

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

These are challenging times and we are all struggling to adjust to this way of life. Here is a very good article from CEOP and Parentzone that has some really good advice, resources, and crucial links for further support.

Surviving family life under lockdown

With another UK lockdown confirmed for the rest of the winter, you may find yourself back in the position of juggling home-schooling your kids with working from home.

Families across the UK are trying their best to adjust to this temporary way of life. There is no doubt that the challenges for us all are enormous, but the way we face them can shape the outcome and bring positive results. Here are some suggestions for surviving family life in lockdown.

Meeting the challenge

How each family copes with the pressures depends on various factors, including financial security, the amount of space available, the make-up of the family unit and the strength of relationships.

Niki Cooper, Clinical Director of [Place2Be](#) – one of the UK's largest children's mental health charities – says, "There are different amounts of pressure depending on a family's circumstances, but there are also different levels of resilience. It's important to note that some families are actually managing incredibly well, heroically, in the situation."

Cooper observes that some families seem to have more natural resilience and can surprise themselves with their resourcefulness in the face of adversity. "I don't think anyone is skipping through this game, saying 'what's the problem?', because it's so dramatically not what anyone would normally choose to do. But pressure doesn't have to be a problem. I think adversity can elicit responses that are positive, and challenge creates resilience, so if you survived something like this, you're going to be in better shape to survive the next thing."

Peter Saddington, Practice Clinical Supervisor at [Relate](#), agrees that it's not all bad news: "If, before this crisis, your relationship with your partner was good or reasonably good, then you're probably just going to experience some pressures. For some families there's going to be post-lockdown growth."

He identifies the extra hours together as beneficial, allowing for more quality time as a family and considers that, without the stress of the daily commute, some may feel less pressure working from home. Some couples will appreciate the extra opportunities to talk and spend time together.

"But, of course," he adds, "if your relationship was already under pressure, then this is going to exacerbate it. For some individuals, couples or families there's going to be almost post-lockdown trauma."

There are ways, however, of avoiding this downward spiral. As Cooper says, "How well a young person or a child comes through this will be down to how the whole family has been enabled to cope with it all. If the parents can manage their own strong feelings, whatever they are, then probably the children will be OK."

Managing strong feelings

One important thing is to recognise that we are living in exceptional circumstances and adjust your thinking accordingly. As Saddington says, "You need to step back and reflect on how things are different. How you think affects how you feel; how you feel affects what you do."

This requires a degree of patience and tolerance in our attitude – avoiding hasty judgements and harsh criticism of partners or children. "If you're thinking, 'You're getting on my nerves', then you're likely to be feeling frustrated or irritated. And if you're feeling like that, you might say something that's unhelpful. If, on the other hand, you're thinking, 'This is really difficult but we're managing really well', and you simply observe the other person's behaviour under pressure, in a curious way, then you can avoid any malice or build up of tension."

Communicating

Of course, talking to each other is key to avoiding a pressure-cooker situation. Each family member will have their own anxieties and you need to be open about your particular issues, saying when you feel upset or angry, and agreeing coping strategies together.

Identify potential trigger points so they can be avoided. "Have a time every day," suggests Saddington, "where you check in with each other about how you're feeling, so that things don't fester. And if there is a problem, you have a chance to talk about it."

Equally important, according to Cooper, is “knowing when you’ve hit a wall and you need to ask for help. And I think for some people that’s really difficult, to reach out and say, ‘I can’t handle this’, and then also to be able to make use of whatever sources of support there are, whether that’s online resources or reaching out to a friend or family.”

Mental health experts agree that children’s fears are best managed by a straightforward approach to their questions; try to answer them calmly and honestly, without either avoiding or sensationalising the truth.

Time out

One of the greatest challenges is the battle for space in any home – whether that’s to work, relax or just to be alone to think. Without the freedom to leave the house, this problem is felt all the more keenly.

As Saddington says, “A lot of people manage their emotional distress or anxiety by distancing. When that’s taken away, you’re staying with a heightened level of anxiety, and distress more frequently. And so, you’re more sensitive, you react more quickly and get angry more easily. You notice negative things about the other person more regularly. Essentially, our window of tolerance, our ability to manage day-to-day stuff, shrinks and we react more quickly than we would have done under normal circumstances.”

Even though you can’t easily escape in the current situation, he suggests, “Give yourself a chance to be distracted, self-soothe: read a book, play a game, contact your friends, do something so that you self-regulate and come back feeling OK.” Everyone in the family needs to understand the need for time out; sometimes just walking away is the best plan and shouldn’t be seen as another cause for a row.

Clearing the air

In response to the surge in calls from parents feeling overwhelmed by the pressures surrounding life in lockdown, Relate tries to develop people’s practical skills: “One of the biggest things for everybody to work on is apologising quickly. So, if you do say something unkind or react more quickly, if you just say sorry immediately, it defuses the situation rather than the other person being angry or upset and it festering.”

Equally important is the ability to move on after an argument, to accept an apology graciously or to avoid comment when someone comes back from their time out. Don’t dwell on things or start recriminations.

Empathy

Try to understand that everyone is under pressure, whether as a single parent coping alone, a couple thrown together 24/7, a key worker facing unusual levels of stress, a worker who’s lost their job or an employee consigned to working from home.

And the pressures are not limited to the adults: many kids are feeling anxious and lonely without their friends, disorientated without the structure of a school day and cast adrift without the anticipated end of their school year with the usual exams, leaving ceremonies and proms.

Avoid berating your lazy teenager for not getting up and allow them some time to adjust to what seems an uncertain future. It’s really not the end of the world if they have a duvet day or spend a few hours on FaceTime or YouTube.

Routine

Having said that, an important factor in lockdown life is the need for routine. Psychologists tell us that we take comfort from the familiarity of a known routine and so it is vital to establish some kind of structure to your day. Without the usual timetable of school and work, life can drift from one day to the next. Try to separate work or study from leisure and have time you all spend together – perhaps for daily exercise, which is another key thing in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Play games as a family, watch a film together, learn a new skill together – an instrument, baking, sewing or painting.

Cooper also suggests a special one-to-one time for each child at a particular point in the day: “It doesn’t have to be very long, but punctuating the day takes the pressure off from children who may feel uncertain and hungry for attention.”

“Routine relieves the pressure and helps avoid feelings of being overwhelmed and distracted,” adds Saddington. “You can think more clearly and everything runs more smoothly.”

Helping others

You can boost your sense of wellbeing just by reaching out to help someone else – a simple phone call or collecting a prescription will be a small act of altruism that acts as a tonic. We all need to be looking out for our friends and neighbours and thinking about who might be really struggling.

Expert help

Sadly, for some the problems of living in lockdown are more serious than daily frustrations and anxiety.

Living in close proximity to a controlling or abusive partner poses a fresh set of dangers and the National Domestic Abuse helpline has seen a 25 per cent increase in calls and online requests for help since the lockdown, according to the charity [Refuge](#).

Charities are keen to reassure victims that support is still available and refuges are open. Most important, if there is an immediate threat, you should call the police in the normal way.

Perspective

It is hard to see into the future and imagine life beyond lockdown but it will help to see things in perspective. We should learn from our kids, as Cooper advises: "Children are naturally mindful and in the moment. So they might be having a complete meltdown in one moment but that will pass and then they're in a moment of total ebullience and joy."

She is optimistic about the future, given the wealth of creativity and ingenuity she's seeing from families as they adapt to the current crisis: "There's no doubt we're going to be changed by this. We're going to come out as a different sort of society. I guess people will potentially discover things in themselves that they didn't know they had."

Useful links

- Parent Zone: articles and resources to help you navigate parenting during a pandemic – www.parentzone.org.uk/lockdown-advice-and-resources
- Ollee: a digital friend from Parent Zone and BBC Children in Need, helping children to talk about difficult topics with their families – www.parentzone.org.uk/Ollee
- Place2Be: advice and tips from educational psychologists plus a wealth of creative ideas – www.place2be.org.uk/coronavirus
- Relate: relationship support – www.relate.org.uk
- Kooth: an online counselling and emotional well-being platform for children and young people – www.kooth.com
- Childline: telephone and online support – www.childline.org.uk
- Refuge: support for victims of domestic abuse – www.refuge.org.uk

Working together to keep our children safe and happy

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