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# HOW TO MINIMISE STRESS AND ANXIETY IN CHILDREN DURING COVID-19

## THE MENTAL HEALTH WAVE OF COVID-19

Covid-19 has managed to grab the attention of all people across the globe. The unwelcome fast paced pandemic has seemingly brought about a 'new normal'. This change in our daily lives has left a vast number of people feeling unsettled, worried, confused and frustrated. People have had to change the way they work, the way they interact with others, the way they shop, the way children go to school, what we safety precautions we wear, our limited movement and how to exist in a state of lockdown with unwanted but essential restrictions.

An 'unseen wave' comes with this pandemic and this wave is the mental and emotional struggles that people have. This wave has certainly not yet peaked in terms of severity. What we have seen is an increase in a need for psychotherapy and psychiatry to help with the increase in mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse to name a few.

## HOW HAVE CHILDREN BEEN AFFECTED BY COVID-19?

Children thrive on predictability, structure and routine. They also rely heavily on adults around them for guidance and containment during

childhood. These elements have all been challenged and changed at the start and throughout this pandemic. Covid-19 certainly made the 'world' a scary and unsafe place. The covid-19 virus has taken the form of a big scary monster for many children who are left feeling afraid and helpless during all of these changes. All of a sudden adults are seemingly scared, Mom's and dads are working from home, schools shut and go online, cessation of all after school activities, serious national family meetings are being held weekly, the news reports of daily infections and deaths, everyone is asked to stay indoors



and wear face masks and Social distance to protect each other. This way of living may feel like fiction to a lot of children, and for the unknown future, these changes to what we knew as 'normal' life will continue. Many children are left feeling distressed by the current events due to the pandemic.

### WHAT EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS CAN WE EXPECT TO SEE AMONGST CHILDREN

Regulating one's emotions isn't a guarantee when a child is born. These skills develop as a child grows up. A child learns how to regulate how they feel from their external environment and through interactions with others in their world. Currently, children are being exposed to their world as being uncertain and scary. They also have had very little time and preparation to adjust to the drastic changes made to their daily functioning and their lives. This may leave them feeling:

- Worried
- Anxious
- Confused
- Helpless

- Disappointed
- Frustrated
- Sad
- Lonely
- Bored

Children's behaviour may change as a result of the emotions that they are experiencing, not being able to process them in the ways they knew or could with all the new changes. Changes in behaviour May look like:

- Irritability or lashing out
- Withdrawal
- Increased time spent on devices or screen time
- Inattention or distractedness
- Disturbances to sleeping patterns
- Shyness
- Tearfulness or emotional sensitivity
- Worrying and reassurance seeking
- Self harm or self injurious habits

Children may experience more serious mental health issues such as:

- Generalized anxiety
- Health anxiety
- Separation anxiety
- Panic attacks

- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Depression
- Substance abuse

### ARE ALL CHILDREN AFFECTED?

Children experience mental health problems just like adults do. Their presentation of symptoms may just differ slightly. Depending on the age of a child, one can expect to see more physiological and behavioural symptoms of mental and emotional problems amongst younger children. This is due to their potential lack of verbal capacity and underdeveloped self-awareness. As children grow so does their ability to correctly identify how they feel in their body and what thoughts they are having. This then helps clinicians with accurately diagnosing mental health problems. Some Pre-adolescents may be better in being able to identify what they are feeling but are also limited in being able to externalize and to cognitively restructure distortions in their thinking. This may leave them feeling helpless and worried for the future. Adolescents may be better able to implement strategies to help them cope with how they feel but are also faced with many developmental challenges such as





# ANXIETY

identify, social esteem and self-esteem development. Their 'at risk' brain makes them quite vulnerable during this stage of development.

## HOW TO CORRECTLY IDENTIFY ANXIETY IN CHILDREN DURING THESE TIMES

It is important to consider the child's age and circumstances surrounding the child's clinical presentation. It would be a good idea to get more collateral information surrounding a child's current functioning so that one can get a better idea of clinical symptoms that point to a diagnosis and need intervention. According to the DSM-V, anxiety disorders include disorders that share features of excessive fear and anxiety and related behavioural disturbances. These symptoms interfere with daily functioning and are difficult for a child to control or manage.

## WHAT KINDS OF INTERVENTIONS SHOULD WE CONSIDER?

Early identification is important. Children may present with frequent physical complaints such as sore tummy, headaches, sore throat etc. It is important to put these complaints into context and look at what is going on around them. We can then start to identify what the severity and interference the symptoms have. This will assist in making the correct diagnosis and guide what form of intervention is necessary. A school based intervention may assist a child by getting a teacher or school counsellor to frequently check in with the child and offer support. A child may benefit from some supportive therapy to process their emotions and come up with coping strategies to help them. A child may require psychiatric intervention such as medication and frequent psychotherapy sessions to help them deal with their distressing

emotions, thoughts and feelings.

## HOW CAN YOU AS THE MEDICAL PRACTITIONER ASSIST PARENTS WITH ANXIOUS CHILDREN?

It's important to psycho-educate parents about how anxiety affects children physically, cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally. A simple explanation about how the fight and flight system works in the brain and how anxiety attempts to prepare us to take action helps parents themselves understand that anxiety isn't bad as an emotion. There are simple techniques that you can teach parents that may help a child deal with distressing emotions:

- **Name it to Tame that feeling**  
The key step in getting correct help for a child is correctly identifying that they are experiencing anxiety or other distressing emotions. A child (depending on their temperament and stage of development) may not be able to verbalize what they are feeling or may not know what is happening to their body, thoughts or emotions. It is important to assist a child with naming what they feel (using words like "sometimes when we are worried our tummy feels funny inside or you might feel like you want to cry"). When talking to a parent or the child, you can as the clinician use describing words to assist parents with a vocabulary that they can use at home. This allows a child to feel that these sometimes-scary feelings or physical sensations can be 'tamed'. This together with seeing a calm adult helping them to identify and then talk through ways to feel better will help normalise these emotions.

Encourage parents to be open about emotions, including their own emotions, to role play what emotions are and how one can deal with them.

- **Respond don't react**  
Remaining calm is paramount to helping a distressed child. Teach parents to remain calm when responding to their child's anxiety. A simple breathing technique can help parents physically help themselves and their child decompress from the physical effects of anxiety. Belly breathing goes something like this:  
Breathe in through your nose, into your tummy (imagine your stomach is a balloon and when you breath in your balloon expands)  
Hold for 2 seconds  
Put your top lip over your bottom lip and breathe out the warm air slowly over your bottom lip  
Then repeat this three times with the child
- **Educate your child about what they are feeling**  
Its important to normalize anxiety for patients and teach them that emotions are normal. Yes some can be uncomfortable and distressing but they only last for a short time and then with time they calm down. All emotions give us information or advice of how to respond to something. For example, if you are worried about an upcoming test, the emotion is simply giving you advice to get started and prepared. Helping a child figure out what advice the emotion is telling them will assist them in finding a solution or coping strategy. **MHM**

**References available upon request**