

## **Coping with Worry and Anxiety about COVID-19**

COVID-19 and the impact on New Zealand is unknown territory for all of us. It is perfectly normal and okay to feel anxiety when in a global pandemic. This can result in strong feelings, reactions, and changes in behaviour. There are a number of steps you can take to help your children, family and yourself. Having a child with diabetes you may feel especially concerned, and this is understandable. When people with diabetes develop an illness it can be harder to treat because of fluctuations in glucose levels. However, you don't need to fear more than anyone else, preventative treatment and routine management is key.

### **Key points to remember about coping with anxiety about COVID-19**

- It is normal for children, teenagers and adults to have strong feelings, reactions, and changes in behaviour when faced with uncertainty
- Children learn from their parents' responses, as well as what they see and hear in the media
- Limit the amount of information that your child has access to while still providing them with accurate information, suitable for their age
- allow for family time and try to keep as many routines in place as possible, to provide a sense of safety and security

### **Psychological Impact of COVID-19**

The age of a child will have an impact on how they respond to the COVID-19 situation and what they need to help them to get through it. Children can be affected by other people's responses as well as what they see or hear about through media and conversation.

Younger children are less likely able to understand the news, the relative risk to themselves their friends and family/whanau which can cause a sense of panic. The older the child, the more 'in-tune' they will be with their emotions and the better their ability to put feelings into words. It's important to remember that if there is a change in your child's behaviour that it could be in response to what is happening around them.

If a child or teenager is already experiencing an anxiety disorder or mental health condition they may be even more at risk of experiencing heightened distress and worry.

### **How Can Parents and Adults Help?**

The response of the adults around children is very important and influences how children cope. It is important to be aware of your own responses and emotional needs so that you can look after your children. There are some strategies to help children and teenagers.

### **Be Calm Yourself**

Children and teenagers look to the important adults around them to determine how worried they should be. Although this can be very difficult it's important that you present and model a sense of calm and purpose.

### **Control Access to the Media and Limit Conversations about COVID-19**

COVID-19 is on every mainstream and social media platform. The information presented may not always be accurate which can increase anxiety and worry due to mixed messages or constantly hearing about the risks associated with COVID-19. Therefore, it is important to control how much access your child has to the media. Your child's age will also affect how they can interpret the material that they see and hear.

When something is constantly talked about we focus on it more and then think and worry about it more, which increases our belief that we are more at risk, which is likely not to match the actual risk.

It is important to make sure that the information you access are coming from official sources including the Ministry of Health or your local DHB and Hospital.

Try and limit access to the news. Turn off alerts on phone so you are in control of the information you receive. Turn off the radio at time of news bulletins. Be comfortable and confident in asking your friends, family, or colleagues not to discuss the constant news around you or your loved ones. This will help you worry less and will also help others.

### **Being honest**

Be honest. Children's imagination and the fear of the unknown can be more overwhelming for children than the reality. Don't focus on the risk aspects of the situation. Talk about the people and services who are working to help control outbreaks and protect people for getting COVID-19. If you do not have answers, then that is OK to tell them that.

### **Talk and Be Prepared to Answer Questions**

Ask your child/teen what they think and know and be proactive in talking about the facts regarding COVID-19. Children ask questions as this helps them to make sense of the situation. Make sure you have read about the FACTS around COVID-19 from reputable sources and appropriate for New Zealand, as different countries are managing the pandemic differently. Explain the FACTS in a simple way that is appropriate for their age, understanding and situation. Let them know that you are available if they have any questions or want to talk more.

### **Listen and Acknowledge how Your Child is Feeling**

Acknowledge your child's feelings. Let them know that it is common to feel this way and that others are also having similar feelings. Reassure your child that they are loved, cared for and safe (in whatever realistic or truthful way they are).

### **Sticking To Routines and Family Systems**

Sticking to routines, including meal times and bed times as much as possible (even if on self-isolation). This gives a sense of safety and security. Continue to go to school unless otherwise advised. Ensure there are family based activities, as not having plans for the day can increase worry and anxiety. Family based activities will make children and teenagers feel like they are part of a unit and provide a sense of connectedness or togetherness.

### **Taking Action**

Encouraging your child to take action. This can create a sense of control and help if your child is experiencing a sense of helplessness. This might be drawing pictures about how eating healthy food is important and washing hands is essential. For example, ask your kids and teenagers to teach you about how they have been taught to wash their hands at school (e.g., singing happy birthday) or learn a fun new way together. Remember what you do to prepare for winter illnesses is what you need to be thinking about now. Make sure you have an updated sick day management plan and have the appropriate supplies on hand. Programme into your phone the numbers you need to contact if your child becomes unwell and don't hesitate to contact if concerned.

### **Looking After Yourself**

As an adult it is very important that you look after yourself as well. This is often easier said than done, because your focus is often on the more vulnerable around us. You need to be in the best position possible so you can look after your child - it is about strengthening yourself so you can be strong for your child. Talk to other adults about your feelings and what is going on; but be mindful about whether this is causing you more anxiety. Access support systems available to you and try to keep to as many routines as possible.

### **Other Support**

Parents and whanau are the best support for children who are anxious and worried. Most young people's distress will improve with the love, care, and support from their family and whanau. Unfortunately, it's impossible to predict those small numbers of young people who will have significant ongoing emotional difficulties.

If your child or teenager is already under a mental health service, then it is important to talk to them about more specific strategies.

### **References and Websites**

[www.moh.govt.nz](http://www.moh.govt.nz)

1737 - 24/7 Counselling Service

[www.kidshealth.org.nz](http://www.kidshealth.org.nz)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.aada.org](http://www.aada.org)

[www.anxietycanada.com](http://www.anxietycanada.com)

Healthline - 0800 358 5453 – For health-related calls about COVID-19

[www.jdrf.org](http://www.jdrf.org)

Coping with Worry and Anxiety about COVID-19 (Diabetes).

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