

Covid-19: Wellbeing for Parents and Carers



This information sheet pulls together some of the most effective psychological advice for this time.

In this unprecedented situation feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, sadness, worry, anger and confusion are completely normal and are likely to be prevalent at least some of the time.

As humans, relationships are key to our wellbeing, yet we are being directed to avoid social contact. Our children are no longer able to go to school and are out of their typical routines. Supporting our children to manage the restrictions and frustrations of being mostly confined to home and not having access to their friends is hard in itself. Trying to help teach them at home is an additional pressure that we may be putting on ourselves. These expectations are coming at a time when we are under increased pressure ourselves, when we don't have access to our normal supports, leisure activities or de-stressors and may have significant additional worries about finances, employment, the health and wellbeing of family and friends and more. Some of us may not have had face-to-face contact with another adult for a long time.

In the face of all of this:

- *How do we not get sucked into a social media or internet frenzy?*
- *How do we achieve a sense of calm when almost everything we've previously experienced about living in the 21st century seems to have been turned on its head?*
- *What can we do that will reduce and help manage the pressures we are under and provide us with a sense of achievement?*

To help answer and prioritise these questions according to your own situation, we have put together some evidence-based suggestions and organised them under the themes of building wellbeing.

Kindness and Gratitude

Circle of Influence

Connectedness and Relationships

Enhancing Our Neurotransmitters

Making a Plan

Shaping Our Thinking and Feelings

Kindness and Gratitude

These are uncertain times; we are likely to have limited access to some of our normal coping strategies, physical and leisure activities. Not only are our children not going to school, we also have additional home learning tasks and there may be additional stressors in our home environments or personal circumstances. Some of us may be at home almost all of the time, others may be juggling the demands of going out to work on top of this. We may well get stressed and we may not always manage ourselves in the way we would like. We need to have realistic expectations of ourselves. We are not superhuman! The majority of us are not teachers and even if we are, teaching our own children is different. Maintaining wellbeing in your home is the most important thing right now. When things go wrong, we need to be kind to ourselves, have self-compassion.

Doing things for others makes us feel better but in challenging times, we also need to remember to extend this kindness to ourselves. For example, not getting through all the home learning tasks can make us feel incompetent, however it's absolutely ok to leave it when causing additional stress! Set goals which are manageable for your family circumstances and which are ok to abandon if things don't go to plan! Being emotionally available for our children providing reassurance and being patient 24/7 is tiring. We need to build in downtime for everyone in the family. It's important to be kind to ourselves, to give ourselves a break and come back refreshed.

Thinking about what we are grateful for is a way to combat anxiety and low mood. Reflecting, identifying and naming 3 positive things which happened in a day is a useful activity, eg we had a lovely breakfast together, managed a quiet coffee time.

Circle of Influence

To support good wellbeing, we need to identify where we can make a difference and direct our attention, energy and actions to those things. This is our 'circle of influence' and will help give us a sense of purpose and control. There are:

- **things we can control** - often our own behaviours, such as when we go to bed, whether we take exercise, eat healthily, limit our access to media, take a deep breath and walk away if we're feeling things are tough;
- **things we can influence** by how we act, behave and respond - although we currently have to support our children's learning at home, we can choose how much we do and when is the best time to do tasks depending on the weather, what we ourselves need to be doing and how energetic or tired people are feeling. We can choose to use our children's interests to motivate them, eg use dinosaurs, baking;
- **things we just have to accept** that we have very little influence over - government rules, things that we can no longer do anything about because they have happened, such as currently schools are closed, our children cannot do their normal activities, meet their friends or are not sitting exams. Sometimes we might need to accept that we haven't been able to achieve very much, and to try again the next day.

Connectedness and Relationships

Connectedness and a sense of belonging is key to wellbeing. In these times of social distancing we need to establish and maintain ways of keeping in touch whilst in physical isolation, eg planned video chats over coffee, telephone calls. Despite the importance of connectedness there is also a risk of being bombarded with online communication. It's important that we give ourselves permission to be purposeful, choose what we respond to and to take a break if overwhelmed.

If you are on your own, this may be even harder - telephone or video calls with absent friends or family members can provide a break, as can taking part in quizzes online etc.

In times of stress when we feel pressured or lacking space from people, it is normal and understandable for relationships to become strained. Arguments in these times of pressurised living are to be expected, what's important is that we acknowledge this and find ways to make up! If you can, try to identify a space for when you need time alone.

Enhancing Our Neurotransmitters

At times we can be flooded by anxious and difficult feelings. We can influence this by purposefully engaging in activities which increase the four naturally occurring 'feel good' chemicals in our brains:

- Dopamine** *Listening to music, relaxation, mindfulness*
- Serotonin** *Good consistent sleep, being outside, nature, laughter and comedy*
- Oxytocin** *Positive interaction with others, stroking pets*
- Endorphins** *Exercise and dancing*

This is useful to think about for ourselves and for our children. It may be tricky to find time for yourself at the moment but it is important to try and build in short periods of time for 'feel good' activities.

Keeping ourselves topped up is not only important for our own wellbeing but also aids our capacity to provide support to our families.



Making a Plan

Unpredictability can increase anxiety; however we can create some predictability by developing simple daily structures and routines. Many of the usual things which provide structure to our day are not available at present and therefore there is even more need to recreate this for ourselves.

When creating your plans remember:

- *Set realistic goals - don't over plan for the day, keep it simple.*
- *Routine times can help - eg for eating and sleeping - this can help us make things predictable and stay rested and energised.*
- *Plan to take a break if you feel that you are becoming short-tempered/overloaded - parents need a break too!*
- *Schedule pleasant events - eg reading, calling a friend, cooking, bubble bath.*
- *Don't overthink it if those goals aren't achieved - tomorrow's another day.*
- *Be kind to yourself - sometimes life takes over.*

When creating a plan it can be helpful to identify obstacles that might get in the way. After trying out your plan remember to review how it went so you can amend it if necessary, eg a plan to have a fun family time, remove obstacles to this by switching off mobile phones and picking an activity everyone enjoys.

Shaping Our Thinking and Feelings

It is normal to be feeling anxious, scared, unsettled or powerless. Taking time to name and acknowledge these difficult feelings will make it more manageable and help limit the experience of constant anxiety. This can be done by naming feelings ourselves, or discussing them with others. Phoning someone and talking through a tricky day can help you process it and then you will hopefully feel more able for tomorrow. While making plans is helpful, it is important to acknowledge that difficult feelings may remain. If thinking about the future makes you anxious returning your focus to the present moment may be helpful. Another strategy is to spot negative thoughts and then to practice replacing with positive thoughts, eg Red (negative, unhelpful) thought, such as *'I am going to catch Covid-19 when I go to the supermarket'*, catching this and replacing with a Green (helpful) thought, such as *'I can shop taking precautions and minimise the risk'*.

Revisiting key messages of resilience also helps in reframing our thoughts, being optimistic and giving hope for the future:

- *This won't last forever; things will get better.*
- *Don't be afraid to ask others for help and support.*
- *Remember everyone is facing their challenges right now, not just me.*
- *Keep things in perspective - this is tough but I can be thankful for the good things in life right now.*

The Educational Psychology Service are there to support your and others' wellbeing. Please do not hesitate to get in touch:

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