



## LIFE BEYOND COVID

# A trauma-sensitive guide for caregivers of children and adolescents

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Now that the pandemic is ending for many of us, we may have had hopes of going back to “normal,” but will life be the same now as it was before? One thing to remember is that fifteen months is a long time in the development of a child—teens, too. Interests and friendships may have changed for them. We can't expect things to be just as they were before 2020. This is a good time to re-evaluate.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been emphasizing to our kids the importance of being safe and maintaining physical distance from others. For many kids, this avoidance of others has become the new normal and they are now exhibiting a fear of returning to once loved activities. (This can be true for adults as well.)

### Caring for the caregiver

This has been a hard time for caregivers, too. And yet, caregivers can be most helpful to their kids when they, themselves, are regulated. That means, that though you can feel even intense emotions, you can control your words and behavior. Self-compassion can go a long way in helping yourselves and your children as well. Here are some steps to help calm your own nervous system:

- Begin by being aware of your own feelings, maybe even your own anxiety. If it is difficult to identify your emotion, you can notice your thoughts, body sensations, urges, and behaviors to give you a clue about how you're feeling.
- Take care of your body: treat physical illness, nourish yourself with a balanced diet, get sufficient sleep, exercise, use substances only in moderation.

- Recognize that there is discomfort in uncertainty for you and your children.
- Work to find acceptance of the situation as it is.
- Utilize self-compassion and self-care to help you stay regulated so that you are better able to help your child with their own anxiety.
- Take breaks when needed (this is important for both adults and kids). When we have anxiety, it is easy to get overwhelmed. *Check out the side bar* for a strategy for taking a break during an intense moment.
- Engage in regulating activities such as meditation, yoga, exercise, etc.
- Maintain or re-connect with social supports (research has shown that having strong relationships builds resiliency).
- Ask for help when needed. Seek friends and family. No shame in seeking professional help, either – especially when self-help and informal help isn't working.
- Be clear with others about what you are comfortable with in regard to safety precautions (masks, social distancing, etc). Keep clear boundaries.

### Supporting children and teens

*Validate feelings!* Encourage children to talk about all their feelings, including their fears. Be approachable and curious. Express empathy for how they are feeling. Let them know that many people are feeling some reluctance about returning to pre-pandemic rhythms.

*Be truthful and problem-solve together.* Provide accurate information. Share only what is asked for at a time. Giving a child more information than asked for can be overwhelming.

### Take a break with STOP

Use this skill to take some space from an intense situation even when you can't physically remove yourself from the situation.

#### S: Stop

Literally freeze your body



#### T: Take a step back

Step backwards, or take a breath



#### O: Observe

Look at the situation like an outsider



#### P: Proceed mindfully





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*Assess new and old routines.* Children (and adults) may have gotten used to the more relaxed, slower pace of pandemic lifestyle. Help children talk about what new routines they hope to keep and which ones they can let go of. What routines from pre-pandemic would they like to reclaim? This is a great opportunity to do a values clarification activity with your child about what is most important to them and what makes them feel healthiest and happiest. (An example of such an activity: Ask your child, "If you could pick only one thing to do, what would it be?" For younger children, you may need to provide limited choices rather than making this open-ended). You might share your own journey in seeking balance in this new world.

*Help your child maintain a consistent schedule,* including regular mealtimes, and bedtime. Build in down time for your child, in addition to opportunities for them to move their body.

*Take things slowly.* For people who are anxious or who have experienced trauma, change can be hard. Make changes in small steps. Set incremental goals. Prepare kids for each step. This will provide children with a greater sense of control and mastery for each step. (Some kids might be helped by "practicing" various scenarios.)

*Remind children of their strengths* and how they have used them to conquer fears in the past. One way you can do this is by using a safety signal: a gesture or an item that conveys safety (e.g. a thumbs up or reassuring smile from a trusted adult, a stuffed animal, a superhero sticker on their hand). For children school aged and younger, it can be helpful to remind them that there are safe adults working to help make conditions safer for all of us.

### Coping skills for children and teens

Support your child or teen in using these when they are feeling particularly anxious or overwhelmed—or any other strong emotion for that matter!

Do something, anything! (e.g. read, make art, watch a movie or TV show, play with a friend or sibling, explore outdoors)



Do something nice for someone else

Create different emotions (e.g. watch a funny video, listen to happy or calm music)



Put your pain in a box on a shelf for a while

Replace your thoughts (do word or number puzzles, read, count)



Boost other sensations (hold ice, take a warm or cold shower, pet your pet)



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*Practice bravery.* For children or teens who continue to feel anxious about venturing out – even when it is safe to do so, you can have them “practice bravery.” Provide limited desirable choices about fun activities (ones that will tend to reduce anxiety) they can do. Offer much praise when they accomplish the activity. They may need you to be with them initially.

*Create one-on-one time.* As the world re-opens and things get busier, make sure to include one-on-one time with your child. Together, as a family, decide on fun activities and special routines that you would like to take with you into the newly opened world.

### **Mental health of children and teens has suffered during the pandemic.**

Teens are reporting anxiety and PTSD symptoms at a rate of 45%. Watch for more concerning behavior such as too much hand washing or isolating or withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities. Seek professional guidance if you or your child needs more support.

*Check out the side bar* for signs of extreme stress in children and teens.

Coming through a world-wide pandemic can be a life-changing experience. There are hardships, for sure, but just like a pearl is formed by an oyster in an attempt to manage the discomfort of an irritating grain of sand, resilience can grow out of this experience as well. You can help your children recognize and claim their new skills by identifying what has been hard about this year and what they (or you as a family) did to get through it. Maybe you can even talk about how these newfound strengths can help them through future challenges as they arise.

### **Possible symptoms of extreme stress in children and teens:**

#### Preschool-aged Children

- Separation anxiety
- Crying and/or screaming a lot
- Eating poorly or losing weight
- Nightmares
- Regressive behavior (like bedwetting or thumbsucking)
- Tantrums or aggression

#### Elementary-aged Children

- Becoming anxious or fearful
- Feeling guilty or shame
- Difficulty focusing
- Trouble with sleep
- Nightmares
- Mood swings
- Overeating or not eating enough
- Demanding more attention
- Regressive behavior (like being clingy, bedwetting, or thumbsucking)

#### Tweens and Teens

- Feeling depressed or alone
- Isolating
- Developing eating disorders or self-harming behaviors
- Beginning to abuse substances
- Engaging in risky sex
- Going “missing” for chunks of time
- Personality changes (a once mellow kid becoming argumentative)

### **References and Resources**

- Child Mind Institute <https://childmind.org/>
- <https://theconversation.com/heres-how-to-help-your-kids-break-out-of-their-pandemic-bubble-and-transition-back-to-being-with-others-157732>
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