



Children Under Pressure: Managing Stress and Supporting Children During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Transforming Children's Lives



The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to [deliver the highest standards of care](#), [advance the science of the developing brain](#) and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to [support children when and where they need it most](#).

Our Work

Research



We are at the forefront of neuroscience efforts to find objective biological measures of mental illness that will lead to earlier diagnosis, more individualized treatment methods, and new and better interventions.

Clinical Care



We provide world-class clinical care to children struggling with mental health and learning disorders. We have helped thousands of children get the help they need in our offices and in their communities.

Public Education



We equip millions of parents, educators and policymakers with the information they need to end the stigma and misinformation that cause so many children to miss out on life-changing treatment.



Back-to-School Resources for Families and Educators

ACCESS NOW

childmind.org

Let's take a mindful minute



Today's Agenda

- Discussion of stress during COVID-19
- Features of anxiety disorders and how to support kids
- Behavioral strategies
- Stress management and Supporting children





Stress and COVID-19

Accepting our “New Normal”



- Understand that uncertainty is stressful
 - This is an invisible threat and anxiety is expected
 - There will be good days and “not so good” days
- It’s normal for children (and you, too) to mourn the loss of typical school and a normal routine
- Remember that our thoughts affect our feelings which affect our behaviors and actions

Understanding the New Challenges

- Managing anxiety about sending our children back in the classroom while also trying to remain calm
- Necessity to enforce safety measures while also trying to teach
- Public health recommendations are in direct conflict with educational best practices
- Balancing professional and personal life
- Difficulty finding moments to feel grounded and centered
- Acknowledging and accepting our mixed emotions
 - Grateful to have children return to school, while also feeling anxious about exposure
- How do we look forward?—prepare for joy!

Typical Responses to a Stressful Situation

- We all respond to stress in a different way, children will likely respond to stress in the following:
 - Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
 - Regressive behaviors
 - Clinginess or separation anxiety; need for extra attention
 - Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
 - Poor school performance or acting out
 - Difficulty with attention and concentration
 - Irritability and disruptive behaviors
 - Excessive worry or sadness
 - Unexplained aches and pains
 - Excessive fatigue

Appropriately Responding to Stress

- Remember that kids are feeling just as destabilized as we are
 - Expect an increase in disruptive behavior, acting out and tantrums
- Collect yourself and remain empathetic towards children
 - Remind them of behavioral expectations when needed
- Rely on support from others
- Communicate with teachers and school
- Keep things light when you can
 - Remember to create time for fun



Kids Experience Stress Even Under Typical Circumstances

School

- Homework
- Managing schedules
- Organization
- Teachers

Social

- Negotiating friendships
- Managing social activities

Family

- Limits
- Expectations
- Conflict
- Multiple relationships

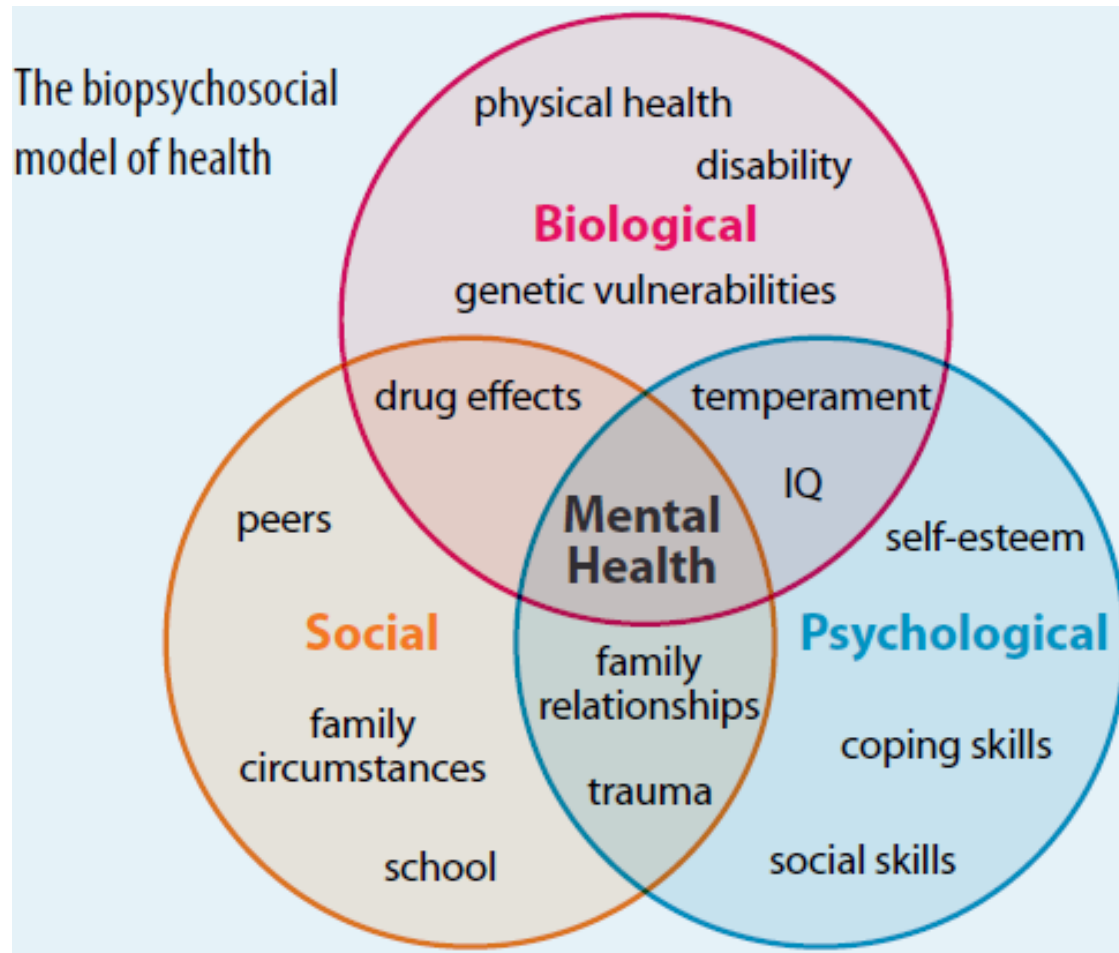
Balance

- How to make it all work
- Time management

+ COVID-19

- Disrupted schedule and routines
- Normal activities canceled
- Separation from peers
- Lots of time with family
- Worry about illness
- Uncertainty

The Biopsychosocial Model: Considering the Whole Picture



Mental Health

Younger Children:

- Seeking Reassurance
- Clingy
- Tantrums
- Disruption in sleep
- Physical symptoms of anxiety

Teens

- Lack of motivation
- Anxiety/Worry
- Depression/Isolation
- Disappointment
- Mourning loss of connection

Young Adults

- Worry/Anxiety
- Depression
- Increased dependence
- Disappointment
- Missing connection

Pre- COVID-19 Mental Health and Learning Disorders

- ADHD/Learning Disorders
- Anxiety/Depression
- Behavioral Disorders
- Autism/Developmental Disorders

Adjustment period is normative – be mindful of persistent symptoms

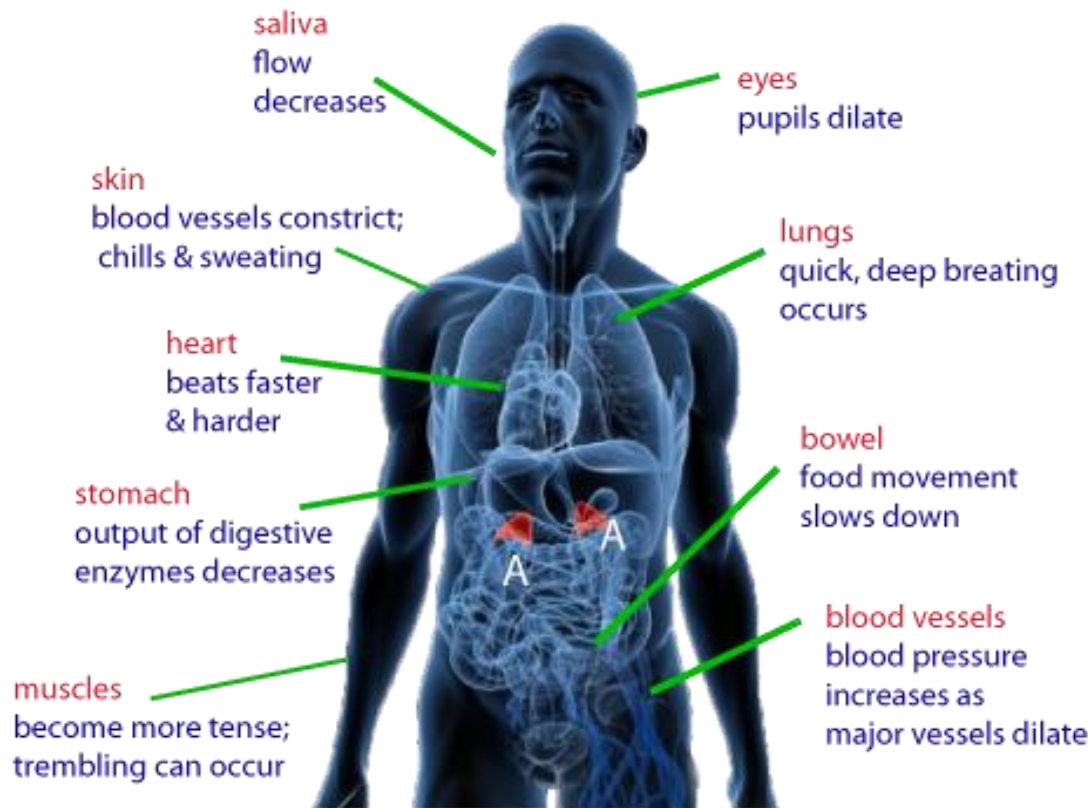


Anxiety and COVID-19

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and adaptive system in our body that tells us when we are in danger. It's not just a psychological state, it's a physical experience.

Fight or Flight Response



Helpful Anxiety vs. Unhelpful Anxiety

- Sometimes our bodies warn us about danger that is not real, like a false alarm
- Anxiety becomes problematic when it gets in the way of a child's ability to function
- Consider these factors:
 - **Intensity:** What is the degree of the child's stress?
 - **Duration/Flexibility:** Can the child recover when the source of stress goes away?
 - **Impairment:** Does the stress interfere with the child's daily life?

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders have a couple things in common:

Difficulty tolerating uncertainty
Avoidance



They can't make anxiety go away, but children can:

Learn to recognize when they're feeling anxious
Learn to manage their symptoms without avoiding what makes them anxious

Characteristics of Unhelpful Anxiety

Unrealistic

Out of proportion

Overly self-conscious

Unwanted and
uncontrollable

Doesn't go away

Leads to avoidance

Reassurance Seeking

A form of accommodation frequent in children with anxiety

Seeking comfort that their fears won't come true, or that everything will be ok

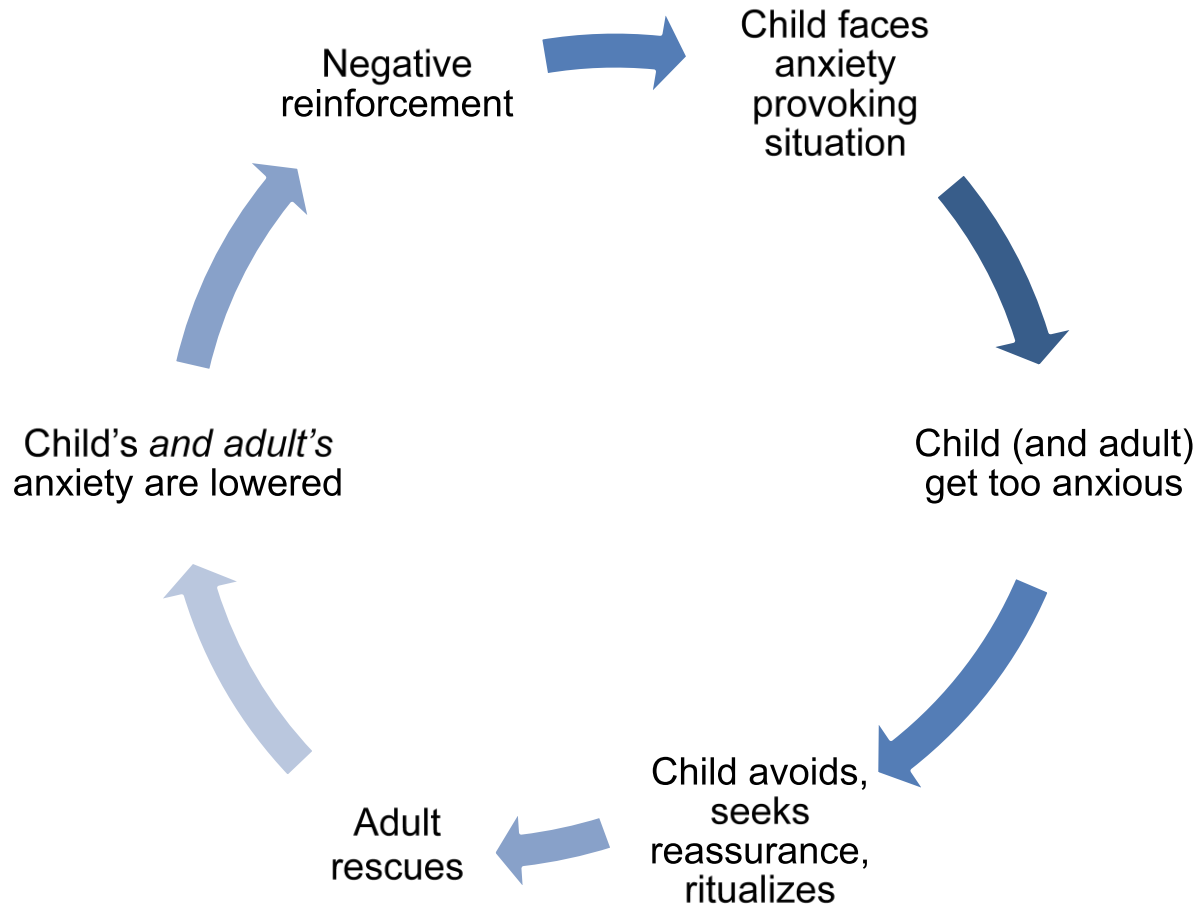
Repeatedly asking questions that have already been answered, or that they know the answer to

Provides short term relief from anxiety, but maintains it in the long run

Accommodations

- Adults may inadvertently play a role in children's anxiety symptoms by:
 - Participating in a child's anxiety behaviors
 - Helping children avoid anxiety-provoking situations
 - Changing routines to avoid triggering student's anxiety
 - Answering reassurance seeking questions
 - Taking on extra responsibilities
- Accommodations help children avoid doing what they fear → Avoidance maintains anxiety in the long run because kids do not learn that their fears do not come true
- Anxious children need to learn that they can face their fears independently, using coping skills

Negative Reinforcement Cycle of Anxiety



Anxiety and COVID-19

- How might COVID-19 affect kids with anxiety?
 - There is a lot of uncertainty, which can be difficult for kids with anxiety to tolerate
 - Big changes in daily routine, schedule and expectations
 - Lots of media coverage about people getting sick, worry for themselves and family members
 - For some kids, food and economic insecurity or uncertainty
 - Adult anxiety levels are elevated
 - Adults may be more likely to accommodate anxiety behaviors and answer reassurance seeking questions
 - We don't know how long this will last

How to Help Anxious Kids



- Model coping & resilience
- Remain (or appear) calm
- Normalize & validate reactions
- Maintain or re-establish routines & expectations
- Provide comfort & age-appropriate information
 - Remain informed using credible sources
 - Limit media exposure and correct inaccurate information
 - Ask what questions kids have
- Support of a primary caregiver or trusted adult

Talking to Kids

- Find a calm, undistracted time to help children understand their feelings
- Reassure children that they are safe to the extent possible
 - **Validate** fears and feelings of uncertainty
 - **Balance** with information about safety
- Kids feel better when they are kept in the loop, but keep it simple
- Be **pro-active** and ask kids how they feel and what questions they have
- Be **patient** and remember kids take in information a little bit at a time
- Use clear, direct, age-appropriate language
 - Avoid euphemisms
 - Let children's questions guide you

General Rules for Handling Anxiety



Do:

- Express positive and realistic expectations
- Respect the child's feelings
- Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety
- Think things through with the child
- Model healthy ways of handling anxiety

Don't:

- Avoid things just because they make a child anxious
- Ask leading questions
- Reinforce the child's fears
- Accommodate anxiety behaviors
- Give excessive reassurance

The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help children manage it.



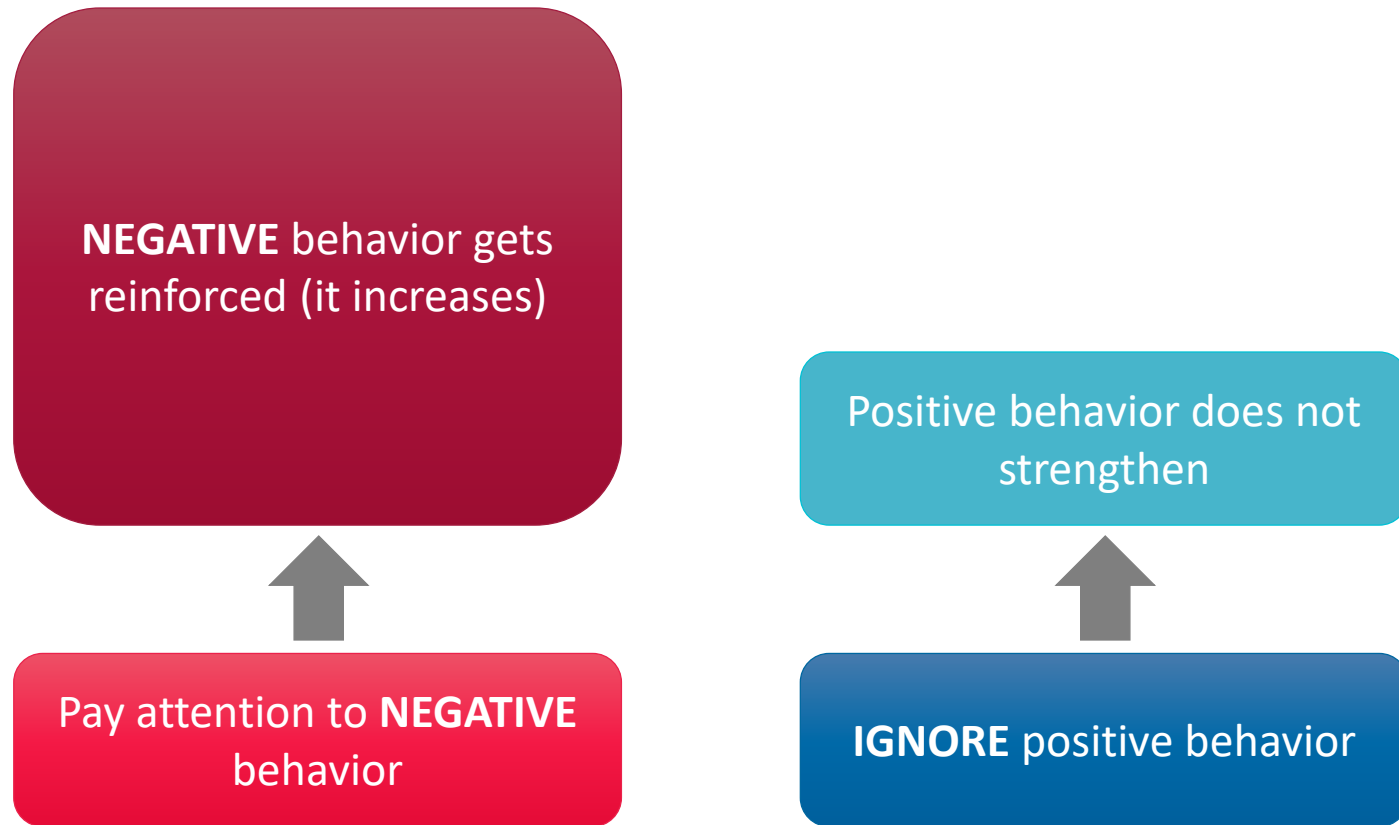
Behavior Management Strategies

Model Positive Behaviors

- Now more than ever we must teach, and model use of adaptive coping skills
- If appropriate, talk aloud when you are having a stressful day to show how you solve problems and handle strong emotions
- Help children identify and manage emotions— at the right time!
 - Strike when the iron is cold



The Power of Your Attention



The Power of Your Attention

Become a detective for positive behavior!



NEGATIVE behavior reduces



IGNORE negative behavior

Positive behavior
STRENGTHENS



Pay attention to **POSITIVE** behavior

How to Make Praise Most Effective

- Be specific
- Be consistent
- Be sincere
- Occurs immediately after the behavior
- Occurs when you are physically close*
- Use non-verbal reinforces
- Use at a high dose (3:1 ratio)
- Focus on behaviors you want to **increase**



Creating Effective Positive Feedback

- State praises with positive behaviors:

Problem Behavior	Positive Opposite Behavior
Disobeying	Listening/following directions
Interrupting	Waiting turn to speak
Not wearing mask	Wearing mask appropriately
Getting too close to other students	Standing 6 feet apart

- Examples of effective positive feedback:
 - “Thank you for getting ready for school on time”
 - “Great job waiting so patiently”
 - “I love how you are wearing your mask appropriately”
 - “Great job standing 6 feet apart”

Describing/Positive Attending

- Point out child's specific **positive** behaviors
- Describe behaviors you want to see **more** of
- This provides feedback and reinforcement for appropriate behaviors
- Examples:
 - “I see that you are so focused on your work”
 - “Great job keeping your mask on in class”





Promoting self care

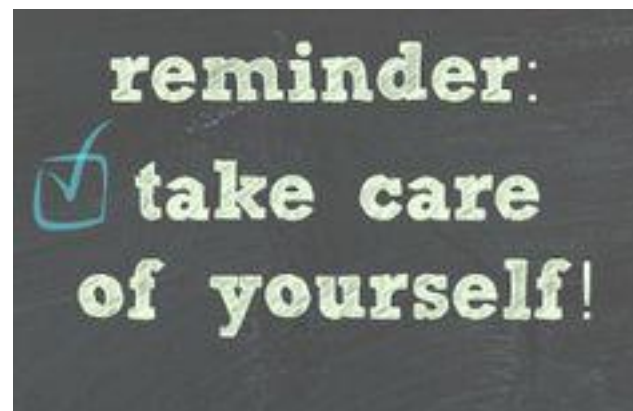
Self Care: It's Not Just an Afterthought!

- Airplane analogy: Put on your own oxygen mask first
- Schedule self care



May Vary <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dacran/2596478381/>

- Assess barriers to self care and plan around them
- Know when you need help for yourself



Psychological First Aid



Do What is Needed

- Focus on concrete needs first
 - food, safety, healthcare, technology, etc...
- Normalize feelings of sadness, frustration and anger
- Problem-solve the things that are hardest right now
- Ask kids how they are doing and what questions they have (follow their lead)
- Ask kids again how they are and what questions they have



Prioritizing Compassionate Self-Care

- During this time, everyone's stress is running high. We need to prioritize compassionate self-care now more than ever before:
 - Intentionally create time for yourself
 - Be thoughtful of how you're treating yourself and your body
 - Reconnect with activities that you once loved
 - Limit consumption of news
 - Be realistic with your expectations
 - Set boundaries with yourself and others, understand when you're getting too much information
 - Prioritize kindness and self-compassion



What is Helpful Right Now?

How Adults Respond Can Help Kids Cope

Age appropriate information, comfort, and help

Remain or appear calm

Focus on coping and resilience

Support of a primary caregiver

Limit media exposure (younger kids)

Ask kids what they see and hear in the media and
correct inaccurate information (older kids)

Validate (others and self)

DO:

Listen

Reflect

Connect

Don't:

Cheerlead out

Turn to logic

Fix right away

How to Help (continued)

- ◆ Lead with empathy and encouragement
- ◆ Refrain from inserting our own worries onto our children
- ◆ Help our children know we are going to move forward together
- ◆ Praise children when they come to us and sharing thoughts and feelings → creates open dialogue
- ◆ Checking in!
- ◆ Be clear and consistent with rules
- ◆ Encouragement and promoting resilience by modeling



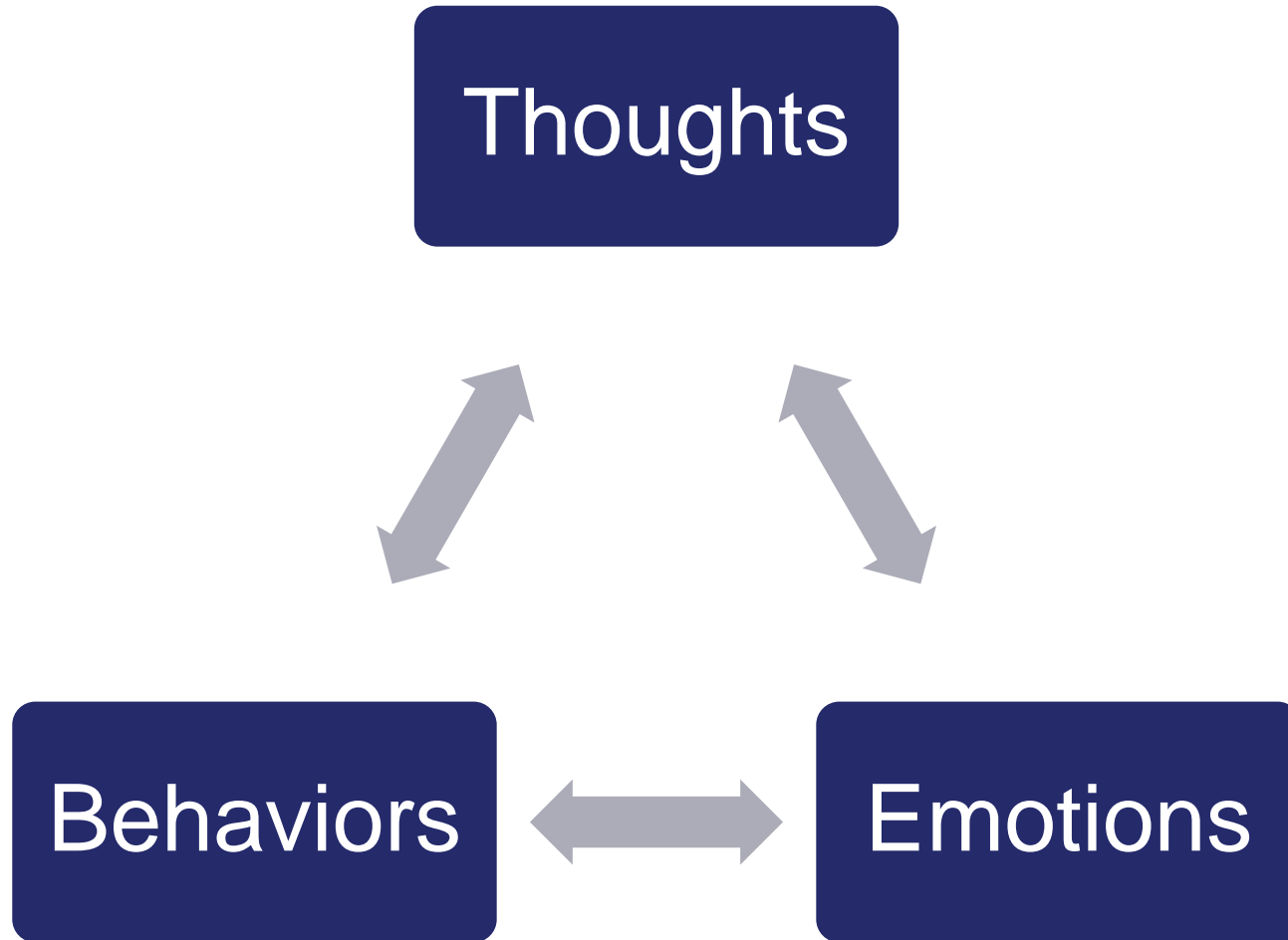
Practical Stress Management Skills

The COVID Mental Health Check-In

☐ Basic Wellness Practices

- ☐ Social Distancing/Hygiene/Health
- ☐ Sleep
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Eating
- ☐ Limiting News Exposure
- ☐ Structure in Schedule
- ☐ Positive Social Contact via Screens
- ☐ Face-to-Face Quality Time with Family
- ☐ Mood Monitoring and Behavioral Activation
- ☐ Riding the Wave (Acceptance)

The CBT Big Three



Emotion Monitoring

◆ Daily monitoring and Checking in!

- ▶ Record a situation, dominant emotion, and emotion intensity rating
- ▶ Do this 5-6x a day

◆ Notice patterns and triggers

◆ Just *noticing* at all is the initial victory

monday!!

<u>SITUATION</u>	<u>EMOTIONS</u>	<u>RATING</u>
waking up	(nervous), excited	8
10am-break	(nervous), intimidated	6
Lunchtime	relieved	3
Subway home-5pm	(determined), anxious	7
Bedtime	(Proud), connected	6

Thinking Traps

All-or-nothing thinking	You look at things in absolute, dichotomous categories
Overgeneralization	You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat
Mental Filter	You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives
Discounting the positive	You insist that your accomplishments “don’t count”
Mind Reading	You assume people are reacting negatively to you
Fortune-telling	You arbitrarily predict things will turn out badly
Magnification/Minimization	You blow things out of proportion or shrink their importance
Emotional Reasoning	You reason from how you feel
Labeling	You identify with your shortcomings
Personalization & blame	You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for – OR – you blame other people and overlook how you might have contributed to a situation

Replacement Thought Exercise

Step 1: Pick a recent stressful situation

Step 2: Identify your emotions, intensity, and a couple thoughts

Step 3: Thinking trap or not?

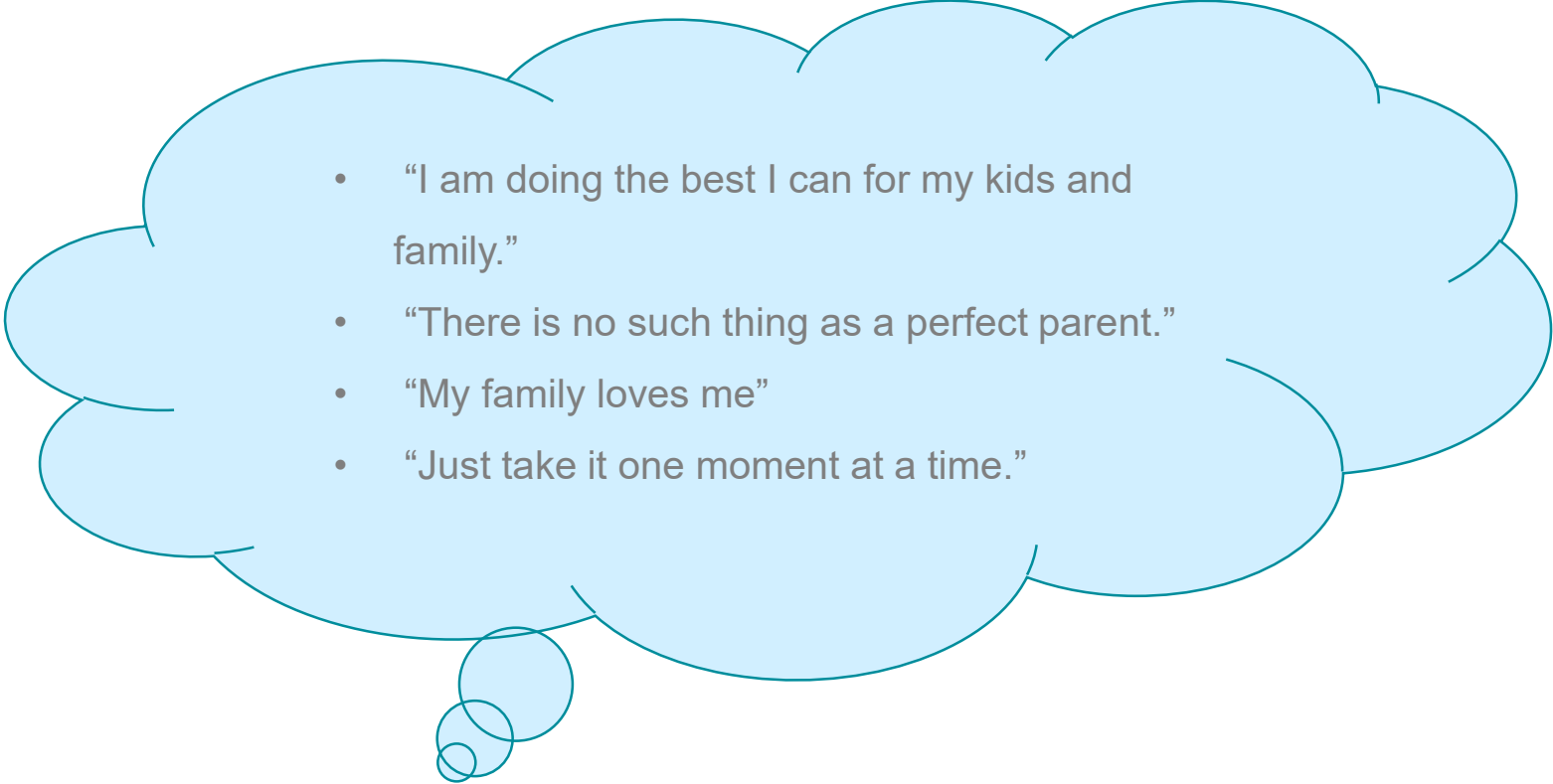
Step 4: Challenge thinking traps with evidence

Step 5: Reassess how replacement thoughts might lead to different emotions or behaviors

Coping Replacement Thoughts

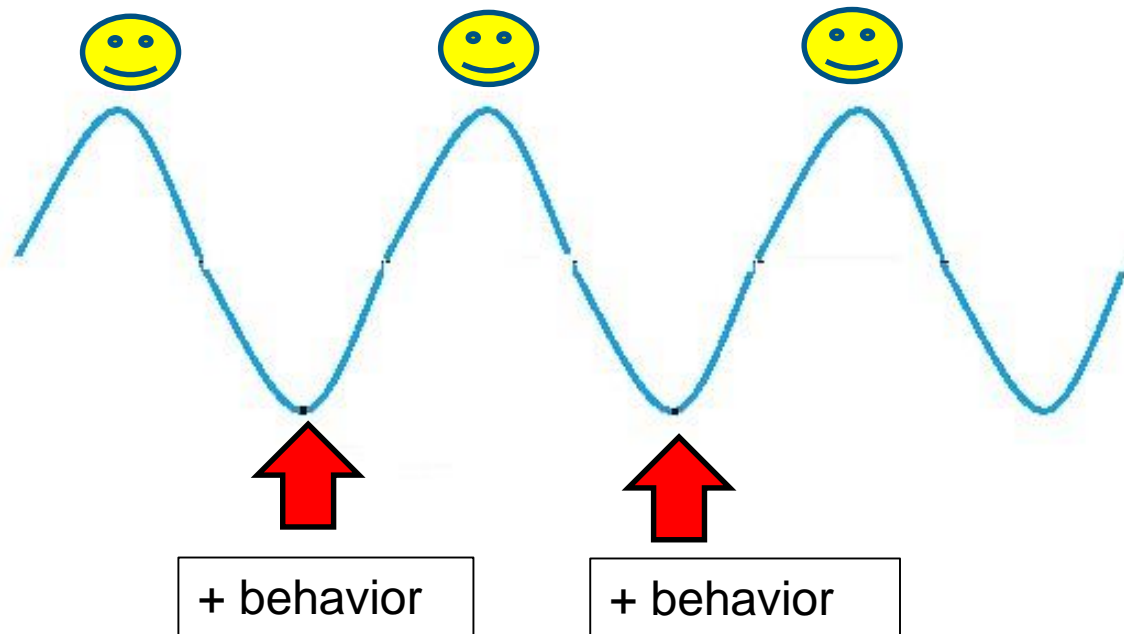
Self encouraging thought or mantra; personal mission statement

A thought that re-inspires you and re-grounds you in your purpose

- 
- “I am doing the best I can for my kids and family.”
 - “There is no such thing as a perfect parent.”
 - “My family loves me”
 - “Just take it one moment at a time.”

The Importance of Behavioral Activation

- ◆ Positive behaviors lead to improved mood
- ◆ Moving from concept to application/practice is difficult



Generating a Good Behavioral Activation List

What are behaviors and activities that boost your mood?

THE FIVE CATEGORIES:

- **Service Activities** - Doing something directly for others
- **Fun Activities** – Doing things you enjoy, either by yourself or with other people
- **Social Activities** – Spending time with other people
- **Mastery Activities** – Doing something to learn a skill, working towards mastery
- **Physical Activities** – Includes exercise, games, and sports

Mindfulness Based Apps

◆ Meditation

- ▶ Stop Breathe Think
- ▶ Take a Break
- ▶ Smiling Mind
- ▶ Headspace
- ▶ OMG I Can Meditate
- ▶ Pacifica

◆ Sleep

- ▶ Sleep Genius
- ▶ CALM

◆ Depression

- ▶ Moodkit
- ▶ Mood247



Child Mind Institute COVID Resources

- ◆ Comprehensive resources on www.childmind.org in both English and Spanish
- ◆ Twice daily Facebook Live videochats with our expert clinicians
- ◆ Parenting in the Time of Coronavirus Facebook group
- ◆ Daily parent tips on childmind.org, Facebook, Instagram, and via our email newsletter
- ◆ Telehealth therapy services for children, teens, and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders
- ◆ Flat-fee parent phone or videochat consultation on a range of issues related to COVID stress



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