



Counseling Corner Newsletter, Week of May 18, 2020

Dear Parents,

As we have been discussing the topic of anxiety, I cannot think of a more applicable situation than what we are going through right now with the COVID-19 virus. One way or another, you have been deeply impacted by this pandemic; whether it is the loss of a job, the loss of loved ones, the loss of financial security, or the loss of everything that's normal. With all this loss slowly churning into mental and emotional exhaustion, it is now even more important to understand **how anxiety during this crisis is impacting you, as a parent, and your children.** Understanding will help us develop resiliency and grit, which will begin the process of adaptation and change. We are all in this together.

If you feel an underlying sense of anxiety during this COVID-19 pandemic, it means Amy the Guard Dog, your amygdala, has been working overtime. It may have lead you to feel tense, irritable, emotionally exhausted and fatigued. Why?

Because amygdala overrides were not meant to be sustained for long period of time!

Anxiety During Prolong Periods of Stress & Crisis

As we mentioned last week, when Amy the Guard Dog has taken over your brain in an amygdala override, your brain and body will be in a fight or flight state. Amy's main objective will be to get you to safety, so cognitive functions are low, your body is hyper-vigilant, and all the blood going to your muscles to help you fight or run away. So what happens when you are stuck in this state of amygdala override? What happens when the circumstances around you does not change for the better and the crisis continues?

You and your kids may have felt or experienced the following:

- Poor cognitive ability: forgetfulness, inattention, ruminating thoughts, inability to plan effectively.
- Persistent feelings of restlessness, irritability, worry.
- [kids] Constantly asking parents when they will be home; experiencing separation anxiety.
- Difficulty sleeping, or staying asleep.
- Bodily aches, headaches, upset stomach.
- Acting out of character or personality.
- And eventually, feeling powerless, or no hope.

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Your brain and your body was not meant to be in this state of prolonged anxiety, so managing the stress and anxiety is key.

Coping with Prolonged Stress & Anxiety

In the last few weeks, I have spoken to many families who are experiencing many of the above symptoms of prolonged anxiety and stress. Their amygdala has been on override longer than it should, so it is causing irritability, tantrums, and emotional meltdowns with the kids, and parents are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and stretched in their roles at home. The “stay-at-home” order to promote safety during this pandemic crisis is starting to take a toll, but we can do the following strategies to ease the rampant stress and anxiety:

1. **Do things you and your kids enjoy.** Nothing counteracts anxiety better than play! When we truly play, we are focused on the present, focusing and absorbed on the good feelings and sensations we feeling by doing something silly, drawing, reading, crafting, collecting, etc. If you can do this, you will hold anxiety at bay.
2. **Exercise.** Daily exercise for you and your kids is not only healthy for your bodies, but vigorous exercise helps resets your brain by flooding it with healthy endorphins (our bodies natural painkillers), and serotonin (the happy neurochemical in our brain). Peak heart-rate exercising forces us out of the worrying ruminating thoughts, and focuses on the here and now, which is a good thing.
3. **Limit the amount of news and media you let you and your kids access.** We have been inundated with the news each day, so it is good to limit yourself and the amount of news you let your kids absorb. Stick to the facts, do your research, but in the end, learn to set it down.
4. **Engage in social interactions while still social distancing.** Talking with friends and family over the phone, face-time, or even social media is now more crucial as we are social distancing. Interactions with close friends and family allows you to talk and **normalize things** you are experiencing. This lets you know that you are not alone, which fights anxiety.
5. **With much discretion, safely find a change in scenery.** Some families have started doing little driving outings in the car; going for a ride to get pickup, going to the drive thru, driving by the beach, etc. This keeps us from feeling trapped, and if you happen to drive by the mountains or the beach, it fuels our soul’s need for beauty in these hard times. Of course, remember to stay within the limits of social distancing and safety orders for the city and personal safety.
6. **Meditate and breathe.** During unpredictable times when you feel powerless to the situation around you, what you do have control over is your thoughts and breath. Focusing your thoughts your values, thoughts of gratefulness, or your faith and breathing slowly in from your nose and out your mouth will (1) alleviate anxiety, and (2) help you find personal meaning and strength. Internal regulation in an unpredictable environment.

Here is a link to CDC’s website, which also address stress and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

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