

CHILD & TEEN CAREGIVING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A RESOURCE FOR ASOO MEMBER SHELTERS

INTRODUCTION

The stress experienced as a result of the COVID-19 situation will not inevitably result in new symptoms of trauma, but may also deepen symptoms that already exist. For example, stress and conflict-ridden families may find negative interactions intensified.

Adults who have not yet passed middle age have had a relatively calm upbringing in terms of not having experienced an especially devastating globally-impactful event or having constant exposure to disturbing Internet and social media content at a young age; our introduction to traumatizing media coverage was relatively gradual. Children of this generation have been continuously bombarded with traumatizing media coverage. This exposure can “activate every human sense that can result in traumatic encoding at the cellular level” (NACTATR, 2020). Social media exposes individuals to ongoing news updates, as well as responses from those consuming such media, which includes both traumatic reactions (high-level) and a spectrum of alarm ranging from none to moderate-level reactions.

Fear impacts individuals by activating survival instincts (fight, flight, or freeze) and causing the brain to no longer react logically. When individuals feel or perceive that their survival is threatened, their survival-instincts will override their capacity for logic, discernment, and thoughtful planning (NACTATR, 2020). Individuals who may already be experiencing diminished functioning due to past traumas may have extreme reactions to scary events, however reactions will vary widely as fear is subjective.

For those who are able to sustain logical reactivity in their brain and are taking ‘reasonable’ precautions in COVID-19 circumstances, the behaviours of individuals who are relying on their survival instincts may be confusing, funny, or annoying and perceived as an overreaction (NACTATR, 2020). However, fight, flight, and/or freeze responses are normal and understood by psychology, not a reflection of lacking intelligence.

The arrival of COVID-19 to Ontario is now directly impacting individuals who have been exposed to the frightening updates coming out of other countries in past months. Previously, individuals could psychologically distance themselves from the tragedy occurring elsewhere. Some people are able to balance their fear and logic to these new circumstances, while others are reacting only based on survival instincts.

RESPONDING TO CRISIS

“The first principle of crisis response is model calmness¹ but that is not achieved by simply telling someone to be calm. We all need context, perspective and a plan” (NACTATR, 2020).

ANALOGY: BIG PICTURE, LITTLE PICTURE, & LITTIEST PICTURE OF ALL

NACTATR (2020) uses an analogy to provide perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Big picture:

There is little that can be done by professionals, parents, and caregiver on a global scale. Being consumed by the experiences of other nations drains energy leaving less for self and those around you. If you have family or friends in other countries, it is best to make direct contact with them through video chat or messaging, rather than getting information from news, Internet, or social media sources. Limit watching dramatized coverage that does not directly pertain to your circle of care.

Tips:

- Save your body and brain from overload by taking turns with other adult family and friends when reviewing news; this strategy allows individuals receiving filtered news to not be subject to unnecessary traumatic details or images while staying informed of the latest circumstances.
- ‘Bookmark’ or only go to trustworthy websites that provide textual content without photos or videos. Photos and videos can cause unnecessary emotional reactions. Look for government-sponsored sites that are written without emotionally-fueled language to keep you grounded.

2. Little picture:

The little picture includes family, friends, and community that can help and be helped. Multiple people can absorb more anxiety than a single person, making leaning on each other a good strategy for managing stress. However, when only one person is constantly turned to, the support given may be less effective for the receiver, making the support provider feel less effective and drained. Consider reconnecting with encouraging individuals outside of your usual circle of support.

¹ While modeling calmness is a tenant of crisis response, it is ok to acknowledge and vocalize that sometimes situations are just awful; being open about feelings is good and venting frustrations can be healthy. Caregivers can demonstrate resilience by showing stress followed by (re)adjustment to a balanced perspective

Tips:

- Both adults and children have friends and family that, to them, seem wiser than others. Such individuals who model calmness through their character may just repeat what caregivers are already telling children, but hearing it from a trusted source who is less emotive and more distanced from the situation may come across as more believable. Children should be encouraged to speak with trusted contacts who are stable and healthy enough to support; it is best that supporters be given advance notice of a call so they can properly prepare.
- Adults who are in need of someone to talk with should interact with a variety of individuals, including those they may be able to support. Alternating who is the caregiver can be a great way to feel empowered and helpful.

3. Littlest picture of all:

This refers to children, who can be supported through positive caregiving. The best way to do this is to model calmness and assist them in gaining power and control of their situation where possible; there are opportunities for them to protect themselves, and help others. Children can tell the difference between stressful images they see on television the “real” emotional and behavioural responses of adults to occurrences. Additional exposure to other media such as social media compound the anxiety.

Tips:

- Caregivers should calmly speak with their children, using resources appended to this document where fitting. It is important that children realize that certain behaviours can offer protection to them and others. Teaching children what they can do helps to empower them. This can be done through simple actions such as:
 - Proper hand washing (minimum of 20 seconds with soap and water)
 - Proper coughing and sneezing techniques
 - Social distancing
 - Being responsible for younger siblings
- All humans appreciate knowing that they are acting on information that they believe is true and value assisting others; upholding these assists with feeling grounded and in control. Children should be able and allowed to express their fears and concerns and be supported in gaining an understanding and helping in ways that they can.

- It is normal that some children are experiencing natural anxiety and show some initial signs that are similar to the stages of grief and loss:
 - Denial
 - Anger
 - Bargaining
 - Depression
 - Acceptance
- Caregivers and professional supporter should maintain awareness that, while children are facing real effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. school closures, job loss/changes for caregivers, activity cancellations, etc.) any struggles they were having prior to the pandemic (e.g. divorce, personal trauma, or other troubles) are the starting point for support and healing. Children who were already struggling with anxiety, depression, and/or other clinical disorders may be further burdened.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD OR TEEN ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

Full article available at: <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/how-talk-your-anxious-child-or-teen-about>

What follows is a summary of these general tips for communicating with anxious children or teens about the coronavirus pandemic. If your child or teen has a moderate or severe anxiety disorder, their mental health professional should be contacted to account for any additional considerations needed in their treatment plan.

Model Calmness: Caregiver behaviour is the most important and impactful form of communication for children and teens. Ensuring that adults are remaining calm and reacting to situations rationally will support calmness in children and teens. Children and teens can sense anxiety, even if it is not being vocalized; caregivers should engage in self-care such as mindful breathing for a few minutes, when possible, throughout the day.

Maintain Normalcy: Changes to daily routines and schedules can be stressful for everyone. While some of these cannot be helped due to closures and cancellations, try to uphold routines and schedules to the greatest extent possible (meals, naps, playtime, baths, bedtime, etc.). Structuring the day will help some children and teens who are used to having their days be predictable, but may not be advisable for children or teens with conditions resulting in a need for excessive structuring (please consult their health professional).

Listen Actively: Children and teens are likely receiving information on coronavirus from different sources. It is important to listen to any feelings, worries, fears, and questions they may have. Be open and non-judgmental in your listening and responses, this will encourage your children and teens to continue to come to you with their thoughts and feelings. The CDC provides four strategies for practicing active listening:

(<https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/communication/activelisting.html>)

- Give your full attention
- Make eye contact and stop anything else you may be doing
- Get down to your child or teen's level
- Reflect or repeat back what they are saying and what they may be feeling to make sure you understand

Validate: Acknowledge, rather than dismiss, your child or teen's feelings by noting that what they are feeling is common. Some people think that validating feelings means that you are agreeing with the thoughts supporting those feelings, but it is possible to acknowledge and understand feelings without reinforcing them. Validation can help children and teens to make sense of and process their emotions, resulting in feeling calmer. Validation can support good self-esteem and a strong relationship with caregivers.

Help Sit with Anxiety: Though sitting with anxiety can be difficult for children and teens, it is good for them to learn that it can be done, that the feelings do pass, and that anxiety does not define them or their life. Children and teens can be helped with noting and expressing their experience of anxiety rather than ignoring or avoiding it. Expressing anxious feelings helps with processing those feeling and emotions and normalizes the experience.

Know the Facts & Direct Towards those Facts: Be preemptive in speaking with your children and teens about coronavirus and the facts of the pandemic by learning about it yourself. Consult reliable sources such as government websites: (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources.html#wb-auto-5>). For older children or teens who may be doing their own research, provide them with trustworthy sources of information, and ensure that they know that news articles may be inaccurate and/or limited in their account. For young children, this may just mean reassuring them that they are safe and reinforcing proper precautions such as handwashing and staying in one place; information should be simple, short, and concrete. If a child or teen asks a specific question about coronavirus, ask them what they think or already know and use that as a starting point for the discussion and inquire about any other questions or concerns. Make yourself approachable and available for more questions, but be honest if you do not know the answer.

Limit Excessive Reassurance: Repeated reassurance in the form of responses to the same question(s) or constant gestures of comfort may reinforce or increase anxiety in the long-term. Reassuring responses and acts should not be constantly repeated. Similarly, do not over question how your child or teen are doing. While a periodic cuddle and honest responses to questions are supportive, they should not reinforce fixation on a particular concern. Work towards positively reinforcing appropriate behaviour and limiting constructive feedback that may be perceived as critical. It is important that the risks of coronavirus are not overestimated and that the ability to protect ourselves is not underestimated. Caregivers who experience anxiety themselves, may find this especially difficult and should seek support from a professional to speak about these challenges in order to better support their children or teens.

Help Practice Relaxation Strategies: Practicing relaxation strategies that are mindfulness based, such as breathing techniques can help to calm children and teens by resetting the central nervous system. One approach for children is using a stuffed animal as a “breathing buddy.” Have your child lay on their back, place the “buddy” on their tummy and watch the animal slowly move up and down with inhales and exhales. These practices are most effective when they are engaged in on a regular basis. If your child or teen experiences obsessive tendencies be cautious that these strategies do not become compulsive rituals for them. Mindfulness exercises can be simple practices of breathing, walking, or eating mindfully, with no judgement and a focus on being present in the moment. Two printable resources are:

(<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE698.pdf>) and (<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/pe727.pdf>).

Another strategy for managing stressful moments is to “Turn Down the FireHOSE.” Everyone can benefit from asking themselves (or others) four questions when they feel their own mood dip or anxiety rise (or perceive a change in others):

- H: Am I hungry? (have a snack)
- O: Am I overstimulated? (take a break)
- S: Do I need to sleep? (maintain a good sleep routine)
- E: Do I need to exercise? (get moving)

More details on this strategy are available at: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-you-and-your-kids-can-de-stress-during-coronavirus>

Make it Educational & Interesting: Age-appropriate activities to learn about coronavirus can support understanding in ways that are engaging. These should be based around your child or teen’s maturity and level of anxiety (consult a health professional if their anxiety is moderate to high). For older children and teens, activities can be tailored to their interests such as science-based discussions of antigens and antibodies or a historical consideration of managing past disease outbreaks—this should reinforce that outbreaks have been managed in the past and

this one will be managed as well. Young children can talk about or draw pictures of the warriors in our bodies that fight infection and note how eating healthy foods, drinking enough water, and sleeping well during naps or at night can help the warriors. You can also talk about healthcare professionals and scientists who are working to protect people.

Watch Closely & Monitor: For children and teens who experience obsessive behaviours and tend to fixate be cautious with creating activities and exercises as they may become repetitive rituals. Those with compulsive behaviours may face greater challenges in this stressful time with handwashing, checking, counting, and other rituals. Consult with you child or teen’s health professional to work on upholding important practices such as handwashing without them becoming compulsive rituals. If your child or teen develops signs of anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder seek out support from a mental health professional as soon as possible and work closely with them.

Limit & Monitor News/Media Exposure: Being aware of what your children and teens are watching on television. Limiting and monitoring this exposure can support them in keeping their anxiety lowered. It is more important that younger children have their exposure limited, while caregiver monitoring can support older children in processing news stories.

Consult & Collaborate with Healthcare Professionals: If you child or teen is experiencing anxiety or other mental health condition, consult with a health professional as soon as possible if they are not currently being treated. Continue to work with health professionals on their journey to wellness.

Practice Compassion: The current coronavirus pandemic is stressful and difficult to navigate as there is significant uncertainty. Ensure that you are being kind, gentle, and patient with both yourself and your child or teen; make this a daily practice. Some guided meditations are available here: (<https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/>)

A trauma-informed approach when reacting to self and others may include the “four Rs”:

- **Realizing** that every person has a unique history of trauma that can affect them today
- **Recognizing** that the reactions of others (thoughts, feelings, actions) are normal responses to an abnormal situation
- **Responding** with compassion and understanding (while maintaining accountability and upholding healthy boundaries)
- **Reducing** re-traumatization

For more details on Resilience During a Pandemic see:

<https://www.acesconnection.com/blog/resilience-during-a-pandemic>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION POSTER: “HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS DURING THE 2019-NCOV OUTBREAK”

https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2

CORONAVIRUS STORY BY ELSA-SUPPORT

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-story-for-children-1.pdf>

“PSYCHOLOGY WORKS” FACT SHEET: COPING WITH & PREVENTING COVID-19

<https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet-COVID-19.pdf>

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (HOMEPAGE)

<https://www.who.int>