

Discovery COVID-19 podcast
COVID-19 and your health
Transcript: Joanna Kleovoulou
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Hello, I am Joanna Kleovoulou. I am a Clinical Psychologist and founder of PsychMatters therapy and wellness centre based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Parents all around the world are asking how they can help themselves and their children to develop resilience in the face of the disruption brought to our lives by the Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic – also known as the COVID-19 pandemic.

I've asked myself that question too. I am married, have a five year old daughter and PsychMatters Therapy and Wellness center is my own business.

Like you, I am attempting to navigate the “new normal”– doing my patient consultations online, from home, while co-managing the household. If you're also feeling the pressure too I want you to know that I see you and I feel you. You are not alone.

We are used to routines that include dropping kids off at school, heading off to work, organising extra murals, doing homework, supper, bath-time and bedtime and so on.

Now all that we are familiar with has been compromised and challenged, shaking our sense of stability.

It's well known that coronavirus disease 2019 poses a serious threat to our physical health. But, there is also a real risk of a threat to our mental health.

In the face of an ongoing, stressful situation, what we may see present is a mixed bag of emotional responses, cognitive alternations and the rise of behaviours that may not help us to cope.

Traumatic and stressful life event such the spread of a serious illness, can overwhelm our coping mechanisms leaving adults and children feeling out of control and helpless. And, continual exposure to the trauma can leave us feeling depleted, exhausted, and acting out in ways that are self-destructive.

For people who have a pre-existing mental health condition such as anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD, social anxiety or panic, the COVID-19 pandemic may have triggered and intensified the symptoms.

Parents need to understand that there is an urgency to protect both their own mental health and that the children they care for and interact with.

Children look to their parents for cues on how to relate to their world.

A parent's moods, behaviours and verbal and non-verbal communication all directly affect how children feel and act.

When parents are highly stressed, children feel stressed.

In turn, children's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours impact on how parents respond to them.

If a child feels overwhelmed by a continual flow of sad or scary news that they don't understand, this leads to confusion about how the world as they know it has changed. This is especially troubling to young children who don't have the life experience or vocabulary to tell the adults in their life what hurts or what they are really thinking.

That's why talking about emotions is essential for a child's mental health. Parents need to make an effort to be especially attuned to a child's state of mind at this time and to support them in a way that moderates the child's experience of stress.

The notion of COVID-19 and what the disease can do, can scare children and, if not dealt with, this fear could create emotional problems in a child for months or even years to come.

Children experience traumatic stress differently, depending on their age and maturity level.

When children are disruptive, rather than simply attributing their behaviour to naughtiness, parents can consider how the child's reaction may be a way to cope with a stressor. This sort of mindset can lead to a more empathic interaction between parent and child and promote more constructive behaviour.

In older kids, fear and an inability to cope with stress can lead to anxiety, depression or self-destructive behaviours like self-harm, use of drugs or alcohol or attempts at suicide.

How do parents explain global events like the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that will make a child feel safe and secure?

- Choose to talk about a **disaster in a way that** can lead to discussion about how to help others, also giving you an opportunity to role-model compassion. Breathe in, and change your mindset and narrative and focus on the words you use. You aren't *'stuck at home'* you are *'safe at home'*.
- Make the conversation age-appropriate. For example, children under the age of 8 have difficulty differentiating fantasy from reality and both can be frightening. Limit their exposure to news and events on TV, social media or in print media.
- Get legitimate information from reliable sources. Answer questions honestly, calmly, clearly and keep your answers simple for your child to understand.
- Explain that many people who have contracted COVID-19 have recovered, and that you and your family are doing what you can to stop the spread. COVID-19 is complex for adults to understand and scientists are still working to uncover more information about the virus. It is harder for small children to grasp, so use animations and pictures from credible sources as a place to start. The World Health organization recently release a children's story book to help children and young people to cope with COVID-19. The book is titled "My hero is you, how kids can fight COVID-19". With the help of a fantasy creature called Ario the book explains how children can protect themselves and their families from the virus and how to manage difficult emotions.
- Next, when it comes to explaining preventive measures, keep it simple with creative approaches like create a jingle for handwashing. I have my 5-year-old doing the "flossing" dance while singing "no touching please, and elbow sneeze; wash your hands for goodness sake, so coronavirus can jump in the lake!"

As parents, we cannot completely cocoon our children from what is happening in the world, but we can create opportunities for open dialogue, sharing, reassurance and nurturing resilience.

I want to share the so-called "7 Cs" of building resilience in a child:

1. One - Focus on your and your child's **competencies** or skills
2. Two - Build their **confidence** by noticing and commenting on how well they are adjusting and how they are coping well

3. Three - Stay **Connected** with your children by checking in with them and asking about their feelings and thoughts. Allow your children to reach out to, to text or video call friends they haven't physically spent time with so that they feel connected to their social circle. Connect to mental health resources to guide your family through the surge of stress everyone is feeling.
4. Four – Build **character** – teach your child about having integrity and doing the right thing for a humanitarian cause. Show compassion to families with a member who has contracted COVID-19 and explain to your children that stigmatizing others or discriminating is the wrong response. Give your children household chores and responsibilities and reward them for doing well, as this will make them feel like they belong and give them a sense of co-operation and independence.
5. Five - Get your child to see the **contribution** you are making by staying at home to flatten the curve of COVID-19, or getting involved in charitable causes
6. Six - Teach your child to **cope** by role modelling calm and healthy lifestyle choices and behaviours during stressful times. Parents must work on their own wellness – your kids will feel better when you feel better.
7. Seven - Focus your attention on what you can **control**, as this will give your family a sense of agency. Let go of what is out of your control. Put routines in place that allow your family to feel a semblance of normality. Include daily schedules, tasks such as schoolwork and family game time and so on. This can connect your family in new ways and alleviate feelings of helplessness and boredom.

It's important that parents are able to identify the symptoms that children of different ages might show in response to feeling overwhelmed by the stress of any situation they are in:

When there is an interruption in the natural flow of your child's life, the child may experience anxiety and fear. Parents need to be aware that there are fears that stem from within the child, from fantasies, and fears that are triggered by a real event.

Your child may not have the words to describe anxious feelings. A child, who is dependent on adults for love, care and security, fears most the losing their parents and being left alone. Given that a child finds it difficult to distinguish a real threat from a perceived one, they are more likely to be overwhelmed by fears that have no basis in reality and children may respond to an imagined threat in the same way as to a real threat.

Some children are predisposed to **anxious feelings** and irrational, fearful thoughts. These children may become more anxious after being exposed to news about the pandemic. Even after an event has passed, the **anxiety** may persist.

Most parents are capable of helping their child overcome basic fears. In cases of severe **anxiety**, when the fear persists over an extended period of time or when it interferes with the child's ability to cope and function, early professional intervention will result in better outcomes.

Which symptoms should parents be on the lookout for, to know when to refer a child for **Play Therapy** or an **assessment**:

For pre-school children it's

- when there is regression in developmental milestones or a slowdown in the mastery of new skills.
- It's also in the appearance of sleep disturbances or nightmares, a child regressing to thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, loss of bowel-control.

- Pre-school children may be clinging, crying, whining or screaming as feelings of abandonment may be triggered;
- They may be following a parent everywhere;
- Refuse to let a parent go out for errands and
- Refuse to be left alone;
- Being fearful of darkness or animals;
- Develop a stutter or other speech problems;
- may also tremble or suddenly be unable to move;
- and also re-enact parts of the devastation they have experienced in their play.

Older children understand that life changes can be permanent. They may become preoccupied with the details of the disaster or exhibit fears that seem unrelated to it. Their stress can manifest as:

- Being withdrawn;
 - Expressing irrational fears;
 - Being irritable or having angry outbursts;
 - Being overly-competitive with siblings;
 - Isolating themselves;
 - Refusing to apply themselves to online school/ homework;
 - Being disoriented and/or easily confused;
 - Exhibiting poor concentration and school performance;
 - Losing interest in activities;
 - Expressing physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches or dizziness; and
 - Being depressed, anxious, or emotionally numb.
 - Blaming themselves and feeling guilty about how the crisis has affected their family
 - Feeling Bedtime anxiety with poor sleep; frequent waking and chronic worrying
 - Older children might also feel pervasive sadness: especially when they perceive feelings of being abandoned, or fear of loss of both parents or siblings to COVID-19. They may be afraid of the world ending, or watching their parents die, with this “catastrophizing” based on fears, not facts. They may also become overactive or act irresponsibly to avoid thinking about stressful issues, disrespectfully or rudely and hatefully towards others.

For teenagers feelings of isolation, loneliness and separation anxiety increase with the loss of matric finals exams, or of hopes of moving to university.

- Teenagers who tend to over-achieve academically, in sports or extra-curricular activities may feel a loss of identity when these activities are taken from them.
- Teenagers may also feel insecurity if parents are not available to them because their parents are caught up in their own stress relating to finances, career or relationships.
- Teens may present with difficulty concentrating, physical complaints like chronic headaches, backaches and stomach aches – with their emotions are triggering very real physical pain.

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In conclusion, the impact of COVID-19 will eventually lessen, but untreated psychological damage can have lifelong effects so it's important that parents and teachers know when to intervene and talk to their child, as well as seek additional support.

Reach out for help. The COVID-19 pandemic has not limited your digital access to doctors, psychologists, social workers, to your loved ones or to your church and community. Children and parents must actively deal with negative emotions now to move past the stress of our current situation and find the strength to cope with the challenges ahead.

I want to remind us all that we grow and get stronger through challenges. Our generation of children could become mentally stronger and resilient because of COVID-19. Courageous resilient parenting will create courageous resilient children.