

CONSORTIUM FOR MENTAL HEALTH & OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT

SPECIAL ISSUE FOR FAMILIES ON COVID-19

Let's Work Together!



Introduction to Special Newsletter on COVID-19

In this era of COVID-19, we at the Consortium for Mental Health and Optimal Development at Penn's Graduate School of Education felt that we had to respond with resources for our school district partners and beyond. This newsletter, designed especially for families, seeks to support mental health and optimal development in the context of this unforeseen crisis that has shut down schools and imposed a divergent reality on us. How do we do our best to support optimal development at home when conditions are generally not optimal? We are accustomed to supporting kids in crisis with anxiety and stress, but how does our current situation impact existing mental health challenges while simultaneously creating new ones? Parents are experiencing rising levels of stress while trying to balance working from home and caretaking for their children. Children are adapting to the challenges of online learning, social distancing, and concern for themselves and loved ones.

In this Issue...

I (Andy) share a piece, *Managing Stress and Anxiety in the Age of Coronavirus*, which offers resources and strategies to deal with the specific challenges of the current crisis. Chloe Kannan's article, *Combating Stigma and Racism during COVID-19 for Parents and Families*, offers guidance on appropriate ways to engage in the racial issues that we face.

Marcia Fervienza shares her moving personal experience as a parent in *COVID-19 Quarantine: My Experience*, offering insights into the many dilemmas that parents must manage. Lauren Wright in, *Moving Towards "Normalcy:" Tips for Managing a Schedule during COVID-19* and Kehan (Anna) Bao in *Staying Mentally Healthy* both offer specific suggestions on how families can manage self-quarantining and social distancing. Finally, Kuan-I (Lester) Wu in *Ways to Boost Our Immune System*, offers tips that can enhance our physical health. He shares the quote, "He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything." We hope this newsletter helps you improve your mental and physical health enabling all of us to have more hope in these difficult times.

What More Do You Need to Know?

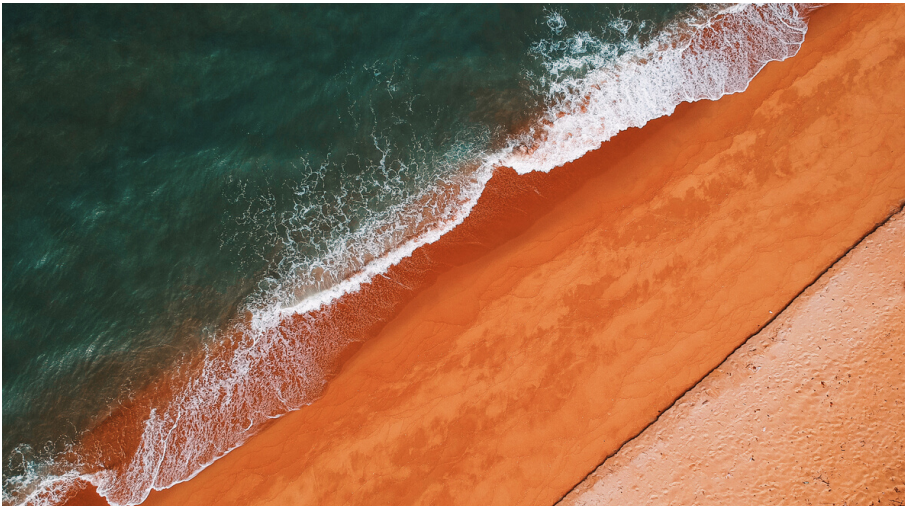
Please contact me at danila@upenn.edu to let me know what content you would like for our next newsletter.

Andy Danilchick & Mike Nakkula from Penn GSE's Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development



"INNER PEACE BEGINS THE MOMENT YOU CHOOSE NOT TO ALLOW ANOTHER PERSON OR EVENT TO CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS."

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MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

BY ANDY DANILCHICK

“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”– Maya Angelou

In this new era of COVID-19, we are being tested like we have never been before. New stresses and anxieties with shutdowns and isolation are being added to our existing stressors. The future is uncertain and full of risks and challenges.

“It’s OKAY to be scared. Being scared means you’re about to do something really, really brave.”– Mandy Hale

Many questions are presented to us:

- How do we manage our own stress and anxiety?
- How do we help others manage their stress and anxiety?
- How can we find health, happiness, and connectedness?
- How do we support our children?*

“Life is ten percent what you experience and ninety percent how you respond to it.”– Dorothy M. Neddermeyer

There are many resources available to help:

- [The Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) has many resources for depression, stress, anxiety, and other psychological issues. Especially helpful is a section on [Mind-Body-Action](#) with managing anxiety and stress.
- The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery has a PDF document with basic information and strategies on [Coping with Stress](#).
- CBS News has an [Interview with Dr. Lisa Damour](#) who offers specific strategies on coping with stress and anxiety during a coronavirus outbreak. The webpage for the interview also has many information links such as ways to help teens manage anxiety with coronavirus, CDC recommendations, and contact information for a mental health distress hotline.
- NBC News New York has a [Guide for Managing Stress with Coronavirus](#), which offers information and tips for adults, children and teens.
- [How to Stay Resilient and Mentally Healthy During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#): Meghna Chakrabarti from *On Point* interviews Jonathan Kanter and Elissa Epel. This resource includes links to additional resources such as Epel’s meditation app recommendations.



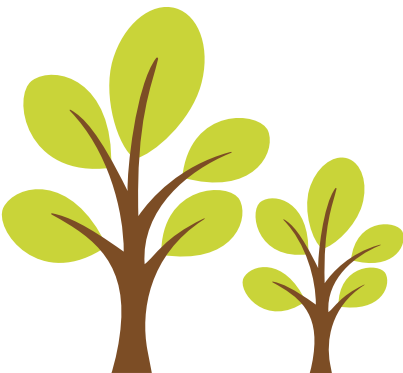
MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS (CONT'D)

Further Suggestions with Coronavirus Stress and Anxiety

All of the above resources can be extremely helpful. How you apply these resources and take other effective actions depends on life experiences, personality, home environment, and your support network. Know yourself and engage in ways that work for you and your loved ones. Here are some additional encouragements:

- **Stay Positive and Active:** On a daily basis, express gratitude for the positive things in your life. Share appreciation and positive energy with others (they will send it back to you and others). Engage in productive and creative activity (with others when possible).
- **Focus on Staying Connected:** Being socially distanced doesn't mean we have to be socially isolated. Call and connect via video with friends and family. Reconnect with people you have been out of touch with. Take this opportunity to increase your social connections.
- **Help Others:** We find distraction and purpose in helping others. Think about how you are currently making a difference in the lives of others. Find additional ways to help others.
- **Practice Self-Care:** It is essential that we practice self-care on a daily basis. That means paying attention to eating, hydration, sleeping, hygiene, and relationships. How we practice self-care is very individual. Think about what you need to be healthy and happy on a daily basis and in the long-term. Take personal renewal time for yourself every day.

"Smile, breathe, and go slowly" – Thich Nhat Hanh



COMBATING STIGMA AND RACISM DURING COVID-19 FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES:

By Chloe Kannan



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We must model acts of dignity, kindness, solidarity, and humanity during this time.

During this unpredictable time, there is a great deal of anxiety and stress, which can sometimes “lead to placing blame on others **perceived** to be associated with the outbreak,” says the [National Association of School Psychologists](#). Asian American and Pacific Islander groups are combatting racism related to COVID-19 in schools and colleges across the country. While the Coronavirus outbreak began initially in China, we need to share with children, in a developmentally appropriate manner, that we **cannot** connect this disease to a race or nationality. As parents and educators, we must help children identify their harmful behaviors and encourage them to stop. In times of stress, children look up to adults in terms of how to respond.

We must model acts of dignity, kindness, solidarity, and humanity during this time. In order to do so, we must help students understand that COVID-19 is not related to race, ethnicity, or nationality, and that individuals from Asian nations are not more likely to “catch” the virus than others. We have to ensure Asian communities are not being unfairly targeted in these times of stress. Instead, we should be taking a more proactive approach and modeling behaviors that can work to encourage ethics of care, compassion, and acceptance.



Here are a few useful strategies from the National Association of School Psychologists to help support your children in combatting COVID-19 racial stigma:

- **Model acceptance and compassion:** Children learn emotional responses from their parents and adult role models. Avoid negative statements about certain racial or ethnic groups. Instead, reach out to your neighbors and community members who feel they might be at risk because of their background, and work to support them.
- **Provide useful information:** We need to make sure we are providing accurate information about events, people, and reactions that is developmentally appropriate for our children. This is especially important when the media has negative statements about any specific group.
- **Avoid stereotyping people and countries:** Children can easily generalize negative statements to students. By focusing on nationality or ethnicity during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can create a culture of anger, prejudice, and mistrust. Support students in understanding their own prejudices, and be clear about your own biases.
- **Stop bullying immediately:** We need to make it clear that this behavior is unacceptable. We must speak with children about the reasons for the way they behaved and offer alternative ways for them to handle their anger or anxiety during this moment. Model stepping in when you hear or see discriminatory behaviors and explain why that particular action or statement was offensive.
- **Read books with your children or students that address prejudice, tolerance, or hate:** There are many age-appropriate books that can support students in exploring and thinking about these issues. It will also support them in better defining their feelings.

Reference: [Countering COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Stigma and Racism: Tips for Parents and Caregivers](#)

COVID-19 & QUARANTINE: MY EXPERIENCE

by Marcia Fervienza

It all started for me about two weeks ago. Even though I heard about Coronavirus here and there, it was just a distant conversation happening in the background for me. Until one day I got home from work, and my husband said we had to start stocking up for the crisis. "Crisis? Which crisis?", I asked. "The outbreak! It is serious. My company is preparing us to work from home for at least four weeks". "Get out of here," I thought. He is known for being anxious and controlling, so I chalked it up to just one of his usual over-the-top reactions to mild risks.

Then my teenager came back from school one day and announced that she was onboard with her dad. "The school is going to close, we will run out of food, and we have to prepare." I scoffed. She is also extremely anxious, just as her father. If they were catching anything, it was America's tendency to overreact to most things. I kept on with my life. I had a conference scheduled for mid-March. "You are very funny if you think you are going," my 16-year-old said. "I am going! I won a full scholarship to attend it! Unless they cancel, I will be there!"

And, in quick succession, everything seemed to happen at once. The school's shutdown was announced, there was no food or paper toilet in any supermarket, classes were moved online, restaurants, gyms, and casinos were ordered to close until further notice, and now we have a curfew of 8 pm. The situation keeps changing by the hour, and it only gets worse. So, they were right! The situation is serious!



Well, at least my husband didn't take my laid-back approach and did stock up on food and essentials. While I was mocking him, he was making all the right choices. Good for us! But now five people who barely see each other during any given week are stuck together 24/7 within a 4-bedroom home. How can we make that work out overnight?

It's been a struggle! Mentally, it is hard to feel caged and lose any personal contact with the outside world. Your routine is completely disrupted: you don't go to work anymore, you don't see others, you don't go for those regular self-care activities (gym, hair salon, mall, dine out, etc.) and you still have to stay productive. After all, this is not a vacation. You have to work remotely. But the kids are out of school, so for them, it is a vacation. Right? Wrong! They have assignments to do, and they know they have to stay up to date with schoolwork, but they want to go out and see their friends, as they are used to doing. They were hoping for school closures every day, remarking the risks of being exposed to the virus, but as the teenagers that they are, they never anticipated what school closure would bring along in its wake. They never thought their social life would be impacted. And, before more strict measures were taken by the government, such as the closure of restaurants and the curfew, parents were endorsing get-togethers in their houses as well.



COVID-19 & QUARANTINE: MY EXPERIENCE (CONT'D)

By Marcia Fervienza

This weekend, I had to go through an argument with my 16-year-old daughter, who wanted to attend a Saint Patrick's Day party at one of her friend's houses where 13 teenagers would meet. Wait, what? "You are not going!" And hell broke loose. She would be the only kid in her group not to attend this event because her parents were overreacting to the virus when all other parents were being reasonable. So, she was very concerned with virus transmission only within the school environment. Getting infected by her friends would never happen because they were outside of school?

This made no sense because, in truth, they wanted to have more time to sleep and more room to manage their schedule. She was not expecting that she would have to "give up on her life altogether" – her words – because of a virus.

And I, as a parent, have to deal with that. I have to deal with the drama, tears, stress, and so on, because there are clear directions to be followed that she can't understand, especially when everybody else is not following them.

But that is not all. There is also the 5-year-old who needs his daily level of activity to be able to have a good night of sleep. But how do you do that when everything is closed? We go out every day with his scooter and bike for some activity outside. It is healthy and necessary. But, after a certain point, he also starts complaining that he wants to see his friends.



Lastly, there is the 24-year-old who has to deal with her job requesting her to come over to sort through the mail because they claim that it is crucial to their business. (They deliver snacks at home, which are ordered through an app. How sorting through mail is crucial to this line of business is beyond me.) She also has a long-term boyfriend whom she obviously won't refrain from seeing during the quarantine, so we have to negotiate that as well, because every time she steps out of the house (or any of us do), everybody else is exposed.

If that is not enough, there is me. I can't find the motivation to do the most basic stuff – reading, writing, working... I feel caged in the middle of a war I haven't started and still have to deal with. But what am I complaining about? That is the nature of all wars.

In sum, the first few days were difficult, but now things seem to be quieting down. I reached out to other teen's parents in the neighborhood to ask them to please keep their kids at home and not allow gatherings or parties. If other kids are not doing it, mine will feel less frustrated about having to stay at home. My 24-year-old is working from home and trying to bring her boss to her senses that she shouldn't have to come in to sort through the mail. My husband is working from home. Everybody is kind of settled except me. I am still struggling. Other than going out for running and meditating, I am trying to stay up to date with work and school assignments. But it hasn't been easy.



Moving towards “Normalcy” - Tips for Managing a Schedule during COVID-19

By Lauren Wright

Creating a schedule for the family right now may not be possible with the many changes to daily life and responsibilities you are trying to manage - AND THAT IS OK! If this is true for you, do not read another line of this article, but know that you are not in this alone. Creating a schedule for the family is a luxury.

If you feel as though you are in an OK place to consider a schedule, then I encourage you to read on. The recommendations below can be pieced together to fit your needs and capacity. A schedule can be beneficial for the household, as it can create a sense of normalcy for children. A schedule can also help you manage the juggling of spaces in the household as well as resources such as computers and other devices, and it can help you and your children manage activities that are focused on being productive versus those that give your brains a break. Lastly, creating a schedule now can help you “set it and forget it”- imagine waking up, glancing at the schedule, and going about your day. Thanks past self.

Plan your weekly schedule as a family during a low-key time of day.

Make a plan when everyone is relaxed - after breakfast, after dinner, or during a walk outside together. Creating the schedule together will ensure your child is fully aware of what is expected of him or her. Ask your child if he or she has any questions, and give them an opportunity to negotiate the order of the activities. Again, you may need to share space and computer devices among several family members, so you will want to take this into account as well. While you're planning the schedule, consider non-academic activities and needs, including physical exercise, chores, creative time, and their emotional well-being. Integrate blocks of time into the day to include these. See the sample schedules below for some inspiration. If you have more than one child, you may also want to create individual schedules to decrease the need to share space and materials/devices and reduce the likelihood of disagreements.



Post the schedule where everyone can see it, and discuss how you will keep track of each block of time. Whether you have a chalkboard or whiteboard, family calendar, or a piece of paper and a magnet on the fridge, post the schedule where everyone can see it. Have one person be the designated timer for each block in the schedule. For ease of access, many phones have timers in the clock apps; however, a kitchen baking timer can also do the trick. Your child may become distracted by watching the time count down or the ticking, so it is best to keep the timer out of view.

Incorporate Breaks. The timer has gone off (again!) and you do not have time to redirect your child to the next activity. Create a short list in advance with no more than 3 different breaks that the child can pick from that day, and give them 5 minutes to enjoy that break-time activity. For example, they can do some deep breathing, a short spurt of exercises, doodle, or listen to music. If you have time to engage with your child during a break, you can select one of these brain break activities/games. Include these 5-minute breaks in the written schedule.

Moving towards “Normalcy” - Tips for Managing a Schedule during COVID-19 (Cont'd)

By Lauren Wright

Social time is essential. While it is best to eliminate screen distractions as much as possible, it is also important for your child to connect with their peers and even their teachers so that they do not feel isolated. Integrate dedicated family time into the day. Include time to talk about how your day went. Skype or call an elderly or sick family member together. Play a board game, or take a walk. You could even take turns picking activities.

Set boundaries now, and have a plan for when things go wrong. There will inevitably be disruptions, arguments, meltdowns - you will be with one another 24 hours a day! When you are creating your schedule, have each person write down 3 things that would help them get the physical, emotional, and/or mental space that they need. Some of these may not be possible given the situation. Acknowledge you hear the child's needs, and explain why this need may not be able to be met right now. Create a final list of agreed upon boundaries, and post them with the schedule as a visual reminder to everyone.

Interruptions will occur, and your children may try to test the limits of what they can and cannot get away with. Set clear expectations for behavior. Be firm and consistent. Not every person - or child - needs the same thing when they are feeling anxious or upset. You may need to incorporate more or different break time activities into the child's day or rearrange the order of activities, which is why it is essential to include time to reflect and make changes as needed. Consider meltdowns (your child's and your own) as signs that the schedule or boundaries may not be working. Ask yourself if the current schedule is practical and manageable in the long-term, and whether this is the best possible scenario based on the situation. Talk about establishing additional boundaries as a family. Even if you may not be feeling particularly stressed, your child may. Ensure that you check in with your other family members at least once during the first week, and make updates to the plan as necessary.



Voice your concerns. You may notice specific challenges to the school's requirements for at-home learning or e-learning. Your school's administrators may not be fully aware of your unique situation and the ways in which these expectations might be challenging for you and your child. You do not have to suffer in silence. Bring your concerns to the school's attention early so that updates can be made to the general requirements or to address your child's specific needs.

Schedule Inspiration.

Take a look at some examples of schedules from other families across the US:

[Example 1](#)

[Example 2](#)

[Example 3](#)

[Example 4](#)

[Example 5](#)



Staying Mentally Healthy in a Crowded House

BY KEHAN BAO (ANNA)

During this crazy time, coronavirus is spreading among communities in the US. Gatherings like sporting events, concerts, and festivals are canceled, and parks, bars, and restaurants are also closed. People are encouraged to practice social distancing, and those who have been exposed to the virus need to self-quarantine for at least 14 days.

Before the outbreak of coronavirus, many parents worked and children attended schools during the day. The evening was the precious family time when everybody enjoyed the warmth of each other and shared their joys.

However, when people are practicing social distancing and staying at home almost 24/7, excessive family time can trigger boredom and conflicts. Here are some tips for managing family relationships during this special period:

1. Give each other space. Families can stay in their separate rooms and do whatever they want. Don't try to stalk each other.

2. Be explicit about how each member wants to spend time together and how much time he or she wants to spend.

3. Create family rules that state clearly how your family wants to look after and treat its members.

4. Have a personal schedule. Each person writes down a personal agenda and follows the plan to keep oneself busy.

5. Have hobbies. Families can entertain themselves even though they are not around each other. It is also essential to take an interest in each other's hobbies and praise each other's works (e.g., painting, drawing, gardening).

6. Specify family time. Families agree upon what periods should be spent together (e.g., dinner-making time, afternoon tea-time, TV time, game time), and everyone should show up for these periods. Everybody needs to be included in the events and conversations.

7. Assign and share household chores. Every chore is a "mission" to complete every day.

8. Be creative in the ways you have fun together. For example, a dining table can be transformed into a ping-pong table.

9. Have one-on-one chats with each family member to strengthen individual relationships. Each talk can be only 5 minutes.

10. Be open about feelings. Families can support each other in managing anxiety during this particular time. Moreover, feelings toward each other should be explicit as well.

11. Show appreciation, love, and encouragement through words and affection. This can be as simple as saying, "I love you."

12. Include children in decisions about things like going to supermarkets and food choices.

13. Share family stories and memories. These can help members appreciate things that aren't obvious, or that they've forgotten.

14. If there's a member with mental/physical illnesses in the family, families should unite in order to combat the stressors associated with the illnesses instead of blaming the family member who has exceptional circumstance

Ways to Boost Our Immune System

BY KUAN-I (LESTER) WU

How can we strengthen our immune system and protect our well-being during the outbreak of COVID-19? Our immune system defends us against disease-causing germs. Science shows that the forefront of defense is a healthy lifestyle. Making healthy choices isn't always easy; however, a healthy lifestyle can protect us throughout this difficult time. Besides avoiding the infection by wearing masks in public, washing hands frequently, and maintaining social distance, the efforts below will pay off in many ways, and have benefits for the rest of your life.

- **Don't smoke.** The impact of smoking cigarette and substances on the immune system include:
 - Higher vulnerability to infections such as pneumonia and influenza
 - More severe and longer-lasting illnesses
 - Lower degrees of protective antioxidants (such as vitamin C) in the blood.[UCSF's Tobacco Education Center](#) offers smoking cessation and relapse prevention classes.
- **Eat healthy.** Scientists have discovered that people who are malnourished are more likely to get infected with influenza. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are good sources of protective antioxidants. Certain foods can be helpful for boosting the immune system and preventing colds and the flu. Here are three types of nutrients that boost our immune systems and details about which foods to find them in:
 - Vitamin C: It acts as an antioxidant that helps protect our immune system from harmful molecules. Vitamin C is helpful in raising the immune systems of people under stress. The following foods provide us with good Vitamin C intake:
 - citrus fruits
 - red and green peppers
 - strawberries
 - Vitamin E: Like vitamin C, vitamin E is a powerful antioxidant, especially among older people. Foods that contain ample vitamin E are:
 - almonds
 - sunflower seeds
 - peanut butter
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular exercise is essential to healthy living. Similar to a healthy diet, exercise can contribute to good health and thus to a strengthened immune system. It may also lead to improved circulation. Healthy exercise may include walking, sports, dancing, yoga, running or other activities you enjoy. Be physically active for 30 minutes at least three days a week. Break this up into three 10-minute sessions when pressed for time.
- **Drink in moderation.** Scholars have found a solid link between alcohol consumption and negative immune-related health effects such as susceptibility to pneumonia.
- **Get adequate sleep.** Our body becomes stressed when we lack sleep. Science has shown that people who sleep fewer hours are more susceptible to infections. It is thought that a lack of sleep impacts our cells' ability to generate protein while we are sleeping, which helps repair the damage caused by germs invading our bodies.
- **Try to minimize stress.** A wide variety of maladies, including infectious disease, have been highly correlated with chronic stress.

"He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything"

Arabian Proverb

