

PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

STRATEGIES TO HELP GRIEVING CHILDREN & TEENS COPE WITH ANXIETY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Anxiety is one of the most common grief reactions for children and teens. The world no longer feels safe, because they understand people die. They wonder what else might happen, and these kinds of thoughts heighten their worries and fears. In addition, anxiety may change their eating or sleeping patterns. Adults can play a role in helping children and teens cope with their anxiety. Research confirms the psychological well-being of the caregiver is the best predictor of how children and teens will cope after a significant loss. Consider implementing some of the following to help your grieving children and teens:

- Validate their anxiety rather than trying to convince them they shouldn't feel anxious. Explain that many children worry someone else might also die after they lose a loved one.
- For younger children it may help to use the word 'stress' or 'worry' rather than anxiety, because they may not understand what anxious means.
- If their loved one died suddenly, children may want to know how to call 911. Teens may want to know how to administer CPR.
- Don't promise nothing will happen to you but provide reassurance about the ways you work hard to stay healthy and safe. Talk openly about what plans you have in the unlikely circumstance that something did happen to you.
- See your doctor for an annual physical exam.
 - Your doctor may be able to reassure your children about your health status.
 - Show a copy of your physical to your teens who may be more reluctant to voice their anxiety.
 - If you do have health concerns, be honest with your children. Don't promise everything will be fine.
- Promote regular exercise. This will help create a more positive mood and improve sleep. Encourage getting outside and some physical activity, when possible. The phrase "action absorbs anxiety" explains it all.
- Be consistent with bedtime and routines related to sleeping.
- Encourage children to be involved in activities they enjoy.
- Introduce journaling or making a memory book – this is surprisingly therapeutic.

- Suggest writing worries on paper; then crumpling them up, tearing or burning them.
- Create a “Relaxation Space” or a “Relaxation Basket.”
 - Fill a basket with items that help relax your child such as a blanket, pleasing scents, food, music, books, and photographs.
 - Think of all five senses – sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste.
- Become aware of your own anxiety level and be intentional about making choices to decrease your own stress. Develop a plan to manage your own feelings. Be a role model for your children, as they take their cues from you.
- Minimize children’s exposure to the media. Listening to constant updates can increase fear and anxiety. Explain that not everything they hear or see on social media or television is accurate.
- Involve your children in some way to help others – letters to first responders, helping with donations, making masks or dropping off food for a shut in. These are ways that encourage thinking of others instead of focusing on their own worries.
- Model and encourage healthy eating habits.
- Teach and model simple breathing techniques. Breathe in through your nose, hold your breath, and then out for the count of three with pursed lips, similar to blowing out a candle.
- Focus on the positive. Take advantage of having more time together as a family. Engage in family projects. Being and interacting together in fun ways provides a sense of security and reassurance.
- Bedtime and riding in the car are two great times to initiate conversation. Use these times to check in with your child and find out what questions they have. Emotion focused therapists say “name it to claim it” or another way to view it is “grief expressed is grief diminished.”
- If anxiety appears pervasive and begins to interfere with your child’s ability to function throughout the day, it may be necessary to seek support from a therapist or physician to discuss the possible benefits of medication.



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