

Coronavirus – Tips to support mental health & wellbeing #3 – 3rd April 2020

We are in week 2 of the more stringent lock-down rules set out by the Government, originally we were told that this level of lock-down was 3 weeks but it's likely that it will be much longer than that – certainly if you look at what is happening in countries such as Italy, Spain and France.

This means that you are potentially going to be spending a lot more 'quality time' with your immediate family members than you ever have done before – perhaps even more than your annual 2-week summer holiday – whether you usually go away together or have a staycation.

For some families this may be an ideal time to strengthen relationships and spend really good focused days together and for many others, this may mean you are living in a pressure cooker and what felt like good relationships before start to get a bit frazzled.

It has to be acknowledged that this is a time where tensions can be amplified, and new (or old) conflicts can arise, resulting in unhappy households and negative feelings. It is stressful spending 24 hours a day with the same people, our routines have been thrown out of the window and for many people there is added serious stress, e.g. financial worries, home-schooling pressure and feeling fearful about the virus itself.

This article focuses on 2 key areas to try and support you with ideas to get through this period:

1. **Diffusing conflict and keeping relationships as steady and calm as you can**
2. **Keeping the family dynamic united in doing things together**

Part 1 – Diffusing conflict and keeping relationships as steady and calm as you can

It is likely that there will be unrest in many households whilst people feel cooped up and feelings of frustration of not being able to engage with usual everyday life set in.

Conflict doesn't have to be a fully blown argument or shouting match – common forms of low-level conflict can be a more passive-aggressive styles where conversations are niggly or lead to minor fall-outs, or family members drop in snippy or snide comments and comebacks during conversations (sound familiar to anyone?). These can zap energy and create a heavy feeling.

It's true to say that some relationships actually thrive on a bit of conflict but the imposed isolation measures can rocket the everyday levels right out of the stratosphere.

Here are some ideas to help you work better with conflict:

Expect

Expect that it's going to be a stressful time and consider how you want to react to this

- Think about what your normal response is when you feel very stressed and how you usually express this
- Acknowledge honestly to yourself what you could change in your usual response(s) to be able to manage this better
- Think about a traffic light system for yourself, what is happening when you move from green to amber and how are you feeling? Can you notice this & remove yourself from others before you're fully in the amber space – before you get to **red**? (this is a cool down technique)

- When you are feeling calm and composed, it can be a good time to create a plan for yourself about your key stress areas and how you can deal with them – when you're angry, anxious, frustrated or panicked, it's very hard to think calmly and rationally – which means actions and behaviours are often not calm or rational – maybe create a family calm-down plan?

Look and Listen

Look and listen in a purposeful way for signs of tension or unrest in family members

- People experience stress and pressure in different ways, if relatives aren't telling you how they feel, look for other signs such as upset stomachs, headaches, redness in the face, irritability, big change in breathing. In children, you might see regression (doing things from when they were much younger like tantrums, thumb sucking, bed wetting, night terrors, disruption with food) or more clinginess to you
- Notice how people react to you and your actions => you might be influencing other people's moods more than you realise
- Listen to the language that relatives are using, notice if they are rooted in negativity so they can be supported to think of things with a more hopeful outlook – examples of this could be "I can't cope", "I'm so frightened", "I can't deal with this", "This is never gonna end"
- Being proactive in your communication about what you are seeing can help, using humour to diffuse a 'bad atmosphere' or encouraging some movement to 'shake it off' to move bad energy on are options to try and derail a bad day and morph it into a more positive one (might be more challenging with teenagers 😊)

Act with kindness

Act kindly and proactively to manage feelings and thoughts with tools, strategies and awareness

- Cognitive Flexibility (buzz word alert!) is important here. It means having the ability to see there are different solutions to conflict and being willing to try other strategies
- Pick your battles. Try to take a different perspective on the smaller things that you could just let go of instead of going to war about them
- If you are in conflict, own what you are saying with 'I' statements that explain why you feel frustrated not 'you' statements that are loaded with accusation. When you go on the offensive, the other person will move into defence and the probability of resolution starts to decrease rapidly for example use "I felt upset when you left all that stuff out all over the kitchen after I'd spent so much time & effort tidying up yesterday" instead of "you have left a right mess in the kitchen and it was so clean and tidy before"
- Breathe – using calming techniques to focus on your breath and your other senses will keep you grounded and help you to keep your thoughts in the front part of your brain that looks after the rational, logical responses. There were a few options shared in last week's article for helpful websites and apps
- Cognitive re-framing (another buzz word!) means taking control of how you think and view things. Instead of telling yourself how awful everything is, use positive statements to yourself (and others) about "I am ok", "I can handle this", "this is going to pass, it's not forever"
- Humour – laughing and smiling releases positive hormones in our brains and helps us to feel good (much like cuddling) and using humour can really ease or relax tension. Being silly and getting in touch with your 'inner child' can help with this – why not hop or skip around your house, do some star jumps, tell some silly jokes or do some impressions of famous people
- If you are modelling acting with kindness well, you may influence other members of your household to do the same – this will bring down the collective tension and means you all operate from a lower stress level from the get-go

Part 2 – Keeping the family dynamic united in doing things together

Ideas for families with youngsters, tweens or teens at home

- For parents working from home, try to take turns working and parenting or schooling
- Set up web chat ‘dates’ with school friends for children & young people
- Don’t forget about your own needs and try to find your own rest or switch off time
- Make yourself a 1 Second Everyday photo montage (download the App 1SE)
- Make a short movie – stop motion using household items, a drama or comedy (lots of Apps available to do this, think Wallace & Gromit ☺)
- Find it hard to be creative? Why not join in with the CH Rainbow challenge? Colouring in is therapeutic, you can display your rainbow in your house, scan or take a picture and email it to us and we can display it at CH too – let’s connect whilst we’re distanced

Come out of this with a new skill!

- Dust off that guitar, drum set, recorder (??) and teach yourself some tunes – there are lots of apps you can use for instruments if you don’t have any at home and plenty of tutorials on YouTube for all sorts of music
- Online quizzing has seen a huge surge, these can be done against other people, within your household or outside – again, lots of free options, for example:
<https://www.challengethebrain.com/questions-and-answers-family-quiz.htm> or
<http://www.freepubquiz.co.uk/family-quiz.html>
- Fancy filling your brain with something other than coronavirus! (Who remembers Brexit!?!?) There are lots of free options, simply put ‘free online courses’ into your search window and the world is your oyster (at a 2 metre distance obv)
- Or you could do some physical therapy for your brain by downloading a Brain Training app – these have lots of puzzles, crosswords, Sudoku, word searches etc – even if you find 10 mins in your day to switch things up for yourself and get a total break from everything else
- You could go out! (virtually) – Chester Zoo & Edinburgh Zoo are doing live animal feeds and talks regularly, many museums are offering virtual tours too – find out more about this here => <https://www.timeout.com/travel/virtual-museum-tours>

Time for fun

- Getting outside is a bit more challenging right now, try to find an indoor space that enables you to be active whilst your inside
- If you do have a garden, it’s a great time to prepare it for the summer – trim back the bushes, get the weeds out etc.
- Plan in some fun days out in readiness for us being able to socialise again – choosing what you’ll do and where you’ll go together could create something positive to look forward to
- Create a scavenger hunt with random household items to be found against the clock
- Get your family onto the Houseparty app so you can have a family party together one evening or afternoon

Remember we have a support line that we man between us Mon-Fri 09.00-17.00 that you can call if you want to talk over anything in this article, or the previous two – or just want a general chat for some emotional support with somebody completely separate to your household – the number is 07500-882834.

We hope this is helpful to you, keep calm, this will pass, stay home and keep safe.

Tash, Catherine, Rach, Frankie and Sarah x