



Cognitive Behavior Associates is now offering tele-psychotherapy services during this difficult time. Please call (310) 858-3831 to schedule an appointment.

## Helping Your Children Understand and Cope with COVID-19

### **A Message from our Director of Children & Adolescent Services: Flora Zaken-Greenberg, Ph.D.**

As we all know, a new type of Coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing an outbreak of flu-like and respiratory symptoms. Many of us have had our lives turned upside down, such as school closings, possibly where we work closing, financial hits, restricted activities that we always took for granted, and less access to groceries and other items that we did not really have to think about before. While we struggle to make sense of this and figure out what will be best for our families, our children are looking to us for guidance. If we are stressed and anxious, their anxiety will increase. Even if we are calm, their world is currently upside down, causing stress and anxiety.

It is very important to be honest with your children at a level that they can understand. Even young children need some real life explanation for what is happening and reassurance that they and their family are safe. Many parents may find this easier said than done. Here are some guidelines you can follow and adapt for your children.

#### **Be honest about what is happening:**

Explain to your children that there is a contagious virus and everyone is working very hard to make sure as few people as possible get sick. Help them understand that a virus, like a cold, jumps from person to person and the best way to prevent this virus from spreading, is to leave home as little as possible.

For those children who are now doing school remotely, this will make sense. Let the children know that we still go out, like to the grocery store, the pharmacy, getting gas in our car, but we are not going to big events like birthday parties. It is the best way to stop the virus from spreading.

That being said, children, like adults, get restless and do need to get out. Go for a walk, go to the park and play, go for a drive, play in your back yard if you have one.

Let your children know that if any of you get sick, your family Doctor will help you and like other times you are sick, you will rest, drink plenty of fluids, and maybe take some medication. Most children can relate to this.

Tell your child that not everyone will get sick, but there are things we need to do to stay healthy and limit the spread of the virus.

- We stay home when we are sick
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze with your elbow or with a tissue. Remind them to throw the tissue in the trash and then wash their hands.
- Try really hard to not touch your eyes, nose or mouth because that is how the virus spreads.
- Wash your hands with soap and water every time you leave the house and return.
- Wash your hands several times a day and use hand sanitizer if you have it.
- Have your children help clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces so they can feel some control and empowerment. Talk with your child and answer their questions:

Keep your explanations and answers age appropriate. Grade school age children need simple and concrete information. This is a virus that makes people sick and spreads from person to person. If their school is open, reassure them that they are safe. If their school is closed or by remote, let them know it will not be this way forever. Tell them that home is safe and the adults know what to do to keep them safe and healthy, but will take care of them if they get sick.

Middle school age children will have more in depth questions and concerns. As with grade school age children, be direct and honest and reassuring that the adults in their family are able and ready to take care of them. Help them balance the rumors or stories they hear from anxious friends with facts. The facts are that we know what is happening and we know what to do. We need to stay clean, not touch people outside the family, wash our hands a lot and wash surfaces we touch a lot.

High school age children are able to discuss this issue in much more depth, and the older your teen, the more in depth and adult the conversation. Give them the facts, read the current information with your teen and reassure them that their family is on this and knows what to do. The more your teen knows, the greater the sense of control they will feel.

#### **Review and model healthy lifestyle practices for protection:**

Be direct with giving your child guidance on what they can do to prevent infection. This will give them a greater sense of control regarding the virus and help reduce their anxiety. Encourage your child to stay healthy with eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly. Explain to them that this will help them develop a strong immune system that will fight off illness. You can even practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes or knuckle bumps. Explain that this will spread less germs. Make it fun!

**Share the symptoms of COVID-19 with your child:**

Tell your child the symptoms so they don't worry about every change or feeling in their body. Let them know they might have a fever, cough, and it may feel hard to breathe, just like when they have had a bad cold in the past. Let them know that you will take care of them, and medical help is available if they need more than rest and fluids. Explain that the adults and the children in the family are a team and will help each other, which is why everyone needs to know what the symptoms are.

**Maintain as normal a routine as you can and monitor TV time and social media:**

Make a regular routine and schedule, even if it is different than your normal routine. Help your children stay on top of school, but be sure to not over stress them and set up breaks and make it fun. Engage your child and family in games such as board games, verbal games, card games, math games, spelling games (have your own spelling bee), and art projects. Do not watch the news all day. The unrelenting news will be very stressful for children and will feed their fear. Let them know that you will watch enough to stay aware of what is happening, and make sure there is time to watch something that they enjoy. Share the new information in a way that is safe, such as letting them know if they and the family have to change something to be safe, you will do it together and everything will be fine.

**Be available and calm:**

Spend some extra time with your children. They may need to talk about their fears and concerns and let them know it is normal to be uncomfortable when everything is different. Also let them know that the people who love them are the same. Hugs and tickles are also very therapeutic for very young children. Hugs are good for children of all ages and we do not want to teach our children to be afraid of human touch and contact. Let them know that not touching people outside the family is temporary. Take this opportunity to spend extra time with your children and learn more about them and their view on life and the world and share your views as well. While none of us like this and there are many stresses we have to contend with, a loving and emotionally open home will give your child a foundation of strength and healthy coping skills.

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Cognitive Behavior Associates (CBA) is one of the largest clinical practices in the Los Angeles area offering short-term, problem-focused therapy from a cognitive-behavioral perspective.

All of our treatments are based on scientific research, and we continually measure and quantify progress for each client so we know when therapy is working. Each of our clinicians differs in areas of expertise and interest, and these factors are taken into account when matching a client with a clinician.

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