

Some advice when speaking about COVID-19 with children and young people

Our Fear Response Makes Sense

Coronavirus is a real global threat which we are constantly receiving warnings from the media, schools and government. It has triggered many fears in us all. It hasn't helped that there is so much unknown and unpredictable. We are hard wired to respond to a threat by protecting ourselves and getting ourselves to safety. Several threat-based emotions can be triggered during threatening times including anger, disgust, sadness and anxiety.

Anxiety can have an important role in:

1. Warning us that we are in danger, that something is wrong, and that we need to do something about it.
2. Activating the fight, flight and freeze reactions to help us to safety and ultimately survive.
3. Biasing our attention to look out for more signs of danger so that we can avoid them.

In response to the coronavirus threat, anxiety is naturally helping us to be more careful about where we touch, proactively wash our hands, be more alert of the environment and people around us. Emotions are not the problem and we need them.

Approaching Coronavirus with Compassion

Self-awareness is a core skill that can empower us to take charge of our emotions and to notice if they are starting to take control of us. Instead of approaching this threatening time by seeing others as the contagious enemy and threatening them back, it can be more helpful to approach this threatening time with compassion.

The definition of compassion is a sensitivity to the suffering in ourselves and others, and a commitment to alleviate it. Compassion is about being helpful not harmful to ourselves and others.

What Can Compassionate Responses Look Like?

- Instead of stealing and stocking up on resources, what about sharing resources with those who are running out or who are unable to get to the shop themselves?
- Altruism and helping others can have a positive impact on our well-being and satisfaction in life. What about offering to drop off food for our neighbour who is quarantined?
- Aligning together, creating a sense of togetherness, not labelling or stigmatising each other, can help us more effectively contain the coronavirus. We are all in this together.
- Staying informed without overdoing it. Anxiety thrives on trying to find certainty and you may notice that you are drawn into finding more information to stay safe. It can help to pause and rest when we recognise that news is taking too much of our mental capacity. Also

being wiser about the sources of information we use to minimise spreading rumors and anxiety in ourselves and others.

- Remember the fundamentals of communication such as respect and active listening. Our anger and fear can become blinding as we convince ourselves that our view is right (and others are wrong) and this hinders our ability to listen. Finding a balance between mindfully listening to experts in the field, as well as sharing our thoughts and opinions, can help us be better equipped and informed on how to cope.
- Compassion is also about saying no if this means alleviating further suffering. It is OK to respectfully say 'no' to being part of another coronavirus discussion, or to say 'no' if we think it is too soon to meet a friend or colleague because we have a vulnerable family member at home or want to safeguard ourselves.
- It is OK to feel vulnerable and scared. We may need to give ourselves and others permission and space to express these feelings, even we do not like them. Trying to suppress, deny, ignore, and invalidate our feelings does not mean they will go away; rather they may accumulate and feel more overwhelming over time.
- When we notice our worrying thoughts, we can thank our brain for doing its job and trying to keep us safe. We can then turn our attention towards nurturing ourselves by showing ourselves kindness and engaging in self-care. We can also focus on engaging in activities that give our life meaning and connecting with people we value. This can help us get out of our heads and into our present moment.
- A special friend helped me understand that finding moments of humour and happiness even during times of adversity can be healing. Notice and punctuate these moments! This was beautifully demonstrated in Italy as the community united together in song and laughter from their balconies. A real illustration of how we can come together to get through it.

And Finally, We May Be Pleasantly Surprised

As the coronavirus has brought us to a halt, this may be an opportunity to look up from our day to day routine, slow down and re-evaluate what is important to us in our life.

We may have a chance to appreciate what we have taken for granted such as our health, connecting with each other face to face, the ease of popping round the shop, having access to so many material resources (which we are spoiled with in third world countries).

Our problem solving skills are being really tested and as a result we may discover that we are able to adapt and to cope in our life more than we thought.

We do not always realise how courageous we are until we find ourselves in the hardest of circumstances and have no other choice but to be courageous.

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Shared by the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain

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