

Parenting during Covid-19

Although my speciality is adolescent psychotherapy, this article is designed to help parents of children of all ages struggling to cope with this pandemic and social isolation.

The information comes from various sources, selected on the basis of what works well from my experience working with families.

Your house, your home

Like you, I did not choose my family and they did not choose me! And everyone now finds themselves living in a home that seems much smaller.

Everyone is enduring prolonged stress around Covid-19. This pandemic creates fears about physical health, as well as psychological health, financial health and our health in the aftermath.

Children will remember this time for the rest of their lives

It is OK for you and everyone else to feel stressed. It's better to tap into that rather than to try to fix it for children and adolescents. Saying "Everything will be OK" to children and adolescents may be received as: "I don't really hear your worries". Likewise, saying: "Don't worry, it'll be all right" can come across as: "I don't really *want* to hear your fears." Better to listen even if you don't have an answer.

There is a reasonable chance someone you know or love may fall ill or even die. But 8 out of 10 people who contract Covid-19 do recover. That is worth sharing with children and adolescents who can see what is happening around them, they want to know the truth and their antennae will pick up adults' reaction.

Adult relationships in the household

Fear does affect adult relationships in your home. When scared, some curl up or go into a comforting cocoon, a suitable word used by the government. Or they may turn on those around them with inevitable friction and conflict.

Avoiding friction from changed roles

- Try to achieve a balance and agree on dividing up household chores.
- In a small space, positive actions should outweigh negative ones.
- Don't let an argument become heated, be the one who lets it go.
- Don't confront over the small stuff.
- Don't let it become personal.
- Actively choose to not have this argument right now.



The disappearance of structures and roles such as schooldays and work schedules can create a sense of groundlessness. There is no kudos for not knowing how to turn on the washing machine. When the structures that define us are gone we are left with who we really are.

Looking after your own mental health

It is normal to be worried about the coronavirus. But to avoid becoming depressed or over-anxious and to regain your sense of self-worth and purpose look for ways to contribute and to be generous to others. Research has shown that generosity is good for your psychological well-being.

It is affirming to: **Appreciate you've chosen to be generous.**

Think of the people you love and who love you. Phone, text or email them regularly to stay in touch.

Giving love is as rewarding as receiving it.

It is affirming to: **Notice and enjoy how good this feels.**

Try not to overeat or drink too much. But we are all trying to survive so if you do overindulge, don't be too hard on yourself.

It is affirming to: **Make a healthy, nutritious meal instead of junk food.**

Don't beat yourself up for what you didn't do, getting out for a walk, yoga or home-schooling.

It is affirming to: **Put your arms across your body and give yourself a hug.**

Helping the children and adolescents in your household

Before Covid-19 childcare was a collaborative effort between parents, guardians, grandparents, other family members, schools and preschools. For now that's all gone. You are both teacher and parent, coping with space and other limitations and possibly feeling very much on your own. For young people as well as adults, problems like anxiety can appear much worse at a time like this.

Practical parenting strategies

Here are some practical suggestions to help you parent through these difficult times.

- Make sure you're up in the morning before your children.
- Choose a time to practice deep breathing exercises to reduce stress levels.
- Plan what you and your children are going to do each day with start and finish hours, replacing partly the routine of school and work.
- Make time for yoga, a walk, or a phone call to a friend or relation, things that support you as a parent.
- Try to have a vision and a goal for you and your children in terms of what you want to achieve in the next few weeks.
- Don't look on this time as an extended summer holiday.

Some useful strategies to help children and adolescents

1. **Concentration** Aim for 1 hour of concentrated work daily, reading a book, doing homework, a research project, keeping a diary. For younger children you can read to them. It is good to start with games and progress to academic work, but not to be too focused on school work. Teach them chess, a board game or a card game.
2. **Creative time** 1 hour a day with no screens, using our creative brain. This can be playing music, learning an instrument, painting, drawing. Singing is particularly good for calming the brain.
3. **Screen time** Your children will be bored and need to contact their friends, so be prepared to extend screen time but set limits. Screens off 30 minutes before sleep time.
4. **Meals and rising times** Make sure the whole family has at least one meal a day together. Eating together reduces the likelihood of eating disorders. Breakfast may not be ideal as children wake at different times, depending on age. Make sure everybody is up before 12 noon and no-one stays in pyjamas all day. Taking a shower discourages that.

5. **Personal hygiene and exercise** Urge them to wash their hands often for at least 20 seconds. There is a danger of slippage since there are no visitors and we are going out much less often. Encourage your children to exercise earlier in the day: walk, kick a ball, trampoline.
6. **Tasks** Though it can be hard to implement and maintain, each person should have their own age-suitable chores, essential to give a sense of productivity and achievement and not let housekeeping fall on one person. Cleaning their room, filling/emptying the dishwasher, exercising pets, cutting the grass.
7. **Fresh air** Even if you have no garden space, go to the door or the window and breathe in fresh air. Focus on the distance or look up at the sky from your window, this will have positive benefits for your wellbeing.
8. **Bedtime** Parameters are essential, but difficult to maintain boundaries. If a teenager's rhythm is out of balance, it can lead to depression and you want your teenager to come out of this in good shape, mentally. You may need to switch off the Wifi or set it to go off at a stated time. This may require negotiation and better if you can reach an agreement with your teenagers but should not be up for negotiation with younger children.

Use hunger to encourage coming off the Playstation: no snacks or drinks while on it, just dinner with whole family in the evening.



Anxiety

Anxiety, the state of unease and worry about imminent danger, is a real problem during these difficult times. Anxious people think negatively and anxious parents teach their children the world is not a safe place. There are situations where anxiety is appropriate and most people can destress after an anxious period, take before and after exams for instance.

Some children and adolescents are prone to anxiety about school, getting everything right, leading to feelings of inadequacy. The anxious child is driven by immense self-pressure, doing homework until the early hours of the morning. They are perfectionists, seeking the perfect diet, sometimes leading to body anxiety and eating disorders.

Coping strategies

Anxious children and adolescents may be worried about death. Avoid offering too much reassurance that it won't happen because anxiety induces a totally irrational state. So first name their fear: "I know you are afraid". Then give age appropriate facts in a positive way. "The Covid-19 virus can cause death, but so far in Ireland only a few hundred have died, this is a tiny percentage of our population of 4 and a half million. That means that there is only a tiny chance that you, or I or Granny will die from it." Then add: "This means **well over 99% will not die from it.**" If you think it will help, draw a graph. This will appeal to the perfectionist brain in these children as you empathise and connect to their way of thinking.

When you are feeling angry with the smaller ones, drop down to their level before you chastise, it is amazing how this will change your reaction.

Be spontaneous with children, start a pillow fight, put on loud music and dance, let them see that if a parent is spontaneous it must be ok. Stressed people produce too much adrenalin and cortisol that you need to use up, exercise and spontaneity are perfect ways to do this.

At meal times give them choices: "Would you like x or y for dinner?" This helps to develop choicefulness, gives them a voice and a sense of autonomy.

It is not good that they stay in their bedroom all day. Set limits to this comfort zone. Drama is great, why not create your own theatre at home, involving everyone in a home made play. This is great for anxious people, forgetting their anxiety for a while.

Meditation and mind-body calming

We don't look for stress it just comes at us! We do need to look for ways to calm ourselves.



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Try this technique throughout the day. Put one hand on your forehead and the other at the back of the neck just at the base of the skull. Try to focus on what is happening in your body before and after. Hold this position for a couple of minutes. Feel how calming this is.

Focus your eyes and your mind on something that will engage for a few seconds or a minute if possible. This might be a fly going up the wall, very calming for the body.

Take one out of the 1440 minutes in the day to breathe, inhale into your tummy for the count of 5, hold for 4 and exhale to count of 7. Increase this to 5 times daily. Stop and look for colours around you.

When you feel shame for overeating, not exercising, attending to homework or other duties, an easy way to meditate is to tap into that feeling in your body, stay with it until you feel it too much just at the point of intolerable, then look out at the sky, or something that makes you feel good and stay with that feeling and come back to tap in to the feeling in the body, notice how it changes

To summarise

- Get up every day before 12 noon.
- Maintain personal hygiene, teeth, shower in the morning and out of pyjamas.
- Give yourself an hour of concentration and an hour of creative activity.
- Get some fresh air and light into your eyes.
- Take exercise, preferably outdoors.
- Everyone sharing in daily chores.
- Stick to meal times and bed times.

Remember every young person is different and quite unique and everything in this article can be adapted to meet your child's need.

All this is temporary, it will come to an end some day. For the moment the task in hand is to get through each day as it comes, while minding our young people and ourselves as parents.