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HELPING KIDS COPE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Anxiety expert David Langer provides practical advice for families



Psychology Professor David Langer

Psychology Professor David Langer helps children manage anxiety in his clinical practice. From his home office—where he is teaching students and counseling patients remotely while caring for his own 5-year-old twins—Langer offered tips for families who are coping with a host of new fears, responsibilities, and circumstances during the coronavirus pandemic.

Q: What is causing families the most stress right now?

A: For parents, there's a lot of justifiable fear about the health and economic impact of the pandemic. Kids are worried about health and about school and activities being canceled. The uncertainty over how long the disruptions to normal life might go on is very challenging for everyone. We are adapting to changes in almost every aspect of our lives on a day-to-day basis.

There is also a very real feeling of information overload. Some of the resources are wonderful—virtual museum tours, educational games, audiobooks. But researching all of these options can be a bit overwhelming for parents who are trying to find a balance between relaxing the rules and promoting learning, in many cases while they are learning how to manage their own remote work.

Q: Does experiencing anxiety mean that there's something wrong?

A: Having that anxiety does not mean there's anything wrong with us. Anxiety serves a purpose. It's our body's alarm system, preparing us to be on alert in case we need to act. In times like these, anxiety may be a sign that we're responding pretty normally to abnormal circumstances.

Anxiety can lead to physical feelings like heart racing, stomachaches, and difficulty concentrating. As we do things to take care of ourselves and each other—and recognize that our body is responding to the world in a way that makes sense—a lot of those symptoms may lessen or go away with time.

Q: What can parents do to help their kids?

A: It's natural (and wonderful!) that parents will often think of how to help their kids before they think about how to help themselves. But parents need to take care of themselves too, for their own health and so that they can take better care of their kids. Be compassionate with yourself, be patient, and recognize that it's not going to be possible to answer every question or to do everything in the same way as before.

Caring for yourself not only makes it easier to care for your children and care for others, it also models for children that self-care is important.

Q: What are some examples of self-care practices parents should be modeling for their kids?

A: Two key things that have enormous benefits for mental and physical health and well-being are physical activity and spending time outside. As of right now, guidelines still allow for families to take walks, hikes, bike rides, and do other outdoor activities together while maintaining appropriate distance from others. These are behaviors parents can model and encourage that will benefit everyone. In addition to physical activity and outside time, take time to do enjoyable things like playing games and pursuing hobbies.

Practicing mindfulness can help us approach our experiences with curiosity and compassion, and Susan Orsillo has helpful tips on [practicing mindfulness in the time of coronavirus \(/news-features/news/2020/03/27/20/15/calm-in-the-time-of-coronavirus\)](#).

Being mindful about consuming news is also important. Remember that we can be informed citizens without checking the news every five minutes. In fact, getting too caught up in the constant news cycle may make it harder for us to take positive steps to help ourselves and help others. I know I've been drawn to read news constantly and I've had to set limits on my own news consumption, setting specific times of the day for reading news and shutting off automatic news alerts on my phone.

Q: What are some other things families can do together to cope while they stay at home?

A: In the midst of these uncertain times, try to bring certainty into your life and your family's life in whatever ways are possible. One of the best ways is to establish routines.

Have similar bed- and wake-up times each day and a rough schedule for daily mealtimes, work time, and relaxation and play times. Build in time to go outside and time for physical activity. Create a routine with room for flexibility but with enough structure that it provides some predictability.

Incorporate fun activities into each week. Maybe Monday is pajama day, Tuesdays are pizza night, and Friday mornings the family goes for a hike. Stay connected with friends and family through video chats and phone calls and by sending handmade cards and artwork. Activities that help others are wonderful because they also help us feel better. Support causes you care about, express appreciation for healthcare workers and others helping us through this crisis, and do what you can to help people in need. You can bring a sense of positivity and constancy to your home no matter what's going on in the world.

Q: How should parents explain the pandemic and discuss their children's fears?

A: No matter how old your child is, it's important to provide age-appropriate information and validate their feelings of anxiety, disappointment, and frustration. How we discuss specifics with children is very different at each age.

Q: How would you talk about this to a preschooler?

A: For younger kids we should be broad in our discussion of the situation. *Some people are getting sick. To keep ourselves safe, we're going to wash our hands more. People are spending more time apart from each other until people start feeling better again.*

Answer any questions that they have in an honest but age-appropriate way.

Q: School-age children?

A: Older children may have more exposure to the media, screens, and conversations with their friends. They will have more questions about the pandemic. It's important to have honest and open communication with your children about the situation without providing more detail than they're necessarily asking for at that moment.

For example, if a third- or fourth-grader asks what happens when someone gets sick with COVID-19, I would start with: *This is a virus that makes people feel tired and have a fever. They may have a cough that makes it harder to breathe, and that's why they need help.* Leave it at that to start with and then see what other questions they may have. I wouldn't start with the most dire and worst possible outcomes, because that may bring more unhelpful anxiety.

Help them feel empowered by participating in daily tasks that keep the family safe like cleaning doorknobs and high-traffic areas and high-touch surfaces such as light switches and countertops.

Q: What about teens?

A: From what I see clinically and personally, this has been particularly hard on teens. It's developmentally appropriate for adolescents to gain their primary social support from their friends. That makes it very difficult for teenagers to have less contact with their friends in person. This may lead to more arguments at home and more family conflict. Be patient and compassionate. Recognize that this is not something that most of us have gone through and that it's hard to be separated from friends and normal activities for such an extended time. It makes sense they're upset and it's OK for them to be upset about it. We should validate those feelings.

Q: How can parents provide validation?

A: Try not to dismiss any fears or feelings. If your child is so worried about contracting the virus they don't want to leave the house, don't tell them they're being silly. Acknowledge that it could be very scary thinking about getting sick, and that it's important to figure out what's safe to do and what may not be safe. Work with them to seek out trusted information sources and develop strategies for being safe. If your teenager is inconsolable about missing out on the prom, don't downplay their feelings by pointing to the "real suffering" of people who are sick or dying. Acknowledge that it's OK to feel loss for the events and activities that enrich our lives.

Q: Where should parents go for more resources?

A: The Centers for Disease Control website is my go-to source for up-to-date medical guidelines, and many reputable news outlets are highlighting new online resources for family learning and entertainment every day. The article "**Maintaining Your Mental Health During Coronavirus (<https://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2020-03-24/maintaining-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus>)**" has good advice for adults, and "**Supporting Families During COVID-19 (<https://childmind.org/coping-during-covid-19-resources-for-parents/>)**" provides a helpful collection of links for families.

The **American Psychologist Association (<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/pandemics>)** has great information on processing pandemic information and seeking professional care if you and your family need it.

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