Hey Parents! Feeling Weird? That’s Because You’re Normal!

Everyone has had their lives turned upside down in the last 2-3 months and we are all living in a time of uncertainty. Things change often day to day, and sometimes hour to hour! The pandemic has brought changes to how you live your life, it has altered daily routines, caused financial pressures, made homeschooling a necessity, and has forced us into social isolation. You may worry about getting sick, how long the pandemic will last, or what the future will bring. Information overload, rumors, misinformation, and the rapid changes can make your life feel out of control. In addition, just when everything and everyone seemed to be adjusted to a new “normal” things are changing again! During this pandemic, you may experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and loneliness; that’s a typical reaction to a traumatic event, which is exactly what this pandemic is. But you aren’t alone. The good news is, there are things you can do to help yourself and make it through this. And we are here to help YOU and your family during these trying times. We hope that you find this to be a useful resource for you and your family. And if you still have questions, or need more information or help, please don’t hesitate to reach out to one of the providers listed on the back of this pamphlet. Mental health providers specialize in working with individuals experiencing stress and trauma!

Impact on Kids

With caregivers becoming increasingly anxious about COVID-19, the impact on the economy, work, school, summer plans, family life, and the transition back to “normal,” it’s inevitable that the children in our lives are noticing the tension and experiencing it in some form too.

Within the human body, we all have nervous systems, which are responsible for managing stress. The nervous systems of parents, educators, and every other adult that our children interact with are being activated. This acts as a warning system to our children, who’s own systems become activated as a result. It’s like a sixth sense and it’s a natural defense mechanism: if people in charge seem scared, it only makes sense as a child to be concerned too.

While we cannot change the transmission of anxiety to the children around us (our kids are smart!), we can help them relieve it in several ways. Check inside for some information on what signs and symptoms to look for, family activities, and ways that you can help your child get through these uncertain times.

“Step with care and great tact, and remember that life’s a great balancing act.”
- Dr. Seuss; Oh the Places You Will Go
Signs and Symptoms to Look For

Anxiety looks different in every child, but here are some common signs. Keep in mind that this list is not exclusive; children express anxiety in all sorts of different ways:

- Reassurance-seeking (Are we going to be okay? Is Grandpa going to be okay?)
- Excessive questioning (Where did it come from? Why is it here? Is it in Disney?)
- Reluctance to separate from parents; excessive clinginess
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Moodiness and irritability
- Tantrums or meltdowns
- Trouble sleeping
- Reluctance or refusal of previously enjoyed activities when offered (i.e. playing with friends, going to the park)

Pro Tip: Taking deep breathes has all kinds of great benefits! When you take a deep breath, try to breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold it in your belly for 7 seconds, and breathe out through your mouth for 8 seconds. Practice with bubbles! How big can you make a bubble while practicing this type of breathing?

Five Quick Tips for Managing Anxiety in Children

1. Manage Your Own Nervous System: Do what you can to support your own well-being and manage your own fears. Remember that intentionally slowing down your breath, and feeling your feet on the ground, can go a long way towards calming the nervous system. Check out the next page for some additional activities that you can try with your kids to help relax!

2. Be Honest But Not An Alarmist: Kids hear their grownups talking and see their worry, and if we are secretive on top of all that, they are left to manage their fears alone. It’s important that we share what is happening with children (keep it simple!) and give them time to ask questions.

3. Teach Kids What They Can Do: Being able to take action in a situation that feels threatening is usually very helpful. You’ve undoubtably heard all the recommendations to wash hands frequently and are likely telling your kids to do so. Making the direct connection for them that every time they do a good handwash, they are not only helping themselves, but others as well, can make things feel a little less out of control.

4. Reassure Them the Grownups Are On It: Tell children explicitly that some of the smartest and most educated doctors and scientists in the world are working to learn more about this virus every day, that you are paying attention to what is happening and that you’ll talk with them about any new developments. For many kids, this kind of direct language allows them to in effect outsource their worries to you. If the person in charge is on it and honest, then they don’t have to keep trying to figure it out.

5. Reduce Anxiety with Exercise and Fresh Air: Often children’s anxiety needs to be addressed from the body up, and one of the quickest ways to change the biology of anxiety in our bodies is with outdoor exercise. Take advantage of the summer weather and get your kids walking or running outside, onto bikes and scooters, on hiking trails, and anything else that is accessible to you. Do it as a family and you’ll reduce your own anxiety as well!
The Great BIG List of Coping Skills

What’s a coping skill? It’s something that you can do to help you feel better if you are worried, scared, sad, or are having bad thoughts. Here’s a list of over 50 different things you can do with your children! Can your child think of other coping skills that we forgot?

- Sing a favorite song
- Take a walk
- Blow bubbles
- Play a game
- Hug a pet or stuffed animal
- Talk to a parent or a friend
- Play outside
- Write in a journal
- Make slime
- Clean your room
- Plant a seed and take care of it
- Play with Play Doh
- Put worries into a worry stone
- Draw a picture of how you feel
- Watch a funny YouTube video
- Go on a picnic
- Practice yoga
- Read a book
- Make/squeeze a stress ball
- Paint a picture
- Take some deep breathes
- Write a story or poem
- Do a random act of kindness
- Take a bath or a shower
- Create an arts and crafts project
- Color a picture
- Learn some new jokes
- Ride your bike
- Make a list of places you want to visit
- Take a nap
- Make a scavenger hunt
- Watch TV
- Make up a “show” and perform for your family
- Watch a funny movie
- Do a puzzle
- Make a card for a family member
- Fly a kite
- Say a prayer
- Play a musical instrument
- Dance
- Knit, crochet, or sew
- Write a letter
- Make a list of your positive qualities
- Play a sport
- Go birdwatching

Pro Tip: Make a worry stone! Pick out a pebble and decorate it with paints, stickers, and designs. When you are worried or nervous, rub your pebble in your hands and send all the bad thoughts into the pebble to stay.

- Learn a new skill (blowing a bubble, whistling, snapping fingers)
- Use a “worry stone”
- Swing on a swing set
- Write down your favorite song lyrics
- Bake or cook
- Do a science experiment
- Make a time capsule
- Try a “grounding” exercise (see back)
- Visit with a loved one
- Exercise
- Go swimming
Pro Tip: "Grounding" techniques are a great way to re-center yourself. Take a moment and try to sit in silence. Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Pause and focus on each one for a moment.

It’s Time to Color!

Coloring is good for the soul! It exercises the brain and is a great coping skill that can be used by people of all ages. Break out the crayons and markers and get to coloring! Can you do it cooperatively? Take turns with family members coloring a portion of the image!

Need More Help?

We are living in difficult times right now and sometimes it helps just to have someone to talk to. If you feel that you or your child would benefit from talking with a professional, here are some local resources! Help is only a phone call away.

Dickinson Center, Inc.
Ridgway, St. Mary’s and Coudersport locations
814-776-2145

CAPSEA
Ridgway
814-772-3838

Cen-Clear Child Services
St. Mary’s (and other locations within the state)
814-834-9283

Elk County Crisis Hotline
1-800-652-0562