

# Parents Need Stress Relief, Too



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I was keeping it together over coronavirus until late last week, when I started feeling like the waves of information were cascading over me too fast and I couldn't come up for breath. I wanted to stay calm for my children, and I mostly succeeded in keeping my voice and body language relaxed. But I don't know which parts of their lives are going to change next, which makes it impossible to give my kids the consistent answers that they need.

The only thing that made me feel better? Running. Even when we're not in the middle of a pandemic, running is one of the few activities that gives me true peace, and I'm glad I resolved to run more frequently and improve my speed and endurance this year. There's good research showing that exercise helps ease symptoms of anxiety and depression for everyone, even during less stressful times.

Because I can't run during every one of my waking hours, I asked two psychiatrists what parents can do to keep the coronavirus-anxiety at bay.

**Give yourself grace.** "This is not the time to be looking at your parenting manual and expecting yourself to be a top performer," said Dr. Pooja Lakshmin, M.D., a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences. "All of the rules are sort of thrown out the window when every day the information is changing." You may be trying to work from home with your stir-crazy children, and all your previous rules about screen time may need to get tossed. "Give yourself permission to cut corners so you can all get through unusual circumstances," said Dr. Alexandra Sacks, M.D., a reproductive psychiatrist in New York.

Dr. Lakshmin even made me feel better about not having definitive answers for my children's questions. "For kids, the way you present information and the affect you have is just as, if not more, important than the content you're relaying," she said.

**Don't judge coping styles.** Everyone is under an unusual amount of stress right now, Dr. Sacks said, and it's important not to judge your own coping mechanisms — or your partner's, if you have one. You might be stockpiling beans, and your partner might be brushing off concerns but the last thing either person should do is call the other "crazy" or be dismissive of their emotions. When there are disagreements, practice starting sentences with the phrases "I need" or "I would feel better if," Dr. Sacks said, rather than criticizing the other person.

**Remember sleep hygiene.** Millions more people are now working from home, and often in close quarters. If at all possible, Dr. Sacks recommends not working from your bed, because if you do, that can create less differentiation between day and night, which can be a trigger for insomnia. Also, get your phone out of your room and power down your devices at least an hour before bedtime.

**Timebox your worries.** Dr. Lakshmin advised creating boundaries around your news consumption and your fears. You can tell yourself: I'm only checking news twice a day, and I'll set a timer to limit my exposure. Checking the news compulsively and reading every random, poorly sourced and histrionic tweet will only add to your anxiety. You can also designate a half-hour per day to be your "worry time." If worries arise outside that 30 minutes, Dr. Lakshmin said, you can write them down on a piece of paper to get them out of your head. "Knowing I have that time period makes me feel less anxious during the day," Dr. Lakshmin said.

**Social distancing doesn't mean you should stop being social.** Even if you're under quarantine for some period of time, you can stay in touch with friends through video chat. Dr. Lakshmin recommended setting up a recurring date to talk, even doing the same activity at the same time, like watching your favorite garbage TV together virtually after your kids are asleep.

**Help others as much as you can.** For the healthiest and most financially privileged among us, we can assuage our anxieties by being proactive, Dr. Lakshmin said. If you're fortunate enough to afford a house cleaner, you could continue to pay them even if they cannot come to work, or you could volunteer to get groceries for a neighbor who may not be able to go outside.