

Factsheet Two: Keeping connected



To help support you during COVID-19, we have created a series of factsheets, designed to offer some support and strategies, whatever your situation, and are based on what we know about people's responses to traumatic events and what can help.

Being safe emotionally and physically is the basic need all humans have. It is often something we take for granted.

Living with COVID-19 has forced us all into a situation previously unimaginable. The safety in our lives we had previously taken for granted has gone and for many of us already living with fear and uncertainty this pandemic has only increased the sense of vulnerability. The situation may have highlighted difficult living arrangements that were just about sustainable before, but with the enforcement of lockdown, the stress of living as a carer (to elderly parents or sick children) or being dependant on someone else (due to illness or lack of finances) will have increased the lack of personal safety. Families used to being at work and children used to being in school face huge challenges suddenly being stuck together without the normal routines of daily life. With the schools shut we are also suddenly thrust into a world where we are expected to become teachers and maybe even support our children with subjects we know nothing about. Social distancing means outside access is limited and unless we are lucky enough to have gardens our children are stuck indoors with conflicting wants and needs.

The aim of these factsheets is to give you some strategies to look after your children by looking after yourself. If you have ever flown on a plane, you may remember the air steward safety briefing – 'in the event of loss of oxygen, a mask will drop down in front of you. PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON first before helping others'. In effect if you don't you will pass out before you can help anyone else. It's the same in this crisis, to help your children you need to be able to look after your own emotional health and safety first.

We know that 'being connected' is really important for our mental health and wellbeing. Having close, positive relationships can give us a purpose and sense of belonging. During this lockdown many of the ways we are usually connected to people, friends family, work colleagues, school chums have been radically impacted.

What we do have opportunity to do is look at how we communicate and interact with those closest to us, particularly our children. This factsheet is about our connections and some simple suggestions to enhance them.

But first what we know - It is difficult to be the emotionally connected adult when you are scared yourself.

As a first step, consider how do you feel:

Scared

Tired

Irritable

Unreal

Tearful

Panicked

Angry

Do you feel some of these emotions? All of these? Maybe lots of others – just to reassure you that these are normal and to be expected responses in such a difficult time.

These emotions can feel overwhelming so having some immediate strategies can be helpful. These powerful emotions can trigger the flight/fight or freeze response and escalate with worrying thoughts running in a loop in our heads.

It is impossible to support our children to manage their strong emotions (which we call emotional regulation) if we cannot manage our own emotions.

Grounding techniques can be helpful to stop this.

Grounding techniques often use the five senses—sound, touch, smell, taste, and sight—to immediately connect you with the here and now. This produces sensations that are difficult to ignore and can distract you from what's going on in your mind.

Some suggested grounding techniques are:

- Eat or drink something. Is it hot or cold? Sweet or sour?
- Use your voice: Say your name or pick up a book and read the first paragraph you find out loud.
- Take a shower or bath. Notice the sensation of the water.
- Trace your hands against the physical outline of your body. Experience your own presence in the world.
- Call a friend and have a chat
- Meditate, if that's OK for you. Otherwise use distractions like television or music to help settle down.
- Take a look outside. Count the number of trees and street signs.
- Look at yourself in the mirror. Smile, even if it's the last thing you feel like doing. How does it feel? What can you see? (If negative thoughts come to mind, write them down to look at later but let them go for now. You're anxious enough as it is).
- Write down what's going on. Keep writing until you notice it making a difference. It will help release some of your anxious feelings.
- Hold on to something comforting. Maybe a blanket or a soft toy.

Once you've found which techniques help, make a list to put on your wall, or to carry around in your pocket.

Think of some of your own.

One thing to think about during this time is the way you and your child/ren are attached (and therefore connect) to each other. We are using the term here to refer to the attachment theory of a man called John Bowlby who first described it.

Bowlby suggested that a child would initially form only one primary attachment) and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. Have a look at the video which explains the different sorts of attachments we make as children:

https://youtu.be/WjOowWxOXCg_

Attachment can be described as: 'A deep and enduring bond that connects one person to another across time and space'.

Attachment:

- Is a basic human need
- Provides a sense of predictability, safety, security and protection
- Serves as the foundation for care, comfort, stimulation and interaction

During this stressful time it is important that we feel attached to our children and they feel attached to us.

Activities to help to help promote attachment

Play hide and seek

Paint each others faces with paint, powder, make up or just pretend

Play a memory game with a personal touch. First have your child look you over very carefully. Then leave the room and return after you've made a change to yourself. See if he / she can figure out what is different

Engage in an 'M&M' hockey match. Use bendy straws and blow M&Ms across the table to the other person's goal. When one of you scores a goal, the opponent feeds that person an M&M

Play catch! Roll a ball back and forth to teach reciprocity. Throwing or batting a balloon back and forth may be easier than throwing a ball for little ones

Use emojis to identify how we feel and how we would like to feel and share things together about what contributes to these feelings

Play board games / jigsaws

Eat at a table together without mobile phones

Piggy-Back Rides can help to strengthen parent-child relationships and repair or enhance attachment because they involve fun and physical closeness

Lotion Massage - Using lotion to massage a child's hands or feet can enhance attachment and strengthen a parent-child relationship. The massage can relax a person's physical body by reducing tension and bringing the brain into a less defensive state

Brushing Hair - Sometimes children can be fussy about getting their hair brushed, especially if they have experienced pain from well-meaning parents brushing their hair too hard. However, allowing a child to gently brush their parents hair and having a parent gently brush their hair can be an activity that can promote connection. This can be a calming activity that includes a sense of nurturing which connects to a person's internal experience of attachment and bonding.

If you are thinking of getting your teenage children involved in activities and they are reluctant see if they will watch this animation with you to stimulate conversations about why doing stuff is important:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0O1u50Ec5eY>

Protective factors

Protective factors are what helps us as adults and children develop the resilience or bounce back we need when facing adversity, as we are under the lockdown situation.

One thing children need is for parents to be resilient and supportive to them at this time. One of the ways we can demonstrate this is to make time for them to talk about what is happening but also to show that we can resolve difficulties – seeing that parents can problem solve is a protective factor in itself. It's important to focus on solutions rather than problems. Focus on the difficulties you can manage rather than those you can't. For example, you can't know when the lockdown will end but you can resolve how the house chores are divided up. This is good for both you and your child/ren.

Stick to routines as much as possible; this can promote feeling of safety and increase trust in parents. Slipping from the routines some days and just watching TV together in your pyjamas can be healing and bonding, but not getting dressed regularly will not be helpful.

Encouraging them to stay connected to friends via social media is good although you may need to monitor how much time they are spending doing this and make sure it is not raising their anxieties about what is happening. Set up 'Facetime' with relatives if you can or create 'Whatsapp groups'. This helps the children and you feel connected and still part of a community. If they are old enough let them join in the doorstep clap for front line professionals (8pm Thursday) as again it will give them that sense of connectedness.

It's also really important to understand what knowledge and information they can emotionally cope with and also consider our own levels of tolerance to the daily news about COVID-19.

If you find yourself constantly checking the news or radio or twitter etc on the latest in COVID-19 it is worth thinking about limiting this to prevent increasing your or your family's anxiety levels.

It's also important to consider the age appropriateness of children listening to adult news programmes that might be alarming for them. Try and find age appropriate stations like CBBC Newsround rather than expose them to information they are too young to understand and will only frighten them.

Finally here is a video that you can watch with your children if they or you are worried about the stress they are under:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxIDKZHw3-E>