

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### Six ways to support your children as lockdown eases

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In recent weeks, the government has announced plans to start an 'easing' of lockdown, and while this may bring relief to many, it also presents new challenges, uncertainty and unpredictability.

This is very much on the minds of parents and their children at present, as they think ahead to this next phase and try to work out how it might affect them. So how do you navigate through the new freedoms and continued restrictions as lockdown starts to ease?

#### 1. Recognise the changes

On the one hand, many of us have welcomed the possibility of being able to see a small number of family and friends again, albeit from a distance. The need to connect has been strongly felt during the earlier phase of lockdown, and at last there is more possibility of this. However, many parents and carers are now also faced with managing increased anxiety in themselves and their children. Added to this, if your child can now return to school, you are having to make difficult decisions about whether this feels right for your situation.

All of this is the reality for parents, alongside managing your children's expectations and the range of possible emotions they may be experiencing - including frustration, fear and confusion. We also have the very real possibility of a return to lockdown in the not too distant future. The best starting point for parents is to simply recognise that this is a situation full of challenges, many of which are unpredictable, and to accept that it will feel a little daunting at times. This is the 'new normal'.

#### 2. Talk about the changes they will experience

In preparing for any significant change that your child will experience, be as clear and honest as possible about what they can expect. Talk with them about how things may be different.

#### 3. Plan for the 'new normal'

Where possible, it is important to involve your child in planning for some of these changes. This is likely to give them a little more certainty about what lies ahead - and will help them to feel some sense of control, which is good for wellbeing. For example, talk about ways to have more direct contact with friends and family (except those who are being 'shielded'), while also keeping at a safe distance from them. Can they find fun ways of giving each other 'hugs' from a distance and perhaps practise these before returning to school? Children and young people developed a sense of the 'new normal' during the earlier stages of lockdown, and now's the time to begin that conversation again. For all families, preparation and planning which involves clear and honest communication will be an important part of managing changes and challenges.

#### 4. Be open about any worries

Keep checking in with your children about how they are feeling about some of the potential changes ahead. This can make children anxious and they may need some extra support as they adjust. If they have lots of questions, keep giving them the opportunity and space to talk about these. They may be worried that they will have fallen behind in their school work, or that their friendships may have suffered. Acknowledge and normalise their concerns. Knowing you are there for them, and will listen, is really important right now.

For those who find it harder to talk openly about their worries, be sure they know you are there to talk when they are ready. Many children can be encouraged to write down, or draw, their worries. Older children may choose to speak with friends or another family member. The main thing is to encourage them to share their concerns and any ideas which might help to make a difference for them. Working to solve (or tackle) their own problems - with reassurance and support from those they trust - is another way of improving children's sense of control in all this.

#### 5. Look after yourself

Self-care remains an important part of your ability to manage and support the emotional

wellbeing of your children. If we look after ourselves, then we are in a better frame of mind to be available to our children. There's no doubt that the last few months have often been stressful, and much of the advice has been around parents making sure they make some time for themselves. The importance of this isn't going away! So, whether it's through having a bath, reading, yoga or going for a walk, continue to do what works for you. Keep this going in the weeks ahead. Make sure it remains a part of your daily routine, even when things feel like they are going back to 'normal'.

## **6. Reflect, and look ahead**

As a family, think about your experiences of lockdown to date - both the good and the bad. Take time to explore some of the challenges you have been able to overcome together, but also acknowledge some of the real struggles. As well as reflecting on the past, start to have conversations about the future and what we are looking forward to. This will be helpful in supporting children and young people to process and reflect on their experiences, but also to hold on to hope and to remain positive about the future.

Finally, remind children that although things are starting to ease, this certainly does not mean an end to COVID. Help to manage their expectations about what lies ahead. Keep a focus on how to keep everyone safe, while also sharing with them in enjoying the increase in freedom they may be feeling.

Working together to keep our children safe and happy.

*Halina Rooney*

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