

Anxiety in Children and Adolescents during the Coronavirus Crisis

The spread of the coronavirus is causing many emotions among children and adolescents including fear, vulnerability, uncertainty and worry about the future. Although this is a normal reaction, some children may develop more intense anxiety than others.

How can we help our children and teens cope?



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and natural reaction to unfamiliar, dangerous or stressful situations. Anxiety may manifest in physical sensations of strong or rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, increased sweat, tightness and tension, dizziness, a feeling of "butterflies in the stomach" or nausea. Anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing, it helps us protect ourselves and motivates us to do our best to improve our condition. Anxiety from the coronavirus may help children to adhere to the instructions, wash their hands as needed and deal with the forced distancing from family members and loved ones. However, when the anxiety is overwhelming it can cause a feeling of distress and impair daily function.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is genetic, so some children have an innate tendency to develop anxiety. However, anxiety is also a learned behavior - and even contagious - a child who is exposed to people who respond with anxiety manifestations may learn to think and behave anxiously as well. Certain reactions from the environment, and parents, to the child's fear and anxiety may also increase the risk that he or she will suffer from anxiety. For example, when a child refuses to stay alone and the parent allows him to avoid it regularly, his/her anxiety may increase.

Anxiety in crisis situations

Powerful emotional reactions are normal in response to a crisis or significant stress situation. In a situation where the entire environment is exposed to a crisis event, such as the spread of the coronavirus, the child may be exposed to high environmental anxiety - to parents' concerns, or to the stressful news reports. Children and adolescents also experience the uncertainty of this new reality and are influenced by the messages they are exposed to in their environment. They are inundated with a great deal of knowledge, most of which is not mediated or adjusted to their age, which impairs their coping ability. The familiar routine changes, so the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity grows. In light of this, they may develop fears that may cause them great suffering. It's important to know that strong family support can help children and teens cope and protect them from the development of anxiety.

Responses to crisis situations at different ages

Children of different ages may respond in various ways to stressful situations such as the spread of coronavirus.

- **Toddlers and young children** do not usually worry about illness or physical threats. The more common fears at these ages are developmental such as fear of loud voices, parting or darkness. However, even very young children may respond with distress when they feel anxious and under pressure from their parents.
- **Elementary school age (mainly age 8+)**, begin to develop concerns about different things. Children of these ages will typically report fears of supernatural things, social situations, and worries about injuries, illnesses or death.
- **Teens** tend to experience even more worries and anxiety due to the typical complexity and stress of adolescence. At these ages, fears may become more abstract, and include, for example, fear of wars, a bad economic situation, or an irrational fear of the end of the world.

How to deal with anxiety?

In most cases, anxiety and fears that develop following a crisis are quite temporary and tend to go away after a few weeks. If your children show signs of anxiety, you can help them deal with the worries and fears that arise from the current situation in several ways.

- **Explain that the sensations they are experiencing are natural** - let them know that it is normal to experience some anxiety when new and stressful situations arise. Acknowledge their fears and do not dismiss or ignore them. Listen to your children and reassure them that you are there to help with whatever comes up in the future. If your children are having trouble talking about their anxiety, suggest to them to write down their thoughts in a journal or blog. Ask what they think will help them to relax, teach them to take deep breaths and do it with them, or offer distractions that suit them.
- **Talk to your children calmly and openly about the situation** - it is important that your children can talk to you about their concerns. Don't be afraid to talk about the coronavirus and don't hide it. Adapt the discussion to the children's developmental stages, and mediate the information in a way that is appropriate to their ages. Try to talk calmly, and do not overwhelm with unnecessary details. Answer questions and correct misunderstandings. Provide reassuring information, for example, that the coronavirus is less common and severe in children.
- **Be aware of your reactions to the situation** - your children are watching you and looking for clues on how to manage their concerns. Show them how you deal with stress and anxiety. If you feel overwhelmed, take care of yourself and get help. Your children are attentive to you and absorb the anxious tones and nonverbal messages in conversations. Try to manage your anxieties before talking with your children and answering their questions.
- **Limit news and social media viewing** - The constant preoccupation with the epidemic and the great deal of information on the various social networks can create great stress, especially in children and adolescents with a tendency to anxiety. Try to be with your children while watching, listening, or reading news so you can relate any questions or concerns they have. With adolescents, you can discuss the potential harm of increased media exposure.
- **Try to maintain routine** - Set an agenda with your child or adolescent and create anchors around meal times and bedtime. Try to incorporate different activities such as learning, movement and exercise, arts and crafts, household chores and time with friends and relatives. Dividing roles for children and adolescents may contribute to their sense of capability. Clear time in the family routine for things your children love and enjoy.
- **Strengthen the sense of control** - teach your children how to maintain their health and environment, and emphasize the actions they can take to stay safe. Explain and demonstrate to children how to wash hands, sneeze or cough. Talk to them about their grandparents' safety and health contribution by following the guidelines. Encourage older siblings to teach their younger siblings the rules of hygiene.
- **Strengthen relationships** - Use the available technology to strengthen relationships with friends and family. Think together about ways you can help each other and create a sense of social engagement. Write letters and make drawings for grandparents and make frequent video calls with close friends.

When you should call for help?

If you are concerned about your child or adolescent, and feel that their emotional reactions are ongoing, aggravating, or significantly impairing their ability to function on a daily basis, seek professional help.

Here are some places you can turn to:

- Ministry of Health hotline 5400 *
- Educator or school counselor
- Call centers for psychological counseling in educational psychological service or mental health stations.

איך עוזרים!

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