recognizing these small enjoyments keeps us going and gives us more energy to tackle the big challenges," he said.

And if you need to, get help from available community support resources like phone or online counselling, he advised.

"If you're suffering, know that you are not alone and that there are people who are willing and waiting to help."

People are resilient, he added.

"Change is hard, but we do have immense capacity to adapt."

Provided by University of Alberta

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