



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Strategies for Families to Adapt to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be very challenging for your family. You have been forced to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, make difficult choices, and deal with disruptions at home, at work, and in your community. It is not always easy, but there are strategies you can use to cope and build resilience. With these five building blocks, your family can better adapt:

1. Increase sense of safety
2. Increase calming
3. Connect with each other
4. Build personal and family competence
5. Foster hope

How to Use Strategy Building Blocks

You can modify these building blocks based on the age of children in your home, your job, or other demands. Using the blocks as a guide can help you create your own ways to attend to the health of your family and adapt to your new circumstances. These strategies can also be adjusted depending on your level of stress.

For instance, if someone becomes ill, or if there are safety concerns within the home, focus on gaining resources to improve your family members' safety and ability to endure, such as making safety plans. If you experience a loss, find creative ways to honor the loss or help children to express their feelings. Do your best to support children and help them make sense of the loss. Finally, gather telehealth resources or hotlines that you can access if anyone is having a particularly hard time.

Pick some of the following strategies within each of the five building blocks or develop your own to help you and your family navigate together through the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Increase sense of safety

When families don't feel safe, everyday problems can seem overwhelming. The ever-changing nature of the pandemic can make you feel even more threatened. You can increase your sense of safety by keeping up-to-date on information that can help you stay safe and sharing that information with your family. Focus on actions that are in your control, such as physical distancing and hand washing. It is also helpful to share consistent safety messages, such as:

- We are keeping apart from people outside our home because that is a way to stay safe."
- "We are keeping apart to help other people not get the virus."
- "We will get through this together."
- "If one of us gets sick, we will do what we need to do to care for each other."

2. Increase Calming

The COVID-19 pandemic may be stressful for everyone in the family. Consider reducing activities that could potentially trigger anxiety—such as watching the news—even if you don't think children are paying attention. Talk with your family about how there will be times when each of you may not be at your best, and that it is important to try to be patient, tolerant, and kind with each other.

Help children manage difficult emotions. Let them know that feelings such as sadness, anxiety, and fear are understandable and that it's okay to talk about them. Offer simple calming strategies, such as showing empathy, talking through concerns, taking short breaks, labeling feelings, and focusing on breathing.

Do your best to be disciplined about making family unity and harmony one of your priorities. Keep to a routine. Structure can be calming because it helps younger children know what to expect. Consider scheduling into your day:

- Fun activities that you do together, such as reading aloud, playing board games, listening to music, singing, dancing, or planning scavenger hunts
- Creative activities such as drawing, crafts, writing journal entries, creating books, conducting video interviews
- Online activities such as a virtual museum tour or vacation, online learning, or online games
- Exercising together, such as family yoga, table tennis, or indoor fitness games. If it is feasible to go outside, take a family walk or bike ride, but be sure to maintain physical distance from others.

3. Connect with each other

"Apart But Connected". This simple ABC message communicates that families may have to be physically apart, but they can still stay connected. Dedicate time to connect regularly with loved ones within and outside your immediate family by video, phone, text, or notes. Include family members who don't live in your home to make the circle wider. If you are separated within your residence, you could also use video messaging, walkie-talkies, communicating through a window, or passing notes or pictures.

This can be a time to discover new things about one another and other family members, like grandparents (e.g., "What's one thing I don't know about you?"). Tell children positive, fun, or meaningful stories from your past. Find new and creative ways to express your love, like notes or drawings.

You can also create new family rituals that promote connection. Do something together that helps someone else, like helping neighbors with tasks that can allow you to maintain physical distancing, such as yard work. Start a family project or family board game, teach children a craft or skill, or have them teach you something they are learning in school. Ask your children what they would like to do and schedule it into your time together.

4. Build personal and family competence

Talk about and develop skills. There are many ways to build competence. You can talk about and develop skills that can help you get through your current challenges. For instance, involve the family in a problem-solving approach to challenges, where you talk through problems; break them down into smaller chunks; brainstorm creative solutions together; negotiate the solutions that will work best for everyone; and take small, steady steps towards your goals.

Role-model competence. Demonstrating patience, forgiveness, and tolerance with yourself will show your children how to do the same. Just being your best self—whatever that best self is in that moment—will inspire others. As you strive to do your best remember to keep your expectations realistic.

Highlight growth by documenting the lessons you learn. Create a video diary, scrapbook, or piece of art together about what is happening and what you are learning from it. You can also document what you have learned from the positive things you've seen others doing.

Whatever you choose to do, competence can be fostered by organizing your actions, discussions, and activities around the following messages:

1. "We have the ability to get through this."
2. "We can tackle problems together."
3. "When times are tough, we may have to take smaller steps, but we will keep moving forward."
4. "We do not always have to be perfect and can be patient with ourselves when we are not."

5. Foster Hope

Most of us will feel discouraged during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those who have suffered significant losses. Focusing on the ways you and your family are safe or strong can help to foster hope. You can also discuss positive things that you see others doing, ways in which you believe that the situation will become better with time, or ways in which you are grateful. Ask others in your life to share how they have maintained hope or seen things from a more hopeful perspective. Highlight that people around the world are working hard to help everyone get through this.

Try to find creative ways to promote hopeful messages or highlight things you're grateful for. For instance:

- Put pebbles or notes in a jar every time you want to mark a good thing that happened.
- Have family members share their favorite things about each other.
- Make a list of what you're grateful for, what your resources are, or what makes you smile or laugh.
- Make a book or artwork to share your gratitude, hopeful messages, or meaningful thoughts.

Many people turn to their values or beliefs as a way to make meaning or raise hope in a difficult time. For some, that might mean finding ways to help others. Others who have faith in a higher power spend more time in activities that foster those beliefs, like prayer, meditation, reading, or reflection.

Summary

The strategies you choose from this list or develop on your own can make a difference in maintaining your family's hope, ability to endure, connectedness, ability to remain calm, and safety. They may even become healthy habits that keep your family strong through other times in your life together. Remember that as you practice these actions, you don't need to be perfect or steady at all times. Do your best, be kind to yourself, and remember that anything you do to role model these types of strategies will help your children as adults and caregivers themselves.