

## **Tips to share with children to help them cope with the 'new normal'**

**by weneedtotalkaboutchildrensmentalhealth**

We are used to life staying pretty much the same – doing the same things, going to the same places and seeing the same people. That has changed with Coronavirus; and we are all having to get used to life being very different – a 'new normal' for a few weeks at least.

It is the same for everyone; and so we are all getting used to it together.

Doing this in a C\*A\*L\*M way will help everyone to get used to it more quickly, and also help everyone to feel less worried generally.

### **C\*A\*L\*M**

#### **C – Create new routines**

Routines help us feel safe. Usually we don't even notice them, and we often take them for granted. But we really miss them when they are gone. Making new routines will be very important over the coming days and weeks. They become the new normal surprisingly quickly – just think of a time when you have been on holiday or to stay with a relative. What are the new routines you are starting to notice?

Some celebrities are helping with exercise, stories or cookery lessons on-line at different times during the day – can you use these to help create new routines as well as seeing a familiar face and trying something new?

Some teachers are sending work so that you can have school lessons at home – can you do these at the same time of day that you used to do them at school?

Some friends and relatives are using FaceTime and other ways to be in touch so that you can still see and hear them – can you arrange a time to 'meet up' on a regular basis?

Mealtimes and bedtimes are a really important part of everyone's routine, especially at a time like this. It is tempting to say they matter less as we don't

have to be anywhere on time; but actually they are more important than ever. They make sure that we eat healthily and get enough sleep – vital to keeping us well and happy.

Some families are using timers as a fun way to make sure they stick to their new routines and move to a different activity, a different room, or into the garden at different times during the day. Have you got something you could use as a timer? Alexa is brilliant, or an alarm clock, a phone or a kitchen buzzer?

It helps us if we do set things at set times in the day because it gives us something to look forward to. It also makes sure we do different types of things during the day instead of just doing the same thing, it helps us do the things we are less keen on but need to do, and it keeps us busy so we have less time to focus on our worries.

What does your new routine look like?

### **A – Ask a grown up**

If you have any questions or worries it helps to share them with a parent or another grown-up or older brother or sister. They may not have all the answers but knowing someone cares and is listening is often the most important thing when we have something that is bothering us.

There is so much news about Coronavirus and it is changing all the time so it is really important that we try to switch off from it most of the time. If you want an update stick to places like Newsround for information you know that you can trust.

If worries are going around and around in your head, then sometimes writing them down or drawing them can help. Some children find making a 'worry box' really helpful so that you can keep them in one place and put a lid on them, and even give them to a grown-up to look after. If worries are taking over then use a timer to give yourself a 'worry ten minutes' in your routine to try and make sure they don't take up the whole day. Drawing a 'worry monster' poster to stick on your bedroom door can help scare off worries so that they don't bother you at bed time.

One of the most helpful ways of managing worries is to sort them into things you can do something about and things you can't do anything about. With Coronavirus there is lots that we can't control but you can wash your hands at the recommended times, you can cough into your elbow and you can keep a safe space away from people when you go outside.

Maybe you have learnt about mindfulness in school and can make time for it in your new routine. You can teach it to the grown-ups in your house too! If it is not something you know about maybe you can learn about it online. It is a good skill for helping you to relax and gets much easier to do the more you practice.

If you have a big worry and don't feel you can tell the grown-ups then can you telephone or message an adult you trust? Or contact a helpline like Childline?.

### **L – Lovely activities**

The best way to keep worries in their place is to fill your time with things you love! Now is the time to search through your cupboards to find games, books and activities you had forgotten about or didn't get around to doing. Old activities you used to do when you were younger can be particularly comforting at a time like this. Make a list of new things you want to try - there are lots of brilliant art, craft, music and sporty ideas online. It really is a chance to let your imagination take over and involve the whole family! Maybe use the alphabet to make a list of things you can all try! Cut them out and put them in a box and pull one out at a time so each day feels like a surprise.

A favourite film or a favourite story is a great way to escape into another world for a bit, or looking through old photographs is a lovely way of remembering happy times.

Being kind to yourself by doing things you love, and treating others kindly is more important than ever. Doing kind things for people in your family will make them feel amazing; and it will make you feel amazing too!

### **M – Making the most of it**

Everyone is missing out on lots of things because of Coronavirus. Feeling sad, angry, cross, fed up, frightened, and just about everything else are all very

understandable. Everyone will be feeling like this from time to time. Doing something active like running, jumping or even punching a pillow can help with these strong feelings.

We can also try to think about it in another way – Coronavirus has given us all a chance do the things we don't usually get a chance to do.

Everybody in the country is in the same situation – and actually all across the world. This is an important time in history and it will become a date everyone learns about for generations to come. How are you going to remember what you did to get through Coronavirus in 2020? What will you tell people in the future, maybe even your own children? Perhaps you could keep a special journal or vlog? Already ideas that are special to this time are spreading – like the rainbows in windows and the clap for the NHS. What else can we spread around the world now that we have a chance? Let your imagination take over!

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## **2.....and getting through lockdown together with teenagers**

**by weneedtotalkaboutchildrensmentalhealth**

My first blog in this series of 2 is aimed at helping families think together about how they can get through the next few weeks of lock down from a well-being perspective Tips to share with children to help them cope with the new normal. I use the acronym C\*A\*L\*M to talk about Creating new routines, Asking the grown-ups whenever kids have worries, Lovely things you can enjoy to help you through, and Making the most of the new opportunities this historic event provides; in spite of all the really hard things it also imposes. I share ideas about how to involve children in this process; offering them some control in a situation where we are all feeling pretty powerless.

Lots of people have asked me to write something similar for teenagers. All of the above applies, of course, as it does for every one of us. However, involving teenagers risks putting parents immediately into a double bind. It is really hard

for us grown-ups to 'get it right' where teenagers are concerned; and their first response to an idea is often to reject it – regardless of how good the idea might be. Even introducing the idea of talking about their ideas is likely to be kicked into touch.

I picked my moment and asked my own teenagers if they would help me come up with ways to get around this trap. At first they said no, of course, or words to that effect. But bit by bit they have contributed lots to this blog. In fact, that is my main message – to offer opportunities, anticipate rejection, but keep the door open for them to join you in their own time. And be genuinely grateful when they do. But don't go over the top with that gratitude or even mention it.....

An acronym to summarise this is O\*A\*K – which is really fitting actually as it requires us as grown-ups to stand steady throughout the storms, and be a calm presence when the sun does eventually come out.

**O – offer opportunities often**

**A – anticipate rejection**

**K – keep the door open**

I shared this acronym with my teenagers and they hated it, of course. They then spent a fun five minutes coming up with alternatives – you can imagine how that went. We settled on C\*R\*A\*P because that pretty much sums up what lockdown feels like.

It is rubbish for everyone, of course, but out of every generation it could be argued that teenagers are uniquely disadvantaged during enforced house arrest. Developmentally, their main tasks are to separate from their families, connect with their peer group and form intimate relationships. This is all now rendered impossible. They have no escape, they have to be at home, and they cannot see their friends.

Some parents will be secretly delighted that this natural drive to escape has been curtailed and they are back in the nest; particularly at a time like this when everyone is feeling anxious. But the nest is the last place that most teenagers are likely to want to be.

This tension of going out/staying in has always been around in families – but now it is enforceable by law and there really is no choice. The one advantage of that, of course, is that it is no longer a battle between you and them. Deep down they do know that, but their anger and frustration is likely to be directed at you anyway – because where else can it go?

There are some exceptions of course, and lots of parents of children who are very anxious or have additional learning needs are sharing that life is actually easier for them in some ways. They are enjoying a bizarre honeymoon of not having to get their kids to places they find difficult to be in; take part in activities they find really hard to do; or engage with people they struggle to be with.

But mostly it is C\*R\*A\*P, and for everyone there will be C\*R\*A\*P bits. Here are some thoughts about what might help:

### **C – Crashing is understandable**

Our teenagers have been hurtling towards major milestones since they first started school. They have never had a say in this; rather it is an unwritten rule embedded in our culture - one that has loomed larger and larger in recent years. I am talking about external exams; GCSEs and 'A' levels. The 'business end' of school, as they are often referred to. Suddenly they are gone, disappearing before our very eyes. No one in the history of the British education system could have predicted this, and our teenagers, who are most impacted by it, are having to face it....alone.

It is like speeding towards a final destination and then suddenly flying off the edge of a cliff. Even for those not sitting external exams it is a derailment. The mantra that their future depends on working towards these goals, a mantra that has been chanted throughout their lives like a humming motor, has been silenced. Gone.

My daughter's GCSE art boards still lie on our kitchen table, shrouded in bin bags, like a corpse. It is a bereavement with no funeral. The prom dress hangs in the spare room like a (subtle and tasteful) bridal gown with no wedding. As adults we know these things will get sorted, and plans will be made to address

the losses....but for our kids? Right now? It is carnage. They are in shock, and the overwhelming urge must be to crash...and sleep it off.

It is tempting to say reassuring things like 'at least the pressure of exams is off'. That has certainly been on the tip of my tongue many times and may have even slipped out. For some young people that might help. I would be cautious though. It is a complicated bereavement, like the death of a relative you don't really like. Only you know how you want to manage such a sensitive loss. Better to ask open questions.....'how are you feeling about not sitting your exams having been building up to it for so long?' Take a guess that it is probably a mixture of emotions. Some will have wanted their chance to shine, others will feel guilty about not doing more during the year, pinning everything on the exams. Reassure them by saying everyone is in the same boat. It is their year group and sense of a nationwide Coronavirus cohort that will mainly get them through this.

But what about routine? What about schoolwork that still needs completing? What about the learning and revision they are missing out on? I asked my kids:

"First of all, there are a lot of hours in the day and a lot of time to find a balance. We know what we need to do. Secondly, all the build-up is about eventually finding a job and settling down. None of that matters if you don't have good mental health so it is important to prioritise that first. This is a really stressful time so not the best time to put pressure on us".

### **R – Rooms are their sanctuary**

Social media means that we are constantly bombarded with images of happy families enjoying holidays and meals out and fun times together. The reality is that these are moments in time in some peoples lives and mostly teenagers are either out or in their rooms. I anticipate that lockdown will show the equivalent images of family craft and baking, hilarious Tik Tok videos and board games. Again, these are moments in time, and mostly teenagers will be in their rooms.

As parents we often struggle with this. We want them with us, to know they are ok, to see what they are up to, and to join in our 'fun' plans. When I asked my kids about this they said 'It is because we like it in our rooms'. It is as simple

as that. This, of course, makes perfect sense when we think that their main task is to separate from us.

It is important, therefore, to respect their privacy, allow their room to be their domain over which they have some control, and knock before waiting to be invited in. If they share a room and want their own space is there a temporary arrangement you can come to? Even if it is just some time when each of them will not be disturbed? Connecting with friends on social media is likely to be a life line for them, and some privacy to do this is essential.

But what about mealtimes? What about the mess and washing and dishes? What about spending hours on line or gaming? What about exercise and fresh air? I asked my kids:

“A lot of the time kids stay in their rooms to avoid being nagged to do stuff. The important thing is to make sure that the atmosphere when they do come out is comfortable, and somewhere they want to be. Being asked to do the dishwasher might seem like a little thing for you, but for them it might be the last thing they need after a really bad day on line. That doesn't mean they won't do it, just let them decide when.”

### **A – Acknowledge how hard this is**

Lockdown and Coronavirus is really hard for all of us. When things upset our kids the overriding desire for parents is to try and make it better. Often we do this by focusing on the positives, offering cheery platitudes and using humour. This can work really well and the great thing about teenagers is that they let you know immediately if it does. You will also get a clear message if it bombs. Jokes about having an excuse to sit in front of a screen all day or not having to revise can go down very badly.....

Try instead saying things like ‘this is tough’, or take a guess at how they may be feeling. You will get it wrong, of course, but they will clock your efforts at some level. Acknowledge your own feelings – Scared? Sad? Lonely? Bored? Angry? Disappointed? I have certainly felt all of these things in the past few days.

Don't underestimate the power of listening and being around. It may not feel like you are doing anything to help, but actually these are the crucial qualities all parents can offer. It is a rare silver lining in this horrible mess that we are

with our kids when they need us most – and when we need them most too. You will argue, of course, but the making up is critical – and reaching out with an O\*A\*K branch is more important than ever if you fall out.

But what if they blank me? What if they slam the door in my face? What if they are rude and take their anger out on me? I asked my kids:

“You never know what is going on in someone’s head, and you don’t know what has happened in their day, even just in their room. No one should tolerate abuse but if you try to understand where they are coming from, that there are things going on that you might not know about, you will make their lives so much easier even if they don’t show it.”

### **P – Persevere**

The most important message of all is to persevere, and never give up. Preserving your relationship, or building your relationship if you struggled before lockdown, is the main priority. It is the key to getting through this. This is where O\*A\*K really comes into its own:

### **O – offer opportunities often**

### **A – anticipate rejection**

### **K – keep the door open**

Nostalgia can be a temptation that is hard for even teenagers to resist. Favourite meals, old board games, photo albums, movies, and family stories.....now is the time to revisit them all. And when they don’t work, which they probably won’t, revisit them again, and enjoy them for yourself anyway. That little kid is still in there.

Talk in their presence about all the things you love about them; all the things you admire about them and all the things you hope for them even though they might ignore and reject it. Write a note and shove it under their bedroom door. Most importantly let them know how proud you are of how they are coping with a global pandemic that has stopped everyone and everything in its tracks. I know that I am super proud of mine.

When I asked my kids about a final message they said:

“Teenagers can be horribly stubborn and relentlessly cruel. But in all cases, this is just a wall put up to hide insecurities, vulnerabilities and fears that they just don’t want you to see. Helping them isn’t about exposing those vulnerabilities, it’s about recognising they exist, and doing what you can to take the weight off their shoulders.”

Proud indeed.

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