

Children & COVID 19 - Dealing with Anxiety

As a therapist I am aware that, since the global pandemic, feelings of anxiety are affecting all of us to a greater or lesser extent. Although I am not currently working face-to-face (any therapy I conduct is via zoom) I am able to keep up-to-date with research into what is happening to our psychological health. Children specifically are suffering increased feelings of panic and anxiety. Cases of OCD, in particular, are becoming much worse. Health-related phobias and nightmares are common.

Bereavement and ill health are areas that few parents had expected to discuss with their children. In many ways, the psychological impact of COVID 19 on children may have been overlooked. It is almost impossible to escape the regular news bulletins, daily statistics and talk of the pandemic. Children of differing ages will react to anxiety and stress in different ways. This is also the case when dealing with the death of a family member. Very young children, although seemingly less aware of these concerns, will continue to react with distress if their caregivers are also distressed. Once a child reaches the age of three, they will begin to develop an awareness of death. They may ask many questions and may find it difficult to understand that the person who has left will no longer return. In fact, it is not until a child is nearing the age of secondary education that they develop a full understanding of their own mortality and of those around them. A child younger than 11, therefore, may not fully comprehend their own responsibility in keeping safe and not harming others. So, although they may comply with requests to constantly wash hands they may also engage in magic thinking (i.e. their own thoughts can somehow influence external events). It is important that adults who talk to children about difficult topics are very clear and concise with their language and do not talk about people 'going to sleep' or the fact they have 'lost' someone. However young a child, it is also important to include them in conversations rather than clam up the moment the child begins to listen, as this will only cause children to feel that they are somehow to blame for what may or may not have happened.

So, what can we do to help children? The most important way to begin to help children cope with worry and anxiety is to know the facts yourself and be able to answer questions in a calm manner. Although life will already be disrupted it is important to develop a daily routine that will help children develop a new sense of what normal is. One way of doing this, both for yourself and your children, is to get up at the same time on what were school days and keep to a similar time schedule where children can indulge in schoolwork and have a break or lunch with you. Think about ways that your child would like to relax. Is it being read their favourite story? Perhaps an older child likes to relax in the bath. Maybe they enjoy walking, even though you may be walking they may be riding a scooter or a bike. Both children and adults who suffer from anxiety will

perceive any situation as threatening and dangerous whether or not it really is. It also takes longer for a child who is feeling anxious to calm that anxiety down as they have fewer resources than we do. Think about how we may try to reduce our own stress or anxiety. Maybe meditation, talking to a friend, an alcoholic drink..... Now think about how you can find strategies to help you child.

Most importantly make sure that you have plenty of time to talk. If your child wants to speak about something that is bothering them always make time as soon as you can unless the task that you are engaged in is incredibly important – which it probably isn't. Why not ask your child to draw a picture of how they are feeling? Perhaps they can enjoy yoga or dance. Above all try to encourage a sense of normality by engaging in things the child used to enjoy. Arrange time outside the home as well as engaging in things that you can do together inside. Physical activity will help to release adrenaline and will encourage good sleep hygiene. Focus also on a healthy diet. This will help everyone as the food that we eat makes enormous impact on our mood. Limit sweets, sugar and processed food and allow your child – whatever age – to help you prepare healthy meals.

Problems occurring in children may range from fretfulness and sleep disturbance to post traumatic stress disorders. Not only can individuals become traumatised by something that they have experienced themselves, but they may also become traumatised by being aware of events that are happening to someone else, whether or not they know that person. I am not talking here about the many situations in 'normal' life than can cause trauma in children: neglect, abuse, problems with a parents' mental health, observing violence.... the list goes on. Complicated trauma may often occur earlier in life in situations where the child has little control over what is taking place. Even young children can seem to be overwhelmed by stress, and may experience changes in sleeping or eating patterns.

Watch out for signs of a normal outgoing child appearing withdrawn or becoming more clingy. Children may revert to earlier safety behaviours such as thumb sucking or may begin to wet the bed after being dry for some time. Children of school age may begin to experience sleep problems and nightmares. They may experience physical problems such as stomach aches and become moody, angry and depressed. Be aware of teenagers who begin to lose interest in their hobbies and friends and who spend too long alone. It is not unusual for children suffering from acute anxiety and stress to have suicidal thoughts. Limit exposure to the media whenever you can don't allow older children to have access to screens in the hours before bedtime. Validate any concerns a child may have; however ridiculous you feel they may be. On the other hand, don't pressurise them into talking if they don't want to.

Most importantly, if you are concerned in any way about the health of your child take time to phone a professional. This may be the GP, another health worker, a counsellor, psychologist or therapist like myself.

The good news is that children respond rapidly and effectively to therapeutic interventions. Matters that would take many weeks with an adult can often be resolved quite quickly with the younger person.