

Coping with anxiety during unsettling times: *Advice from a Clinical Psychologist*



Advice from Dr Helen Care

Coping through unsettling times





Coping Through Unsettling Times

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We spoke with Dr Helen Care for some advice on how parents can help their children to cope during the Coronavirus pandemic (and other unsettling times).

Read on for more details about what Dr Care has to say about coping at this time.



Some other great sources of information and guidance on **worry, anxiety** and **youth mental health** are:

- [British Psychological Society](#)
- [NSPCC](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre](#)



If you feel that you or someone you know (be they a parent, child, teacher or young person) are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek immediate professional help.

Seek an emergency GP appointment or call 999 if you or someone you know is at immediate risk.



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Responses to the current pandemic can range from “*Arghhhhh!*” to “*it’s all going to be fine*”.

Right now, as parents, neither response is necessarily very helpful. There is something serious going on, and whatever the eventual outcome for us or our children, there will be some impact. Even if that is just handling everyone talking about something that is difficult and confusing, you are likely to be feeling a lot of stress currently.

There are many causes of stress that may be triggered by changes or things happening in your life. Stress comes from a mismatch between what we see as a problem and how well we perceive we can manage that problem. One example of this might be when difficult things are going on at work, if we feel we have the resources and skills to handle them, then those things won't feel distressing. It may feel like pressure, it may feel 'stressful', but it could also feel like an exciting challenge.

The Coronavirus situation is a big problem and most of us do not have the skills or resources to fix it alone. In fact, probably none of us do. So, it will feel stressful. What we need to do is to try to find those parts of it that feel manageable. Try to break down our current situations into smaller bits, rather than get overwhelmed by the sheer size of the problem as a whole. We don't have to be able to do everything to be able to do something.

If we are going to support our children through this troubling time, learning to control our own anxiety about the situation is a good place to start. This doesn't mean we can't feel anxious. It also doesn't mean that we have to hide that anxiety from our children or teens. It just means that we need to understand our own anxiety, not let it overwhelm us, and find ways to contain it enough so it doesn't overwhelm our children either.



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Here are some steps you can try putting in place to understand and manage your stress and anxiety levels during this tough time (remember, as with all things parenting, you can't get it right all of the time and you don't have to be perfect):

- 1 Practice telling yourself that it's OK to feel anxious.** Or annoyed. Or confused. Or pretty much anything right now. This is difficult but cut yourself some slack and try to look after yourself in any way you can.
- 2 Limit your exposure to more worrying details.** Stop reading the news all the time, or at all if you need to. Stick with social media exposure that you can handle, and if it makes you feel worse, stop doing it. If you do want to read social media posts or news, try giving yourself a reasonable time slot, say 20 mins a day to do so, and then steer clear for the rest of the day.
- 3 Find ways to look after yourself:** have a shower, spend five minutes reading a book, get some exercise, stand outside in the sun for a few moments.
- 4 Keep up with social connections as much as possible.** Speak to friends and family on the phone, online, video call or instant message. Set up regular 'dates' in your diary of specific times you will call friends of yours or friends of your children.
- 5 Tell someone you trust** if you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- 6 Focus on small, achievable tasks.** Set yourself small and easy goals that you can measure and tick off to give yourself a feeling of being in control.
- 7 Create a Jar of Joy.**



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Jar of Joy

One of the ways we can keep a hold of the everyday in the face of a big problem such as Coronavirus is to physically write down all the little things that bring you a bit of joy or give you a sense of normality. A Jar of Joy is a technique that people have been using in various versions for years to do just that.

A Jar of Joy is a very simple idea that packs a big punch. Take a jar (or any kind of container you like – a Box of Brilliance, a Margarine Tub of Moments... all are equally valid!) and decorate it. Although not essential, this really helps to give it some importance. Invest time in it, even if it is only five minutes and it will feel much more special. If you get to decorate it your own way, it will also hold some personal value to you.

You should never underestimate the power of feeling pride in something you have made, no matter how unskilled you might feel. Put your jar or container somewhere you can see it easily.

Any time something happens that brings a little moment of joy, however small, write it down on a scrap of paper and put it in the jar. Challenge yourself to find at least two things every day.





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Seeing the jar gradually fill can be an incredibly helpful and positive experience in itself. It's also good to have something to look back on when things feel bleak, to remind us that there are good things out there.

The Jar of Joy isn't about solving problems, but about holding onto the better moments.

You can get your kids to make their own or even have a family one that anyone can add things to, but remember to keep contributing to one yourself!

Examples could be:

Something you had never seen your child do before

Something someone said that made you smile or feel good

Something you noticed about your child's skills

Something you achieved that you have never done before

Something your child said that was funny or memorable

A win, no matter how small

A moment of positive communication

A compliment to you or anyone else in your family

Something you said to your child that made them smile