

Coping with the Pandemic

Tips from our Discovery Counseling Center SCIP counselor:

As the unprecedented circumstances surrounding COVID-19 continue to change day to day, you and your students are very much on my mind. I imagine you are inundated with information and trying to figure out the best way to support your family. I put together the following with the hope that you might find some of the following resources & suggestions helpful as you navigate these uncharted waters.

I consider life a balance between chaos and order. With society currently experiencing widespread change, adjustment, and fear, I hope you will find something that resonates with you in the information below, if only to show your family that balance, connection, gratitude & fun are possible even when the outside world is chaotic.

I have drawn from the words of wisdom of Lynn Lyons, who is a therapist and author, and expert in the field of anxiety and families. In these difficult times I hope her offerings can be peppered into what you are already doing to cope with these times the very best that you can. I too am employing many of these suggestions to cope with these times!

• Explaining COVID-19 Information to Kids & Adolescents

- Ask your kids if they have questions about the Coronavirus & answer those questions appropriately — unanswered questions can leave kids filling in the blanks, which can often lead to kids imagining & focusing on the “worst case scenario” (hello anxiety!).
- Talk about the Coronavirus according to the developmental stage of your child. Younger children do not need too much information, and it is best to answer their questions simply, without offering extra information that isn’t asked for & isn’t helpful or reassuring.
- View the news yourself, then summarize it for your children. You know your kids best — filter out information that you don’t think they can handle or won’t be helpful for them to hear.
- Limit the media and news for them. Even our adult nervous systems are not evolved enough to maintain regulation when we are being thrown upsetting news 24/7. If you are feeling anxious, wait until a time when you are feeling more grounded and calm to talk about it with kids.

• Practicing Creativity & Flexibility

- Find opportunities for age-appropriate autonomy. The independence that comes from autonomy is an important part of building one’s self confidence. Your children are used to practicing autonomy every day at school when they are on their own. Brainstorm ideas for maintaining independence during shelter-in-place with your child. Some possible examples: Give them things to do on their own such as laundry, helping prep meals, walking the family pet, feeding the family pet, etc.

- Remember they are missing out on a lot right now. You don't need to fix or take away the difficult feelings they might be experiencing such as grouchiness, sadness, annoyance, anger, or disappointment. You could say something like "I hear you, I get it, and we still have to do this (social distancing)."
- Find creative ways to celebrate what kids will be missing during this time. Many of the children will be missing their own birthday party, special school performances, athletic events/seasons, field trips, and more. This is a time where your creativity will be important! Celebrate your child, whatever they will be missing, figure out a unique way you can commemorate their special experience in a different way. For example birthday parties with all your child's stuffed animals symbolizing the guests, or a wall collage of photographs of all the friends and family who wished they could be in attendance. While it won't be what they originally expected it *will be* story they will remember forever.

- **Promoting Physical Health (which then promotes mental health!)**

- Keeping your child's **circadian rhythms** (our bodies' inner clock) on a relatively normal/regular schedule. This will help their overall physical and mental wellbeing. When our rhythms are in balance we are more able to perform and cope at our natural capacity. Sleep is a primary function of our inner clock. Maintain sleep routines and schedules as best you can with some flexibility — of course sleeping in a little later & staying in PJs later can be a way to add some much-needed fun to this time!
- Move, move, move... Lack of movement impacts mental health. Many kids' normal exercise (PE, sports, exploring the neighborhood with friends etc) is cancelled right now. Explore what type of movement works well for your child & family (of course, keep it social-distancing friendly). Ideas: go on family walks, hike in the open space, kick a ball outside, do jumping jacks, jump on the bed, try online exercise programs, home yoga, play kick the can, hopscotch, or Wii games all encourage movement.

- **Encouraging Connection & Gratitude**

- Right now, adolescents are missing out on much of their social lives and activities, which are at the forefront of their developmental stage. They really need to feel connected (we all do). Encourage them to use video chat channels such as FaceTime or Zoom with their friends and loved ones.
- Lynn Lyons suggested doing 3 things everyday that brightens someone's day. Brainstorm meaningful things you & your child can do right now to brighten someone's day. They can be little things such as recognizing something someone does, i.e. "I really like how you made an effort to clean up after

yourself.” Call a grandparent and check in on them, bring someone their favorite thing to drink, write a note and leave it on a family member’s pillow. This is an opportunity for you & your child to focus on gratitude & connection (key to well being!) & make a difference in others’ lives.

- Incorporate FUN at home. Some ideas: play your favorite family games, cook or bake favorite items, play cards, puzzles, charades, pictionary, board games, Simon says, arts & crafts, draw outside with chalk, hopscotch, kick the can, hide and seek, build chair and blanket forts.

• **Practicing Mindfulness**

- Using mindfulness is golden. Mindfulness is *not* always sitting still & getting “zen” — mindfulness can take many different forms! Mindfulness is simply coming into the present moment, using our five senses, without judgment of ourselves or the experience. Mindfulness is a great tool for moving away from anxiety or fear by grounding in the present moment.
- Some examples of mindful activities:
 - Spending time with pets is one of the best gifts of mindful therapy we can give ourselves.
 - Smell & taste favorite foods, while noticing the flavors & sensations.
 - Listen to favorite music & notice how body feels & thoughts change — maybe you remember a favorite memory associated with the song & feel happy or peaceful.
 - Listen mindfully to nature sounds such as birds, rain, or wind.
 - Notice your feet on the stable and firm ground.
 - Take a deep belly breath or two.
 - Notice the contact points of your body meeting the couch or chair

On a final note, when kids (and us adults too!) reflect back on this time, they will remember what you did together & how you connected as a family during this unprecedented time in 2020.