

Coping with Coronavirus

For Parents and Carers

We know that our current situation is difficult for everyone, not just children and young people. Parents and carers might be feeling worried too, particularly as the situation is so uncertain.

This tip sheet is designed to help you cope with the impact of the COVID-19 and to provide you with some practical tips.

How to talk to your children and teenagers

It is not always easy to know what to say to your children or teens regarding the coronavirus. Remember that communication is really important, and ‘being there’ for them will help to ease their worries.

1. Be a good listener

If your child or teen wants to talk to you about their worries, try to use ‘good’ listening skills to show them you are hearing what they say. These could include:

NON-VERBAL	VERBAL
Looking at your child or teen	Not getting distracted by what to say next
Stopping what you are doing and giving your full attention	Not making judgements
Sitting down with them on the sofa to talk	Not focusing on your feelings and putting your full attention on your child or teen’s feelings
Giving age-appropriate/situation appropriate physical contact (e.g. holding hand, touch on the shoulder, cuddle)	Not giving advice unless asked to do so
	Not interrupting or changing the subject
	Feeling comfortable to leave silences

2. Give lots of empathy for feelings of anxiety/uncertainty/panic

Use lots of empathy alongside your good listening skills.



“Empathy refers to your staying with your child in their emotional state and experiencing it with them. Through empathy you are conveying that you deeply understand their emotions and that you are supporting and comforting them over the stress that they are feeling. In conveying empathy for their current emotional state – even one that you created by criticising their behaviour, or one that they created through a poor choice – you are joining them in their distress.”

(Dan Hughes – ‘Parenting a child with emotional and behavioural difficulties’ – ref pg. 27)

Empathy involves reflecting thoughts, feelings and wishes without asking questions. For example:

- “Your face looks like you wish I’d shut up.”
- “Goodness, you seem to be really angry.”
- “Wow! You’re looking really excited!”
- “I wonder if you’re a bit disappointed.”

Why is empathy so important?

- Helps the carer understand the child and helps the child feel understood.
- Shows that you are ‘being there’ for the child – a way of encouraging attachment.
- Empathy can often divert further difficulties because it makes the child feel understood and more secure.
- It also helps the child to identify emotions and begins to teach them how to handle their feelings.

Remember, empathy is a doing word – not just a feeling

- Say something that guesses at the child’s thoughts, feelings and wishes
- Use cautious language
 - i.e. “I wonder if you’re feeling...” “you might be feeling...” not “you must be feeling...”, “I bet you’re feeling....”
- Match your tone to what you’re saying and match the child’s tone
- Talk about the child’s feeling
- Avoid direct questions
- Be brave – don’t be afraid to get it wrong
- No ‘buts’ at the end of your empathy statement. This negates your empathy.
 - Example: “you look really scared... but don’t worry, everything is going to be fine...”

Ideas for starting empathy statements:

- “I wonder...”
- “Sounds like...”
- “Perhaps...”
- “You look...”
- “Seems like...”
- “Your face tells me that...”

For example:

Situation:

Child is worried about not seeing their friends.

Likely feeling:

Anxiety

What you could say:

“Your face tells me that you might be feeling worried about something...”



For a great example of empathy, watch this video clip from Disney’s *Inside Out*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT6FdhKriB8>.

This is another useful clip from Dr Brené Brown and the RSA:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw&t=2s>.

3. Calmly reassure where you can

While you might not have an answer about what the coronavirus situation will hold, you can calmly reassure them about their situation.

- Agree that things are different, but remind them that there are still things that are the same.
 - Idea: make a list with your child of all the things that are not changing in their lives.
- Show your coping tools through your behaviour, and remember that stress is catching! Try to remain calm and in-charge in front of your children and teens.
- Try to show that feeling anxious or worried during difficult times is normal. Help your child find their own way of coping.
 - This could be reading a book, keeping busy, talking with friends etc
- Remember that your children might be worried about your health, or the health of their grandparents or other relatives during this time.
 - Talk about what you are doing to keep yourself healthy.
 - Remind them that you have lots of friends and family members that can help if you do get ill.
 - Reassure them that the virus is not seriously harmful to most people.
 - Talk about how they can do their part to help keep the community safe (e.g. washing hands and staying at home). Acknowledge that this might mean some disappointments for them.

4. Communicate with your children and teens about why you have to stay in

Don't avoid talking about coronavirus. Honest communication at an age-appropriate level will help them feel reassured.

- Try to find a balance between too much information and too little.
- Be cautious about taking too much information from social media. Only use the official government website when planning and preparing for the future:
 - <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
 - If you have teens in the house, talk to them about fake news and remind them that not everything they read on social media is correct.
- Keep the lines of communication open and let your children know they can talk to you at any time.
- Don't be afraid to say 'I don't know!' Use your empathy skills to acknowledge that uncertainty can be hard.
- Try to avoid promising anything. This might lead to disappointment if events or activities need to be postponed.
 - You could consider offering an alternative activity related to what the child wants to do. For example: "We can't go to Alton Towers at the moment, but why don't we get some paper and design our own theme park?"
 - There are more activity ideas in our 'Activities' tip sheet.

5. Help them cope practically

It can be tricky to know how to support your children practically, as well as emotionally. Remember that your children will look to you as an example of how to react in these uncertain times.

- Give some practical tips to your child about how they can look after themselves. For example, show them how to wash their hands properly, and remind them when they should be doing it.
- Keep as many regular routines as possible, so that your child feels safe and that things are stable.
- Get plenty of exercise and eat as healthily as possible.
- Build activities into your new routine that help your child de-stress. Help them find their own ways of coping too.
- Get creative with your activities and find ways to keep things as 'normal' as possible. There are more ideas in our 'Activities' tip sheet.

5. Make use of other resources

There are plenty of resources available online to help you talk to your child about the coronavirus. Gateway Psychology has tip sheets that you could give to your children and teens.

You could also browse these links for more ideas:

- <https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/talking-to-your-child-about-coronavirus/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-children-about-feelings/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-your-teenager/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/talking-to-your-child-about-coronavirus/#ten-tips-from-our-parents-helpline>

6. Remember that Gateway is here for you and your family

If you want to talk about more coping methods or anything else in your sessions, your clinician will be able to accommodate that. We are here to support you during this difficult situation.

How to manage uncertainty

It is important to feel as safe as possible during uncertain times. This applies to both you and your children. There are things you can do to help you and your family feel safe and secure.

1. Put very clear structure and routines in place

Structure and routine will help your children feel safer. It will also help you manage the new routine of staying at home.

- A clear, visual schedule is a great idea. You and your child/teen could create one together. Ask them what they would like to do and include those activities in your schedule too.
- Be sure to maintain your 'normal' routine as much as possible. For example, stick to the same mealtime, bath time and bedtime rules during this period of social distancing. Try to wake up at the same time every day to encourage a good sleep health cycle too.
- Children and teens might feel like they want to help you. Encourage them to do this with age-appropriate activities. This may help them gain a sense of control over the uncertain situation. You could ask them for help with planning meals, doing chores or connecting with elderly relatives (through virtual methods).

- Allow some flexibility in your routine for times when your children do not want to do the planned activity (within reason). It could be a great idea to have a jar of fun 'staycation' activities for your child to pick when they're feeling bored.

2. Most people try to feel safe by making efforts to gain control of what they can.

This is especially true when the bigger things feel out of control. We all do this, adults and children alike.

- Recognise this in yourself and in your child.
 - For example, you might feel the need to tidy things away more or eat more/less.
 - Your child might become more defiant or want their own way more often.
- Behaviour is always a means of communication.
 - Think: what is your own or your child's behaviour communicating?

3. Underlying anxiety usually accompanies uncertainty – and a low mood.

Anxiety and worry are completely normal at the moment. The key to managing these feelings is to be open and honest with yourself, your partner and your children. Keep talking about your worries together.

- You or your child might be worried about a range of different things. These may include:
 - When will I see my friends?
 - What if my Mum or my Dad dies?
 - Am I going to die?
 - Will we be alright financially?
 - How will all this end?
- Remember to calmly reassure your child or teen, while using your listening and empathy skills to recognise their emotions.
- This is a good method to use with your partner too.
 - Spending lots of time together in an enclosed as a family can lead to feelings of frustration, irritation, anger or worry.
 - You may also find that you have a low mood as a result of the social isolation measures.
 - Find your own coping strategies to de-stress. You could come up with a 'signal' with your partner to let them know you need some space to de-stress.
- Show consideration to yourself too. You don't have to get it right every time.
 - If you lose your temper or become upset – either with your children or partner – give yourself some space to unwind.
 - Return to the situation and explain what happened to repair the relationship.
- Most importantly, talk about your worries together. Don't let a trickle of worry become a raging torrent.

How to manage anxiety

Managing your own anxiety, and the worries of your children and teens, during uncertain times is not easy. There are practical ways to ease your anxiety, as well as to provide a positive environment for your children and teens.

1. Self-regulation

Self-regulation means taking care of yourself and recognising that you need to focus on your own mental health. Self-regulation activities can be helpful for parents and carers, as well as children and young people.

- Take time to breathe deeply if you can (you could set reminders on your phone to do this).
- Take mini-breaks from things causing stress.
- Only watch the news to get official updates on the coronavirus situation.
 - Try to avoid watching it too regularly to avoid extra stress.
- Use your social media for 'good' only.
 - Try to avoid looking at advice from other people, news stories or clickbait stories. These can fuel your anxiety.
 - Instead, use your social media to connect with others and read uplifting stories.
- Try to let go of thinking about things out of your control.
 - Take control of what you can do inside your own house and with your family.

2. Avoid focusing on negative thoughts

This is often easier said than done! However, it is important to try and focus on positive thoughts to ease your (and your children's) worries.

- If it helps, write a list of things you are grateful about and things you can feel positive about.
 - You could cut these up and put them in a jar for when you need a boost of positive thinking.
- Use activities to distract yourself. This may help to ease the worry of your children and teens too.
- Keep your structure and routines in place. Try to keep busy where you can, allowing periods of downtime to unwind.
- Talk honestly about your feelings with your partner.
 - Encourage your children and teens to talk to you when they are feeling anxious (don't forget about empathy!).
 - It's ok to tell your children that you are feeling a bit worried about the situation. It will help them understand their feelings are ok too.

3. Connect with others

Social distancing and quarantine don't mean social isolation. We all need support from our family and friends at this time. Do your best to connect with your friends and family regularly.

- Get on the phone for a chat. Text messaging is a wonderful way to stay connected, but 20 minutes on the phone can be an even better way to get and give support.
 - Phone family members and friends regularly to chat.
 - You could even schedule 'non-coronavirus' phone calls every now and then to get a break from thinking about the situation.
- Use technology to help.

- Skype, WhatsApp video calls and FaceTime can all help you connect ‘face-to-face’ with friends.
- Use this technology with your teens and children too to help them keep in touch with their friends (supervised where necessary).
- Write letters and cards.
 - Spending time to write letters is a lovely way to connect with friends and family. It also encourages you and your children to go outside for a walk to the post box.
 - If you do not have stamps at home, you can order these online from the Post Office: https://www.postofficeshop.co.uk/postage-stamps/?gclid=EAlalQobChMllc6a4LKn6AIVQ7TtCh178wiIEAAYASAAEglz-fD_BwE
- Keep your Gateway appointments in the diary.
 - We are offering all our clients virtual sessions. Do your best to keep these in your calendar as far as possible.
 - You are likely to need extra support during this time, and it is important that there are no gaps in your ‘normal’ therapy plan too.
 - If you can, make adjustments at home to make sure these go ahead as normal. Otherwise, we will offer telephone calls and online chat options too.

How to manage ‘unfinished business’

Unfinished business is when something has ended without warning

There are a lot of unknowns at the moment. We know that it is not possible to tell your children and teens when things will return to normal. However, there are some things you can do to manage this ‘unfinished business’ together.

1. Acknowledge the unfinished business

Acknowledge that it is difficult at the moment, with uncertainties making life very different. You don’t need to sugarcoat this or avoid talking about it. Speak openly and honestly with your children and teens about the situation (in an age-appropriate way).

2. Acknowledge the feelings that might go along with that

Use your empathy and listening skills to recognise the feelings your children might be experiencing. When it is appropriate, calmly reassure them that they are safe. Use your own behaviour to model ways for coping with their feelings.

3. Get creative with ideas for managing these ‘endings’

- Write cards, draw pictures and letters to friends and family members.
- Use Skype, WhatsApp Video or FaceTime to call friends and family.
- Host virtual playdates with friends.
- If important events, like birthdays, are likely to be missed, think about ways your child or teen could celebrate with their friends.
 - Virtual playdates or birthday parties could work.
- Get outside and go for a walk.
 - It may be best to avoid busy areas like parks. Be sure to follow the latest government advice to see if outdoor activity is still permitted.
- Use the same vocabulary you usually would to maintain consistency and normalcy.
 - Try to keep to a similar timetable of activities that your child usually does if you can.

Setting the tone as parents

In this guide, we have talked about using your own behaviour to model the ways your children can manage their feelings. Your children and teens will look to you as a guide. It's up to you to maintain the 'tone' of your home.

1. Be a thermostat, not a thermometer

As a thermostat, you maintain and control the temperature of your home – not just measure it. Thermostats don't just read or react to the temperature, they guide.

Depending on the situation, the 'tone' might be playful and fun or calm and relaxed. Guide your children and teens through your activity schedule and own emotions.

Try to maintain your tone throughout the difficulties you are facing.

2. Keep your own calm

Take the time to de-stress and manage your own anxiety. Schedule time for your own self-care too.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, it is important to try and maintain your calm. You might need to 'fake it until you make it'. If you parent with a partner, consider putting plans in place for them to take over when you need a break.

3. Maintain your role as a parent/carer – be 'in charge'

Your home tone should always be loving, nurturing and positive. However, you need to be the leader in the home. Always be in control, without being controlling.

4. Keep your structure and routine, as well as firm boundaries

As we have mentioned before, your structure and routine will help to keep the tone of your home going.

- While you could expect your children's behaviour to change in line with their anxieties, it is equally important to keep your boundaries in place.
- If they misbehave or show dysregulated behaviour, use your normal boundaries to address the situation.
- Remember that your child might need extra time and support from you during these uncertain times. Give them as much attention as they need.
 - Punishments like time out or 'the naughty step' might not be the best approach for addressing negative behaviour – it will make them feel isolated.
 - Instead, try a 'time in'. This is where the child sits with you for as long as it takes for them to calm down. Don't lecture or punish during the time in – give them space to talk if they want or just sit quietly together.
 - Use logical consequences when addressing negative behaviour. For example, if they have broken a sibling's toy, you could tell them they need to help fix it. Use empathy and help your child repair the situation.
 - You could also try the 'two good choices' technique. If you need your child to do something and they are not cooperating, offer them two good choices. For example, they could help you with the washing up and watch 1 hour of TV after dinner. Or, they could help you with dinner and spend 1 hour Skyping with their friends.
- Use your empathy skills to talk about what they might be feeling and give them space to talk to you about their worries.

5. Create plenty of opportunities for fun, laughter and affection

Opportunities for fun, laughter and affection will help to keep the tone of your home positive. They might even help you manage the time at home. However, these moments do not have to be big and complicated activities. Even small gestures can help to create a positive moment for your child or teen.

Remember:

- These opportunities should not be conditional on behaviour
- Do them in small amounts and frequently
- Try to incorporate them lots of times throughout the day
- Don't be afraid to surprise them! For example, with a 5-minute treat for you both
- Be creative and sensitive to the child – look for any little opportunities
- Remember all the 5 senses – touch is particularly important
- Enjoy it yourself – really remember how to play!
- Remember that your child may look like a teenager but may need to play like a toddler
- Consider creating new 'staycation' rituals to help your child feel connected (like a film every Friday night or dessert Mondays).

There are more ideas in our 'Activities' tip sheet.

Take good care of yourself

Taking care of yourself is essential. You can't care for your children properly without first taking care of yourself. There are more ideas in the 'Self Care' tip sheet.

Think about your 'stress bucket.' If you feel overwhelmed or that your bucket is overflowing, think about ways you can de-stress to prevent from overflowing.

Be attuned with yourself to recognise your own signs of stress. These may be physical, psychological or behavioural. Keep stress small by catching it early!



Important to remember: your clinician is still here to support you. You can talk about your worries in therapy sessions (which may need to be via Skype/Zoom or similar for now). Your children are welcome to talk to their therapist in the session too, or you can ask them if there is anything they want you to talk about for them.