

# Helping Children and Young People to Cope During COVID-19

We are experiencing a very unusual situation with uncertainties about how the future will look. During these difficult times we will all be experiencing a range of emotions. Some of these will be quite strong and may last for a while, or they may come and go. The key thing to remember is that these feelings are normal in times of difficulty. In such situations children and young people may have the following psychological responses (Psychological First Aid, NES, 2020):

## **4 – 6 years of age:**

- Start clinging to parents or other adults
- Regress to younger behaviour such as thumb-sucking
- Stop talking
- Become inactive or hyperactive, and struggle to concentrate
- Feel irritable
- Stop playing, or start playing repetitive games
- Feel anxious and worry that bad things are going to happen
- Changes in their sleep and eating patterns, including nightmares
- At times take on adult roles
- Become easily confused
- May misunderstand what has happened and 'fill in the blanks'

## **7 – 12 years of age:**

- Feel and behave confused
- Withdraw from social contact
- Talk about the event in a repetitive manner
- Feel and express fear
- Memory, concentration and attention impaired
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Show aggression, irritability or restlessness
- Experience physical symptoms related to emotional stress
- Concerned about other affected people
- Experience self-blame and guilt feelings

## **13 – 18 years of age:**

- Excessive concern for other affected persons
- Change in outlook – major shifts in their view of the world, accompanied by a sense of hopelessness about the present and the future
- Self-absorbed and self-pity
- Intense grieving
- Changes in their relationships with other people
- Become defiant of authorities and parents
- Risk-taking and self-destructive behaviour
- Avoidant or aggressive behaviour

The following ideas may help all family members deal with feelings of anxiety and/or low mood during the current situation.

### **Daily Structure**

- Have a morning routine – get up at the same time, get washed and dressed into 'day' clothes and leave the bedroom.
- Have an afternoon routine – choose a time for lunch and regular breaks.
- Have an evening routine – choose a time for dinner, catch up on regular TV shows, video message a friend. Try to go to bed at around the same time every day (maybe later at weekends).
- For children and young people, school will have provided information and support about learning activities and may have also given suggestions about how to develop a timetable. Many celebrities and local businesses are offering free classes and activities online. These may help to give some structure to the day, especially if they are on regularly.

### **Basic wellbeing factors**

- Our body clocks like when we do the same things at a similar time every day, such as eating meals, going to bed at night and getting up in the morning. It is important to try to do this, even when our daily activities are different.
- We should try to have some form of basic exercise every day, choosing something enjoyable (e.g. walking), and do it for as long as you can to experience the benefit from it (and that is allowable while we are in lockdown).
- If sitting a lot at home, it is important to get up regularly and move around.
- Parents/carers should model self-care so that children see examples of how they should be looking after themselves.

### **Social activity**

- Connecting with others is important whilst social distancing measures are in place, and peer relationships are particularly important for most young people. It is therefore important to help teenagers in the home maintain safe connections with their social networks.
- Some young people may struggle to engage with social interactions through social media and video platforms so consider arranging a structured activity to help ease them in to the interaction, and give them a focus. Popular activities at the moment include on-line quizzes, Netflix streaming parties, and age-appropriate gaming.
- Not everyone will have access to technology so, for those who have limited IT options, consider being creative and writing letters to encourage social interaction.
- Remember that for teenagers the opportunities for them to be increasingly independent have been taken away from them, so it is important to provide space and privacy at home where this is possible.
- Feelings of anxiety will have an impact on productivity, focus and interest levels, so reduced interest in socialising and difficulty focusing on work shouldn't necessarily give reason to be overly concerned.

## **Coping with Feelings of Anxiety**

Anxiety is our body's natural reaction to perceived danger, focusing our attention and giving us a rush of adrenaline to react, sometimes called the "fight or flight" response. Due to the many changes in our lives due to coronavirus many of us may feel anxious or stressed. It is important to remember that it is OK to feel this way and that everyone reacts differently. This situation is temporary and for most of us, these difficult feelings will pass.

The first step in coping with feelings of anxiety is to make sure you or the person you are concerned about is doing the things above, i.e. following a daily routine, sleeping well, exercising and having some social contact. These [NHS tips to help](#) if you are worried about the virus are also good starting points. For young people, this article from Young Minds about '[What to do if you're anxious about coronavirus](#)' will be useful. If worries and anxiety persist, some of these tips will help:

- **Sleep** can be difficult when we're anxious. In addition to the [usual advice](#) about sleep routines, make space for a 15 – 30 min routine before sleep which includes a combination of muscle relaxation, [deep breathing](#) and gratitude. Writing down [3 things](#) that went well that day and why they went well helps to train our minds to focus on more positive events.
- It is easy to feel **overwhelmed** with everything going on and it is important to focus on what we can do, not on the things that are out of our control. This [guide](#) for young people from *Living Life to the Full* helps us to focus on **what we can control**.
- However you or the person you are concerned about is feeling, one of the most important things we can do is to **talk about our worries**. Little ones might find it difficult to understand what is going on. This [Children's Guide to the Coronavirus](#) from the Children's Commissioner and [free information book](#) illustrated by Gruffalo illustrator Axel Scheffler, help you to explain and discuss the virus with your loved ones. [Dave the Dog is Worried about Coronavirus](#) is another free downloadable book, which could be used to provide practical advice and reassurance for younger children.
- If you need to talk to someone, there are also a range of [helplines](#) available including Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87. Alternatively, there is a text messaging service available from [Shout](#) who offer 24/7 support to people in crisis. Text 'Shout' to 85258 to access the service.
- A great way to reduce our own feelings of anxiety and worry can be to **help someone else**. We naturally want to help others, particularly at a time like this, so tapping into that motivation can help us as well as others. [Ready Scotland](#) have ways to volunteer and safely help others
- When actually feeling anxious, there are a range of strategies you can use yourself or with your child to reduce those feelings. These usually involve simple techniques to take our mind away from any worrying thoughts and feelings, and focus instead on the 'here and now'; our breath, what we can see and hear, how our feet feel on

the ground. Pooky Knightsmith, a mental health adviser has a number of really helpful, practical [YouTube videos](#) and also a couple of [free programmes](#) that adults or young people can work through. Several audio guides are also available on the [NHS website](#). These include help with low mood & depression, anxiety, sleep problems, low confidence & assertiveness, and unhelpful thinking.

- If you have a young person in your household who is feeling particularly distressed, they may find the [MindSET Livestream](#) sessions from the charity, Body and Soul, helpful. Young people can register on the website for access to the weekly sessions.
- Grounding techniques are quick and effective ways to calm someone quickly when they are feeling anxious or to help someone become mindful of their current surroundings. A simple technique is called '**5,4,3,2,1**'. All you have to do is stay still and focus on what is around you. Name:
  - **5** things you can **see**,
  - **4** things you can **hear**,
  - **3** things you can **feel**,
  - **2** things you can **smell**, and take
  - **1** long, deep breath.

In general terms, the links below offer further advice and resources. If you are supporting a child who is feeling anxious, remember that they will look to you for guidance about how to cope. They will **learn from watching what you do** more than listening to your advice so if you are also feeling anxious, it is important to follow this advice yourself.

Above all, remember, this situation shall pass. It is OK to feel what you feel. You are doing your best, at this moment in time, under these current circumstances.

#### **Angus Educational Psychology Service: COVID-19 Update**

Access to the Educational Psychology Service will continue while schools in Angus remain closed.

If you are a member of staff in an Angus school, or from one of our partner agencies and know who the link educational psychologist (EP) is, please contact the EP directly as per your usual arrangements.

If you are a young person or parent/carer and would like to access this service to discuss concerns about you or your child's learning and/or wellbeing, please make contact with your school in the first instance using the contact details that they have provided. The school will then contact their link EP to discuss any concerns and a call back from either the school or the EP will be arranged as appropriate.

#### **Further helpful links**

**Association of Psychological Therapies –**

Links to a couple of hand-outs that give suggestions about how to maintain good mental health during lock down and ideas on how you should be spending your time;

<https://www.appt.ac/maintaining-good-mental-health-during-self-isolation.html>

<https://www.moodmaster.co.uk/img/things-to-do-lockdown.pdf?version=8>

**MindEd – [www.minded.org.uk](http://www.minded.org.uk)**

A website containing resources for parents/carers and professionals on how to support the mental health of children and young people