

Managing Youth Anxiety During COVID-19

School closures, activity cancelations, and adhering to the new concept of “social distancing” has quickly become a new reality for our kids and teenagers. Helping our youth make sense of the changes taking place in the world around them is something educators and parents across Nebraska are facing. It is normal to feel fear, uncertainty and worry during wide-scale disease outbreaks that are contagious, especially when the normalcy of everyday life is turned upside down. Additionally, it is hard to escape the endless news cycles detailing the spread COVID-19, which can increase feelings of anxiety. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, these feelings can feel even more overwhelming for a child/teen who is already suffering from an anxiety disorder or who may be predisposed to feeling more anxious during times of uncertainty.

Below are tips to help communicate with you children and teens about the Coronavirus:

Model Calmness- children are perceptive to the behaviors of others in their environment. By behaving calmly, you are sending a message to your child/teen that there is no need to panic. Monitor your own feelings and reactions and if you are feeling anxious, take a break or pause to take a few deep breaths before communicating with your child/teen.

Maintain Normalcy- changes to everyday routines and schedules can be stressful for kids. During school closure, structure during the day may help ease anxiety. Attempt to maintain normal household routines as much as possible. For example, stick to regular mealtimes and bedtimes and build time into the day for educational and enrichment activities as well as exercise.

Listen and Validate- Actively listen to your child/teen’s thoughts, feelings, fears and questions about COVID-19. Express empathy for how they are feeling. Uncertainty about the future can be hard for adults to process, it can be equally difficult for our youth. Acknowledge and be careful not to dismiss their feelings. Validating feelings can help our children and teens feel understood and enhance their ability to process emotions. It may also be helpful to inform them that there are lots of other children and teens around the world who are experiencing some of the same feelings.

Keep Talking- Be mindful that your child/teen may be hearing about COVID-19 on social media, from friends and through news outlets. Limiting and/or monitoring the exposure of your child/teen to news cycles can help ease anxiety. Help kids to understand that every news story may not have all the accurate details. Educate yourself on the facts from reliable sources such as the CDC or your local Department of Health and Human Services. Do your best to answer questions honestly but remember that it is okay if you don’t have an answer. Let kids know that as you get more information, you will update them. Keep in mind that what we share with a younger child is different than what is developmentally appropriate to share with a teenager.

Help Sit with Anxiety- Help your child/teen recognize and verbalize the experience of anxiety rather than avoiding it or trying to distract from it. Putting feelings into words can help individuals process emotions. Sitting with unpleasant feelings can be challenging but it can help kids to realize that it is an experience they can get through and it doesn’t have to define them or their life.

Help Practice Relaxation Strategies- Relaxation strategies like mindful breathing exercises can help children/teens feel calmer. Mindfulness has been found to change the brain in the same way that exercise changes the body. Several apps offer free guided mindfulness exercises such as, “Smiling Mind”, “Stop, Breathe, Think” and “Insight Meditation Timer”.

For additional information follow the below links:

[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource?mc_cid=e21891c772&mc_eid=be3546cfc1](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource?mc_cid=e21891c772&mc_eid=be3546cfc1)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

References: Anxiety and Depression Association of America; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); The Child Mind Institute