

Children and Young People's Mental Health and Coronavirus (COVID-19)

A booklet for parents from stem4



By Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Introduction

At a time of uncertainty and increased anxiety, parents have a key role in supporting the mental health of children and young people. They can provide comfort and reassurance, limit the impact of uncertainty and information overload, help deal with loss and change, strengthen family connections and be aware of how their own responses might impact on the family.

This is also a time for parents to learn effective strategies to deal with new challenges and establish resilience for the future - in their children and in themselves.

About stem4

stem4 is a charity that promotes positive mental health in teenagers and those who support them, including their families, carers, teachers, school nurses and GPs through the provision of mental health education, resilience strategies and early intervention.

This is primarily provided digitally through our innovative education programme, pioneering mental health apps, clinically-informed website and mental health conferences that contribute to helping young people and those around them flourish.

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Chapter 1

Possible Effects of Coronavirus on Family Mental Health

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has created a new and uncertain time for us all.

Whilst children and young people seem the least affected by the virus, coronavirus and the resulting lockdown have created a series of challenges for parents including enormous disruption to the routine of life, challenged health and financial safety, disrupted future planning and made us focus on basic survival in a way none of us could have anticipated.

The fact that the context of COVID-19 is constantly evolving makes it even harder to know how to adapt.

Parents face many challenges some of which include the following:

- Ensuring the family's basic safety and wellbeing
- Communication challenges
- Anxiety in your children, your partner and yourself
- Supporting extended family, especially older adults
- Ongoing educational needs
- Work and financial strain
- Pre-existing family tensions
- Pre-existing physical and mental ill health conditions
- Emerging physical and mental ill health conditions
- Dealing with loss and change
- Building resilience in your family and yourself

Trying to anticipate and manage these emerging difficulties can place considerable strain on a parent. In addition, variations in family structure (for example being a single parent and / or separated or divorced) can make it harder to cope.

The Basics

The first step for any parent is to create safety - both physical and emotional. This is our most basic need and is essential to recover from any dangerous situation.

Dr Krause's 4 C's to create emotional and psychological safety:

- **Connection:** Provide secure attachments, express emotions, create harmony, encourage positive social connections and opportunities to connect with nature.
- **Communication:** Provide opportunities for positive communication, shield from media overload and support learning opportunities including academic, social and emotional.
- **Control:** Support self-regulation by encouraging children to focus on routine, deal with boredom and set limits.
- **Compassion:** Be kind when it comes to your children's fears and struggles (and your own). Encourage enjoyable activities and promote community engagement and giving.



Chapter 2

Supporting Children and Young People According to Their Developmental Needs

At a time of increased anxiety and stress it is very important for parents to communicate openly and effectively with their children and young people, keeping in mind that they are not 'little adults'.

However, in order to communicate effectively, it is important for parents to know what thinking and understanding is like at different ages so that communication can be effective. In addition, it is useful for parents to understand the psychological needs children and young people have at different ages so that they can ensure they can take steps to meet these needs as best they can.

Outlined below are the main developmental stages together with some suggestions of what parents can say and do.

The next section focusses on communicating effectively with children and young people who are at the following developmental stages:

- Infancy and toddlerhood
- Early childhood
- Middle childhood
- Early to middle adolescence
- Late adolescence and young adulthood

Children and young people, however intellectually or emotionally mature they seem, will understand and respond to the coronavirus situation differently based on their age and developmental stage



Tips to Communicate Effectively

0-3

Infancy and Toddlerhood (0-3 years)

Their Perspective

They will be focused on the here and now and be affected by what they pick up from the family, especially fear, worry and sadness. They will respond to changes in their routine (such as sleep and eating) and may show they are unsettled by becoming clingy.

Steps you can take:

- Maintain normal routines as best you can
- Explain changes in a literal way (E.g. "Mummy is working from home at the moment")
- If they seem fearful, provide extra comfort
- Try to protect them from the emotional impact it might be having on you

4-6

Early Childhood (4-6 Years)

Their Perspective

They will still be focussed on the here and now but will understand illness in a simple, everyday way (colds, coughs, etc) unless they have had exposure to illness in the family or in themselves already. They will, however, find it difficult to differentiate between simple and serious illness and may become anxious and confused about this.

They will respond to changes in routine and may show they are unsettled through changes to sleep or eating and a need for reassurance. An increase in difficult behaviours such as temper tantrums is another way they may show distress. They are also likely to miss friends and fun activities.

Steps you can take:

- Help them understand the steps they can take to make themselves feel safe - for example, washing their hands. Make it a fun experience
- Ensure they know that their actions will contribute towards better protection but won't necessarily stop someone getting ill
- Provide them with simple information on the illness (e.g. 'Grandad could take longer to get better if he gets sick, that's why he's staying at home and not visiting')
- If they are distressed, bring back reassuring old practices such as bedtime stories, extra cuddles or fun games
- Understand what their angry behaviour might be expressing and be flexible within boundaries
- Be aware that it will be harder for them to connect online with friends, especially with conversation and hard for them to socially distance if they see a friend
- Create fun activities at home and provide opportunities for virtual play sessions such as baking or building blocks
- Provide opportunities for social interaction and the learning of necessary social skills
- Gradually encourage socialisation when lockdown is lifted to enhance both verbal and social skills development

7-12

Middle Childhood (7-12 Years)

Their Perspective

Children at this age will be able to understand illness and its effects. They will be subject to messages from multiple forms of media, and able to understand practices informed by science such as the importance of hygiene.

They will also pick up on family tensions and are likely to worry about loved ones. They may feel able to communicate these anxieties, but are also likely to express them through behaviours such as clinginess, seeking constant reassurance, or asking lots of questions. Some may worry about increasing the burden on their parents by voicing their worries.

Children of this age will also miss friends and worry about missing out. They will find it harder to self-regulate and may become overstimulated with online activities, movies etc, unless there is adult monitoring. They will be affected by the lack of routine and discipline provided by school, and for those who are in the process of transition from primary to secondary school, there may be concerns about losing old friendships.

Steps you can take:

- Set up regular communication, including the opportunity to share worries
- Review rules and provide alternatives to keep them entertained
- Explain that the way they feel is normal
- Encourage a limit on intake of news (perhaps to updates conveyed by you) and get them to think about alternative, positive ways to interpret what may be negative and scary
- Help them keep up social contact – set up regular opportunities to connect online, for example through quizzes, games and other shared activities
- Encourage them to keep friendship diaries or make things for friends (e.g. friendship bracelets, or home-baked cookies)
- Make sure they don't take on 'adult roles' such as supporting a parent's emotional needs
- Help them maintain hygiene-related behaviours such as handwashing but check if they seem to be anxious about them or overdo them
- They may need gentle encouragement to face their fears when lockdown is lifted and persistence in resuming usual activities

13-16

Early-mid Adolescence (13-16 Years)

Their Perspective

Young people of this age will have a good understanding of COVID-19 through information from friends, social media and the news, and may be inclined to believe these sources more than you. They will be able to imagine hypothetical possibilities, leading to increased worries and overthinking.

Since one of the main tasks at this age is identity formation, they will find social isolation difficult and will challenge rules. They will find it difficult to deal with lack of structure and will mourn the loss of opportunities. Excitement may be craved, sometimes leading to risky behaviour online, or other ways of pushing boundaries.

Young teens may also be influenced by moral and ethical concerns and experience distress in terms of what they might be missing out on, for example friendships and love interests. Since social anxiety can heighten at this time, some may find online group chats difficult. There are more likely to be sleep changes, and they may not find it easy to be around the family 24/7.

Steps you can take:

- Maintain communication - use messaging as well as social media if helpful
- Create positive opportunities to be together as a family at least once a day
- Provide opportunities to question ideas and beliefs they may have picked up from friends. It's better to approach this through a pros and cons perspective
- Don't dismiss anxieties even if they seem irrational
- Provide them with ways of helping others
- Provide opportunities to socialise with peers and discuss things with them
- Consider reviewing (on an ongoing basis) rules on time spent online
- Provide a positive framework for change
- Encourage engagement with academic work but make it purposeful (telling young people they should do something for the sake of doing it or 'because it's good for you' usually won't work)
- Provide opportunities for choice and independence wherever possible
- Encourage self-imposed boundaries on sleep

17-25

Older Adolescence and Young Adulthood (17-25 Years)

Their Perspective

This age group has probably experienced the greatest disruption to academic, social and psychological development. Their ideas about who they are and their goals will have been challenged.

They will have a good grasp of the illness and its impact, together with wider concerns about financial impact on the family and relationships. They may not confide in parents, either because they want to retain a separate identity or because they don't want to burden them. They will continue to be significantly influenced by friends and partners, which may bring about changes to their attitude and behaviour which can cause family tensions.

They may have increased concerns about the social, moral and emotional impacts of the illness and this may add to the existential worries and concerns that characterise this age.

There may also be an increase in risk-related behaviours due to a worry that time is running out, difficulty dealing with boredom (especially as time goes on and novelty wears off), and a drop in motivation. Fears about loss and change are to be expected, especially if they are leaving school for sixth form or university or have had to stop working.

Worries about weight changes as a result of eating differently and exercising less and drinking more at home are also likely to be common.

Steps you can take:

- Find ways to maintain family links
- Create a non-contentious space for support, listening, affection and discussion
- Offer choice in making their own decisions and if these are difficult for you to accept, work on asking open questions such as 'what do you think might be different if you did xx?'
- Help them focus on future choices and re-evaluate their goals
- Highlight their strengths
- Offer problem-focussed discussions and reframe the current context to provide them with opportunities. Ultimately, it might mean that you support them in making the choice they want to make even if you don't agree with it
- Suggest they connect with schools and colleges, grandparents and other influential people in their lives

General Parenting Challenges

Some parenting challenges heightened by the current crisis:

- Increased parental tension, arguments and conflict
- Managing escalation of behavioural difficulties such as temper tantrums and challenging behaviour
- Encouraging self-management rather than assuming parent responsibility for everything
- Challenges as a result of working from home
- Managing the logistics of being separated or divorced parents
- Possible challenges of being a single parent

Family tensions

The combination of stress and spending more time with relatives can create fertile ground for arguments. While tensions might be inevitable, steps can be taken by:

- Agreeing on how family space is shared
- Setting plans and expectations for everyone each day - especially if space is tight
- Allowing each family member to have quiet time and space to withdraw to when it all gets too much
- Giving yourself time to seek your own support
- Making future plans for fun activities

Temper tantrums and challenging behaviour

Tantrums and other difficult behaviours are forms of expression. At the moment, the cause might be anxiety about coronavirus, or a response to parental stress. Initially you can manage the tantrum by finding a distraction to change their focus and waiting until they are calmer.

You can also soothe them by showing you love them and praising good behaviour. It's also a good idea to name the emotion ("I know you are feeling worried/cross/etc") and remain calm throughout. Explain why you are setting boundaries, work on incremental changes and never compare them to siblings or friends.

Encouraging self-management

Teaching children to learn responsibility for their actions should start from an early age. It arises from a gradual shaping of behaviours, the degree of independence you grant, helping them gain control over their choices and value effort.

Expecting children and young people who haven't gone through these processes to suddenly become helpful will only lead to frustration on both sides. Be clear in your expectations and start with small, achievable goals.

Start by offering choices (what cereal they want, for example). Let them work alongside you and learn from your practical example.

Provide structure and routine so that they know what they are expected to be responsible for and when, teach them the consequences of their actions, recruiting them to be helpful without making them feel guilty or fearful.

Working from home

Working from home poses all sort of challenges. It usually generates stress and makes it difficult to find balance.

Some tips that might help:

- Clearly demarcate where you will be working and where the children will be playing/studying
- Draw up a daily schedule - both for yourself and the children
- Be very clear about when it will be out of bounds for you to be disrupted (e.g. when you have a call or video conference) Perhaps set up a 'strictly do not disturb' sign
- Set aside regular breaks to check in with family
- Make sure the family has time to discuss concerns and be prepared to change as a result
- Take the pressure off yourself to be perfect
- Remember that supporting children through their school work is not the same as home schooling – keep their goals small and realistic
- Take steps to self-care – take breaks, exercise, or do something else you enjoy
- Seek support from your partner, friends, colleagues and family

The challenges for separated and divorced parents

Separated or divorced parents can face particular challenges. To some extent, these can be managed by keeping in touch through messaging and sharing activities online. However, lockdown and social distancing can heighten existing relationship tensions.

Knowing there are disputes will leave children feeling distressed and fearful. Maintaining routines as far as possible, keeping in regular contact and reassuring children about illness worries might be helpful strategies for co-parents at this time.

Being a single parent has its own challenges. Juggling roles and responsibilities, making sure you remain productive, financial concerns, dealing with dating/relationships and child-based challenges can all be exhausting.

Decide how many roles is realistically possible. A different rate of productivity will do no harm, so focus on what's really essential and let go of some of your responsibilities.

Chapter 3

Supporting Children and Young People According to Their Mental Health Needs



Common mental health conditions affecting children and young people include:

- Anxiety disorders
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Depression
- Self-Harm
- Eating Disorders
- Alcohol Misuse
- Digital Addiction

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental ill health conditions among children and young people. They can start from the age of five and are believed to affect around one in six children and young people. Anxiety disorders are debilitating, affecting education, relationships and physical health.

It is important to recognise that children and young people will be affected by a variety of anxieties as they grow - for example, separation anxiety in 0-3 year olds, anxieties around illness and death in middle childhood and social anxiety in young and middle teens. These are not anxiety disorders unless they impact significantly on wellbeing.

The stem4 website (www.stem4.org.uk) has a number of practical tips for parents on supporting a child with an anxiety disorder. The Combined Minds App also has a range of tips you can have handy on your phone.

Some tips for parents to manage a young person who is anxious:

- Create structure and routine, particularly around eating and sleep
- Point out what is safe and encourage discussion, keeping in mind their developmental level
- Provide an alternative perspective
- Keep in mind that a child or young person who is anxious will focus on the negative information more than the positive
- Help set limits. People who are anxious are more likely to overthink and overdo precautions 'just to make sure'
- Support yourself

Specific COVID-19 related anxieties include

- A worry about the virus itself (becoming ill, loved ones becoming unwell, the extent of the illness, including death)
- Absence from friends
- Fear of stigma from passing on the illness
- Negative impact on the family
- Finding it hard to resume usual activities once lockdown is lifted due to feeling 'unsafe'

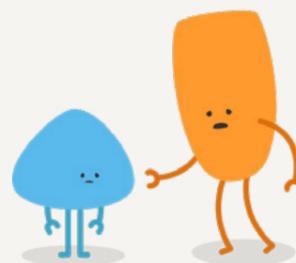
Some groups of young people may actually experience a reduction in anxiety during lockdown. They include those with separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety, experience of being bullied, challenges with interpersonal relationships, neurodevelopmental conditions or physical and sensory problems that make a normal school day more challenging.

However, this may create its own problems when usual daily routines resume. There will be a whole new focus on how to help them return by learning to manage their anxiety and its symptoms, and to face their fears one step at a time.

What you can do:

Feeling safe is essential in the effective management of anxiety. The current, ever-changing global health situation can therefore contribute to increasing anxiety symptoms in all of the family. The teen years in particular need special focus since adolescence can be a time when emotions are experienced intensely. Some specific management around COVID-19 anxiety includes:

1. Explain the nature of anxiety: It's an essential emotion we all feel in response to threat. It will bring about a response which affects all parts of our body, our thinking and our behaviour. When anxiety is managed it can be helpful, allowing us to harness its protective nature to spur us into positive health management.
2. Help them develop positive self-care behaviours to maintain health and hygiene. This will build confidence in their ability to protect themselves and help them learn to take responsible action.
3. Help challenge negative thoughts that may make them overestimate dangers, leading to difficulties such as over-thinking and over-worrying. This means providing them with facts to minimise fear. Make sure they are from a trusted source like the BBC.
4. Help them regulate the amount of information they have access to through the news, social media and online. Misinformation spreads fast and an 'infodemic' is as unhealthy to the mind as a pandemic may be to a nation.
5. Practising social distancing does not come easily to teenagers. Risking being excluded is probably one of the biggest punishments a teen may feel. Provide a benefit to social distancing such as being able to complete a highly valued task. This will provide an incentive to follow through with distancing rather than making it a punishment.



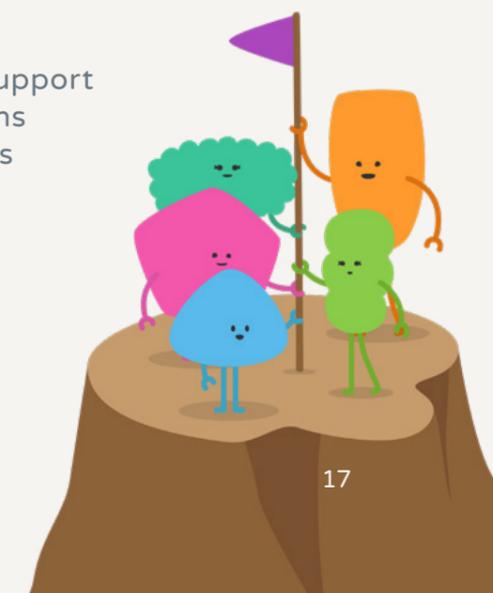
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6. Social media can provide a safe alternative to keeping up with friends, despite it not always helping a young person's mental health. Help place boundaries on their use and talk about what discussions might be happening online.
7. Shift the focus to helping others. Providing social support not only increases empathy and helps avoid stereotypes, but also helps build confidence.
8. Challenge compulsive behaviour. Constant checking fans anxiety rather than reduces it. Suggest they scale back on checking for updates and limit screen time, trusting adults to share significant information instead.
9. Encourage searching for positive bits of news and provide feedback on what's going right rather than fixating on what may be wrong. Encourage the development of a balanced perspective.
10. "A frightened captain will make a frightened crew" so anxious adults should take steps to manage their own tense thoughts and behaviours and counterbalance negative ideas and actions with positive, uplifting ones.

The first line of treatment for anxiety disorders is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). There are some online CBT programmes recommended in the NHS Apps Library. The Clear Fear app, for example, helps children and young people manage symptoms of anxiety using a CBT Approach.

Combined Minds is an app for parents and friends to support the mental health of a young person. It uses a 'Strengths Based Approach' which focusses on using the strengths of a young person to deal with challenges rather than focussing on what they find difficult.



Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is a form of anxiety disorder in which intrusive thoughts are repeatedly experienced. Usually they are distressing, and in order to deal with them the person will carry out some form of repetitive behaviour.



OCD often focuses around a number of common worries. Of particular relevance to Coronavirus are:

- Fear of contamination
- A worry about harm, either to oneself, or to someone else
- Fear that something bad will happen unless a particular behaviour is carried out

Common repetitive behaviours young people use to manage these worries include:

- Washing
- Touching
- Counting
- Checking
- Ordering

OCD can occur at all ages and is best treated using CBT, which involves facing fears through exposure and response prevention (ERP).

Tips for parents:

If your young person has a pre-existing OCD condition, make sure they stick to agreed rules on not overdoing any careful behaviours. This means keeping hand washing, checking and any other anxious behaviours to a minimum by limit-setting and encouraging an approach where feared situations are faced one step at a time. It is important to separate anxiety-based thinking from general good health guidelines.

The stem4 Clear Fear app can help a young person make a contract with themselves to set limits on excessive behaviours and help manage the symptoms of anxiety.

Depression

Clinically, the term depression refers to a group of symptoms and behaviours clustered around changes in mood, thinking and activity. They will be sufficient to cause impairment to personal and/or social functioning.

Mood changes typically include sadness and/or irritability accompanied by a loss of pleasure, even from the most passionately held interests. Young people may become very self-critical and lack motivation to do anything.

Depression often focusses around a number of common worries. Of particular relevance to Coronavirus are:

- Sadness
- Emptiness, increased irritability and anger
- Withdrawal from important friendships
- Loneliness
- Risk-taking behaviour
- Self-harm
- Sleep changes
- Withdrawal from school and family
- Drop in school performance
- Withdrawal into online activities
- A lack of hope and pleasure



In general, looking after mental health when depressed is difficult since it requires energy. This is harder for children and young people, and even harder in the current situation, with its limited opportunities for self-care.

Social distancing and isolation lead to a more cloistered existence. A reduction in life's pleasures, disruption to daily routine, lack of face-to-face encounters, dislocation from friends, a feeling of dread, financial changes to the family and uncertainty about the future are all everyday feelings for many young people. However, these factors are likely to be heightened in the current situation, intensifying the negative outlook, helplessness, hopelessness and withdrawal that accompany major depression.

Young people who are depressed are also more likely to misuse alcohol or drugs and there are reports of increased alcohol use during lock-down. They are also more likely than usual to interact online and to absorb themselves in gaming. Parents working from home may find it more difficult to monitor young people's use of such activities.

Young people who are depressed may also self-harm, either with or without suicidal intent. If their living situation is a contributory stressor to their mood (for example, because of family conflicts) being locked in without a break can lead to further despair.

Tips for parents of children and young people affected by depression:

- Keep connecting - one-to-one chats may be better than big family conversations
- Make sure they keep up a daily routine
- Make sure social isolation doesn't turn into further lethargy and withdrawal
- Establish sleep goals
- Discuss things that are working for them and things that aren't
- Work on re-establishing goals that may have slipped
- Address any alcohol or substance misuse issues
- If they have experienced a loss, find ways to grieve together and also seek online support
- Move Mood is a new app from stem4 which provides young people with the opportunity to develop positive behaviours using evidence based Behavioural Activation Therapy. It will be available from June 2020



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Self-Harm

People self-harm to express or deal with difficult emotions. In most cases there is no suicidal intent but a teenager's safety must always be kept in mind and the risk they pose to themselves should be assessed by a suitably qualified mental health professional. Self-harm usually increases with a worsening mental ill health condition, and treatment will need to focus on this.

The restrictions posed by COVID-19 may protect a young person who self-harms (by reducing tensions and stressors contributing to the behaviour). However, it may also increase the urge due to worsening mental health as well as creating more time and opportunity to self-harm.

Tips to manage self-harm during this period include:

- Maintaining good communication, being open to listening and avoiding anger or blame
- Finding out if the current situation may be triggering worries
- Providing a different perspective on things
- Identifying stressors at home and helping develop a safety plan
- With agreement of an alternative coping behaviour, making it harder to access self-harm equipment
- Helping establish a sleep routine – the urge to self-harm can increase at night-time
- Identifying a safe person they can contact (keeping in mind that social distancing limits choices)
- Using digital tools such as the Calm Harm app to help manage self-harm urges
- Connecting them with relevant professionals to help with underlying mental health issues

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders - anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorders - are serious mental ill health conditions that affect both physical and psychological health.



A person who has a diagnosis of **anorexia nervosa** will be extremely careful about their food intake and often manage their anxiety through a set, daily routine. They will get very anxious if it is changed, particularly without any preparation.

People with **bulimia nervosa** typically have an overlap of the same symptoms and behaviours but will alternate them with periods of binge eating together with ways to 'lose' the food they have consumed (purge behaviours or over-exercise). Unlike anorexia nervosa, the condition is often characterised by disorganisation around food and impulse regulation is difficult, particularly if emotions are high and food is easily accessible.

People with **binge eating disorder** experience periods of binge eating with no compensatory behaviour, leading to significant impact on weight and health.

Eating disorders isolate individuals, either because of their extreme focus on weight, low self-esteem or because they feel uncomfortable around food and eating.

The Coronavirus crisis has had a major impact on a number of factors relating to eating disorders, including:

- The availability of certain foods
- Reduced access to specialist services
- Reduced access to regular monitoring of weight and safety measures such as blood tests
- Increased time in a family setting (where relationships and meal times may be stressful)
- Restrictions on social situations
- Reduced access to exercise

All of these changes will have direct effects on someone with an eating disorder

Tips for parents:

- Encourage adherence to their recommended eating plan
- If they are unable to get their 'safe' food, help them identify similar alternatives
- Set clear agreed limits on exercise or join them if at all possible when they exercise
- Keep binge food in limited quantities and provide healthy alternatives
- Help them nominate a 'safe' person in the family who can take their weight and provide information on signs that should trigger a visit to either the GP or emergency services
- Manage your own eating behaviours



Chapter 4

Supporting Children and Young People According to Their Special Educational Needs

- Children and young people with learning disabilities
- Children and young people who have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Children and young people who have physical issues

In April 2020, the Government released guidance on supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus outbreak. This document outlines the needs of those who are vulnerable (and also those whose parents or carers are vulnerable.)

The three main groups of children included are those who have a social worker, those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan and those who were otherwise assessed as vulnerable. The main recommendation is that vulnerable children and young people attend educational settings.

Children and young people with learning disabilities may present with heightened anxiety during the crisis. An easy to read guide has been published by the government.

Also helpful are [Mencap](#) and [BILD, the Learning Disability Professional Senate](#)

What you can do:

- Maintain familiar routines
- Provide simple explanations
- Provide reassurance and guidance on change



Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Children and young people with a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have difficulties identifying and expressing how the coronavirus situation is affecting them. They may show more agitated behaviour or experience disrupted sleep and eating patterns.

Certain elements of the virus - maybe the illness itself or physical symptoms - could become preoccupations. They may become more obsessively fixated on cleanliness and hygiene and show enormous anxiety when leaving the home.

What you can do:

- Provide factual information on the virus and the current situation
- Help them to manage self-soothing behaviours such as excessive online activity or self-harm
- Provide opportunities for self-care
- Encourage the development of social skills through online connections
- Contact local autism groups
- Make use of the National Autistic Society's resources

Physical issues

Children and Young People with physical problems may have increased worries about coronavirus, especially if they have respiratory problems. They may present with higher levels of anxiety about becoming unwell, and may also worry about ill health in their parents.

What you can do:

- Support them by listening to their concerns
- Communicate honestly, highlighting the steps being taken to protect them
- Check on the availability of usual care arrangements and make sure there is a plan in place should you become unwell
- Provide self-soothing and distraction strategies to help deal with pain



Chapter 5

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Families

A fifth of people in England and Wales are from BAME backgrounds

Currently there is limited information about both their mental health needs, and how they have been affected by COVID-19. However, early, tentative data suggests that severe illness and death caused by COVID-19 in these communities is twice as likely, and the government has launched a public inquiry into the causes.

In general, problems affecting these groups include discrimination, racism and stigma, social, physical and economic inequalities. While these inequalities are present it is likely that children and young people from BAME communities will need greater support in managing anxieties about COVID-19.

According to the Children's Society, young carers are 1.5 times more likely than their peers to be from BAME communities and English is twice as likely to be their second language. During the coronavirus crisis young carers may become anxious about what would happen if the person they care for becomes unwell or if they themselves become unwell and can't meet their responsibilities.

What you can do:

- Plan what will happen if a parent or a young carer becomes unwell
- Draw up a safety net - family and friends will be an important source of support
- Encourage the young carer to:
 - Ensure they connect with friends online
 - Give themselves a break from their duties
 - Engage in their education
 - Share responsibilities if at all possible
 - Share in a grieving process if there has been a family loss



The coronavirus pandemic may lead to some young people experiencing discrimination, harassment or bullying as a result of their ethnicity

Take steps to ensure their protection by keeping lines of communication open, providing them with the opportunity to see that bullying is wrong and strategies to deal with this, be it to ignore, not retaliate, tell a responsible adult or seek help. Putting your own angry feelings aside will be helpful and make sure they know it is not their fault.

All schools have anti-bullying systems in place, so make sure support is sought through them. Other sources of support are the National Bullying helpline, the NSPCC, Kidscape, the Antibullying Alliance and Bullying UK.



Chapter 6 Your Mental Health

Parental mental health is an important contributor to the wellbeing of the whole family

The extra responsibilities, uncertainty, changed routines, lack of social connections and fear of change resulting from the Coronavirus outbreak may all impact on your mental health.

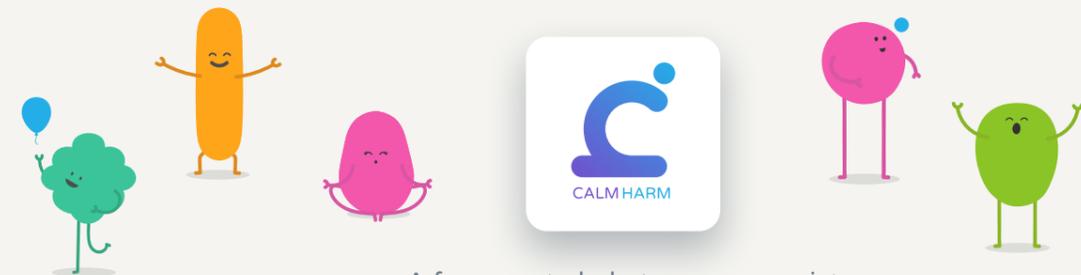
What you can do:

- Avoid media overload and step away from rumour and speculation
- Take suitable steps to manage excessive behaviours
- Evaluate all safety measures you have taken and reassure yourself you are doing all you can
- Take steps to manage your own mental health. This starts with regular self-care, making sure you eat and sleep well, exercise regularly and have breaks
- Stay in contact with friends
- Talk to important family members and share your fears and concerns
- Talk to your children
- Make future plans, even if tentative
- Review whether your working arrangements are satisfactory, and whether they need adjustment

stem4 Apps to Manage Existing Health Issues



A free app to help children and young people manage the symptoms of anxiety
www.clearfear.co.uk



A free app to help teenagers resist or manage the urge to self-harm
www.calmharm.co.uk



A free app to help families and friends provide mental health support
www.combinedminds.co.uk

Available June 2020



A free app to help teenagers manage symptoms of depression
www.movemood.co.uk

Available on the App Store and Google Play



Chapter 7

Enhancing Resilience



Resilience is the ability to adapt to the challenges you face in life. It's not just about being stoic or carrying on regardless.

It's about being able to learn from failure, being flexible, accommodating change and having a variety of strategies that you can put into action. Resilience is an evolving, interactive process - it's about active management and change.

Different people can be resilient in different ways and in different situations. Family members may also be affected by a crisis in different ways, and this can further complicate a parent's role.

Resilience strategies fall into three categories:

- **SURVIVING:**
The 'stiff upper lip' idea of getting through a difficult time. This may work in the short term but is not effective in the long term.
- **COPING:**
Identifying the problem and finding adaptive ways to deal with it effectively
- **THRIVING:**
Learning and growing from the situation



The MINDYOUR5 concept by Dr Nihara Krause, focuses on five areas to develop in yourself and in others. It gives you five things to do a day and five categories to focus on, which follow the acronym HAPPY:

Healthy practice

This refers to the importance of looking after your physical health, since good physical health leads to good mental health and vice versa. Two particularly important areas to look after are diet and sleep.

Lockdown has made it harder for many people to stick to a healthy diet. Make sure you eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and that meals contain a balance of protein, carbohydrates and good fats.

Sleep has become a popular topic over the past few years. Most young people benefit from eight to ten hours a night, while adults typically get around seven. Lack of sleep can lead to increased stress, difficulty concentrating, irritability and less creativity.

A changed lifestyle with a later wake-up time has therefore been good for many people. Studies of the sleep cycles of young people show they benefit from a later morning start due to variations in pubertal hormonal cycles. Meanwhile reduced stress for parents (not having to worry about the school run or their commute for example) has been a valuable relief.

Not everyone finds it easy to sleep, especially at a time like this, so try to set some rules.

These might include:

- Not having caffeine after 3 p.m.
- Making sure you get exercise in the day
- Starting a routine of downtime from around an hour before you plan to sleep
- Doing relaxing things and limiting online activity before you sleep



Successful sleep training takes time so perseverance is important.

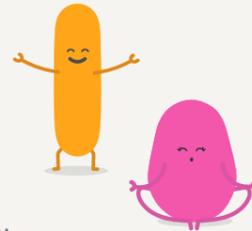
Activity

Try to do something active every day. This might include walking, running, sport, or something creative. Of course, having times of rest is also important.

Positive thinking

Some tips to make yourself think positively are:

- Have a strategy to deal with things that go wrong or with failure. One strategy is to add the words 'as yet' to whatever hasn't worked so that you can realise it's something you can learn and grow from. This strategy might be useful to help get through the current crisis
- Learn to deal with major challenges. Sometimes we make problems worse by overthinking them, or through 'worst case scenario thinking'. The bigger we make something the scarier it gets. Instead, break the challenge into small problems that can be addressed one step at a time
- The big difficulty with the current situation is the unknown, which may make you feel like you need to prepare yourself for the worst case. The problem is that this rarely works since intense preparation increases anxiety and reduces efficiency. Allocating a specific time to review the facts, list what the actual problems are, look at alternative solutions and create an action plan will be more effective
- Catch the judgemental you. Be mindful of the critical things you say to yourself and see if you can change them into positive ones instead. This is particularly important right now when you have to be a positive role model
- Listen to the positive things people say about you and remember them. If you do something positive write it down. Often, we remember things that go wrong rather than things that go right, particularly at the moment when we are all working in a new way. Summarise a positive thing you've done in the day
- Manage over-thinking. This can be a challenge, especially when you are under pressure. However, over-thinking is exhausting and can affect efficiency and sleep. If you have to concentrate on a problem, allocate a specific time to do it rather than letting it run throughout the day. Keep a notebook, write down your worries and address each one using a problem-solving framework



Positive emotions

Emotions are the smoke detectors of the mind. They alert us to the fact that something has affected us. Like smoke detectors, we need to listen to our emotions, which means learning to identify what the emotion is and how to regulate it.

The current situation and the enforced restrictions we face may have generated a range of emotions. You may feel agitated, anxious and angry, or worry about others. Access to your usual strategies - for example playing football or relaxing with friends - may be restricted.

Big emotions are like wild elephants: they can cause devastation if not tamed. In order to manage these 'wild elephant' emotions it is helpful to take a break. Relaxing and breathing or connecting with positive people can all help.

Your interactions

The COVID-19 crisis has given us many examples of inspiring community activity. The weekly 'clap for carers', socially distanced keep fit sessions, Sir Tom's laps of his garden, the number of people who volunteered for the NHS, all show the value of human connection.

Ultimately, spending time with people who are important to you - talking and listening, asking for help and relying on them in times of trouble - is the greatest source of resilience.

Whilst online connections are less satisfactory over a long period, they bridge a gap. Make sure you connect, whether it's online, on the phone, or even by post.

Dr Krause's podcast on resilience for parents working from home during the COVID-19 crisis can be accessed here:

www.theworkingparentcompany.co.uk/the-amazing-dr-nihara-krause-on-resilience-during-lockdown/



For resources and signposts to help please go to www.stem4.org.uk and also check out the Combined Minds app for parents and friends to support the mental health of a young person.

stem4
supporting teenage mental health
www.stem4.org.uk

This guide has been made possible through
the generosity of



Thank you to Steve Harman and HMA

Email: enquiries@stem4.org.uk

Twitter: [@stem4org](https://twitter.com/stem4org)

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Wimbledon Business Centre, Old Town Hall,
4 Queens Road, London, SW19 8YB
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