

Coping tips for stressed-out families in the COVID-19 pandemic

January 26 2022, by Leslie E. Roos Et Al



Many parents are struggling with burnout, loneliness and mental health problems during the pandemic. Credit: Pexels/Alexander Dummer

Talk to any parent during these dark winter days and you're likely to hear a mix of fear, [anger](#), exhaustion and [defeat](#). These are tough months when many politicians have moved to a living-with-the-virus model despite millions of our youngest citizens being [ineligible for vaccines](#).

There seem to be endless immediate stressors of unpredictable child

care, school closures and isolation requirements. What can you do when there are truly no good choices? Here, we offer coping tips to help push back on parenting-during-the-pandemic despair.

As psychologists (and parents), we've focused on understanding families' experiences since the onset of the pandemic. We know that so many parents are struggling with [burnout](#), [loneliness](#) and [mental health problems](#). Based on the science of [stress](#), we describe why this should feel hard and strategies for taking back control when you dread the challenging day ahead.

Why is this so hard?

There are three core components that make up the concept of "[stress](#)," and the pandemic has served parents up a textbook example of each:

- **Unpredictability:** When you're faced with something unfamiliar or the future feels uncertain.
- **Uncontrollability:** When it feels like you can't change your circumstances or protect your loved ones.
- **Social-evaluative threat:** When you fear being judged. For example, "Am I a bad parent for giving them so much screen time?"

Stress takes a toll on our bodies through activation of our stress response system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPAA). The [HPAA is designed](#) to help regulate our energy and metabolism.

Shared with our evolutionary ancestors, the HPAA is great for helping us respond to urgent threats to family safety or tricky social settings by mobilizing our attention to respond effectively. However, the adrenaline surge is less helpful when it persists long-term or results in late-night anxiety about decisions like keeping your kid home.

Chronic stress has downstream effects on health, including altered sleep, appetite and mood dysregulation (like [anxiety, depression and anger](#)). However, you can also push back to bring your stress system in check and reduce the mental health burdens of the pandemic.

What you can do:

1. Say "Help!" out loud. You probably know that being able to see friends helps your mental health. This is aligned with research highlighting the "[stress-buffering](#)" effects of [social support](#).

COPING STRATEGIES

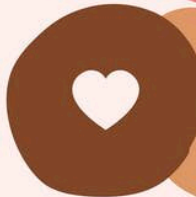
For the pandemic & beyond

FOR YOU:



Say "Help!" outloud.

Tell people you are struggling and be direct when asking for what you need.



Do something (anything).

Engage in an enjoyable activity – no matter how small. It doesn't have to be perfect.



Be kind.

Work on treating yourself with compassion and offer supportive words. This is hard and you're still here & trying every day.

FOR YOUR KIDS:



Lower your expectations.

Keep routines simple and familiar. Offer praise for effort.



Sit on the floor.

Get down to your child's level for 5-10 minutes of focused play to strengthen your relationship.



Say what you see.

Name your child's emotions and let them know you are here.

Coping strategies parents can use during the pandemic and beyond. Credit: Leslie E. Roos, Author provided

The trick in the pandemic is that you need to *tell* your people that you're struggling. Before 2020, allowing people to see your tears, rage or nervousness would signal a need for help (a key function of emotions), but now they probably won't know that you're struggling unless you tell them because we're interacting less in-person.

It is helpful to be direct about asking for what you need: "I'm feeling crappy and sad, do you have a minute to talk? My kids are driving me bonkers, any chance you take them for an outside play? I really need a hot shower to unwind, could you Facetime read a few books with Devin?"

We know it's not the warm hug or shared meal you are craving. [It can still be helpful](#), especially when you're managing pent-up inner chaos.

2. Do something (anything). Taking 10 minutes to move your body (stretch or walk, keep it easy) and purposely seeking out good news can help shift gloom and doom thinking. [Behavioral activation](#), an evidenced-based treatment for low mood and stress, emphasizes that in the midst of lifestyle disruption, finding pleasurable daily activities—ones that are really important to you—significantly impacts health and well-being.

Choosing to engage in any sort of activity can provide [positive reinforcement](#), which [decreases stress and improves mood](#). The activity may not be the [gym class](#) you used to love, *but* substituting an online class (even better if it's with friends) or a 10-minute walk can be helpful.

3. Be kind. When things are hard it can be tough, but incredibly

important, to offer yourself compassion. What do you say to your friends when they are feeling defeated? Likely, you meet them with warmth and kindness: "This is so hard. You are doing your best in an impossible situation. I totally lost my cool yesterday too. Being a great parent includes having bad days."

Most of us are less generous to ourselves than we are to others. Take a moment to reflect on supportive words that you can offer yourself next time those tough thoughts creep in. Evidence shows that re-framing self-critical thoughts and working on self-compassion can [improve mood](#) and facilitate positive coping [during these challenging times](#).

Connect With Your Kiddo

with one activity a day



Learn & Play

Click title to
visit the link

Colour Sorting: Find objects in your house & sort them by colour

Skip Counting: Number popsicle sticks & practice counting by 5s

Virtual Museum: Hop online & tour famous museum exhibits



Get Outside

Shadow Drawing: When the sun is out, trace the shadow of different objects

Snow Paint: Mix water & food colouring and make designs in the snow

Nature Bingo: On a walk, cross off bingo squares of what you see (e.g., bird)



Exercise

Cup Stacking: Build a pyramid with plastic cups & unstack as fast as you can

Family Cardio: Do an online 10-minute cardio class with your kiddo

Penguin Waddle: Put a balloon between your legs & waddle like a penguin



Crafts

Cheerio Bird Feeder: Thread cheerios onto pipe cleaners & tie on to a tree

Painted Rocks: Paint odd-shaped rocks & glue on googly eyes, flower noses, pebble teeth

Rainbow Soap Foam: Mix water, dish soap & food colouring to create coloured foam

Visit these links for more fun activities:

toddleratplay.com

busytoddler.com

thebestideasforkids.com

A parent's presence and connection, even through short bursts or simple activities, can help kids manage stress. Credit: Leslie E. Roos, Author provided

How you can support your child's mental health:

1. Lower expectations. Children have a tough time with unpredictability and can sense parent stress. Keep things simple and familiar to help them know what to expect. For [online learning](#), this could look like setting a short period for engaging (do 20 minutes, then take a break). Offering praise or small rewards for their efforts not abilities promotes a growth mindset, which helps children take on challenges. If you have the energy, try a [visual schedule](#) to let children help plan their day.

2. Sit on the floor. Getting down to your child's level and giving them your focused attention for five to 10 minutes a day can offer an emotional reset, strengthen your relationship, and prevent challenging behaviors. You can even try lying down and see what your child wants to do. (Read? Pretend your belly is a racecar track?) Your presence and connection, even through short bursts, can help kids [manage stress](#) and feel confident to do things independently later in the day.

3. Say what you see. Big emotions and behaviors are normal ways children react to unpredictability. Pointing out what you notice and naming emotions helps children make sense of their own experience and develop [socio-emotional competence](#). "Your fists are balled up and your voice is loud, are you angry your tower broke?"

If your child is safe, all you need to do is sit with them calmly (even if you're not feeling your calmest) and let them know you're here. If they are actively doing something dangerous, feel free to move their body

first. The saying, "That's not what you wanted to happen, is it?" can apply in most situations.

When it comes down to managing stress as a parent right now, there are no easy solutions. Sometimes a good cry in the car is a necessary release but try not to keep these feelings to yourself. Occasional team screams (or pack howls) as a family can offer a surprising mood boost at the collective challenge of it all. It has been a difficult two years, and acknowledging the challenges of parenting during the pandemic is part of coping.

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