

**Anxiety Now:
Information and Suggestions for Adults and Children**

Virginia G. Cooper, PhD Martha R. Durham, PhD
Edited by: Stephanie Burnette and Allison Askins

In our lives as psychologists, we specialize in the treatment of anxiety and related disorders. One of the first things we talk about is an increasing understanding of anxiety. Anxiety is very adaptive; it exists to alert us to threats, helping us act quickly when danger is present.

Fight or Flight is the activation of your sympathetic nervous system in the face of perceived danger. Complementary to the sympathetic nervous system is the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls rest and relaxation. Imagine that your right arm is the sympathetic nervous system and your left arm is the parasympathetic nervous system. Most of us live a life in a culture that exercises the right side, but not so much the left, so we wind up with a Popeye right arm and a weakling for a left arm.

In unexpected situations like the pandemic we are facing today, there are tools we can use for ourselves and our families that can help us cope in the face of uncertainty.

1. The Big A: Anxiety

Physical

Physical components can be: your heart races; chest pain or discomfort; problems breathing; numbness or tingling in hands; feeling dizzy or lightheaded; muscle tension especially in neck, shoulders, or jaw; and stomach or gut issues.

Cognitive

Cognitive components can be: catastrophizing or what we call arbitrary inference (making a judgment with no supporting evidence) especially to a worst case scenario; personalization is thinking an event or behavior is related to you when it's not; selective abstraction when you look to only one event for proof while ignoring other information that may disprove it and focus on the negative while ignoring the positive; overgeneralizing one instance to apply to numerous or all other situations; and labeling is defining yourself by one event or behavior.

Emotional

Emotional components can be: feeling stressed or anxious emotionally, which can be expressed as irritability with others, tearfulness, jumpiness, problems sitting still, or problems concentrating.

2. How to Cope:

Address anxiety on a physical level first through body calming. When someone is highly anxious, their body is prepping to fight or to run away; the blood is going to major muscle groups to help you fight something or run away as fast as you can. It is not prepping to solve a mental problem.

Calm Your Body

You can exercise the "rest and relaxation response" to combat stress and anxiety. Deep abdominal breathing and guided relaxation or meditation is effective. If you've never done this before, *the only wrong way to do it is not to do it*. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to breath, how it feels coming in and out of your nose and in and out of your body. *We like the apps "Simply Being," "Stop Breath and Think," and "Insight Timer."*

Technique for Body Calming

- Deep breathing down to your belly to a slow count of four
- Hold the breath for a count of two
- And then slow exhale for a count of six

The magic is in the exhale. A minimum of 20 minutes per day is what it takes to affect anxiety and stress. It can be broken up into two 10-minute periods or four 5-minute periods; there's little to no research saying all 20 minutes need to be at the same time.

3. Managing During Crisis:

No Obsessive News-Checking

Establish a time and a time limit once (or at most twice) a day to read news, watch TV, or check social media. Constant updates are a huge stressor to the human animal.

Separate Facts from Feelings

Name and identify your feelings, which clinically helps you process and move through them.

Get Information from Pre-determined Reputable Sources

Limit searching online for more information as your anxiety will spur you to latch onto the sensational. Follow the plan of a trusted health organization (such as the CDC) about handwashing, cleaning, going out of the home, and being around others.

Exercise Daily and Go Outside

Your body is meant to move. Movement and exercise help regulate mood and decrease stress.

Occupy Your Mind

A mind with nothing to focus on will attach to anxiety. Read books, study, do Sudokus or crosswords, or tackle a challenging home improvement project.

Separate Work and Living Spaces

Working all the time can create stress and anxiety. Have a dedicated work space. Leave work at the end of the workday.

Be Social

Stay connected to others and maintain your relationships. We are asked to social distance, not social isolate. Isolation is detrimental to your mental health. Connect with others in real time through a phone call, FaceTime, or through Zoom or Google Meet. Send texts or emails.

Maintain Routine

Routines help us feel secure by providing structure and predictability.

Accept Uncertainty

This situation we find ourselves in is scary and surreal. We are uncertain what is coming next. The inability to accept a situation you cannot control doesn't change the situation; it just makes you miserable. Accepting a situation does not mean you approve of it; it just means you aren't fighting against the reality of it.

4. Parenting Children During Crisis:

Most importantly, *talk to and with your children no matter their age*. It will not increase anxiety. Ask them to share their thoughts about the current situation. Offer to answer any questions they may have. They know more than you suppose and/or they will have inaccurate information.

Correcting inaccurate information will calm their fears but be aware not to answer any questions they are not asking. Many parents over-explain a situation. Complicated explanations can lead to more anxiety.

Make sure that your own anxiety is in check, allowing you to model a calm response to a stressful situation.

Have Rules and Structure

Children feel safe with structure. Make sure they understand all the rules that help keep us safe, including hand washing and disinfecting, face touching, maintain 6 feet of distance from others, cover a cough, and sneeze with your elbow, etc.

Have a Weekday Routine

A sense of normalcy is very important for children. Homeschooling should have a start and stop time. Try to maintain a time for waking up and going to sleep. It also helps to get dressed (meaning no pajamas all day). Kids and parents should have regular check-ins with teachers.

Keep Mental Health Appointments

Most providers are offering telehealth. It is healing and calming to have an unbiased source to validate feelings, explore thoughts, and offer support. With all of this togetherness, everyone needs a little alone time or time with someone outside the family.

Use Opposite Action

This comes from dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). It helps when emotions feel overwhelming. Opposite action can lead to opposite and manageable emotions. For example, when you fear something, confront it. If your child is afraid to ask a teacher for help, have them reach out rather than avoid the contact.

Daily Body Calming

The children we work with employ mindfulness and meditation very successfully. All major meditation and mindfulness apps have child (and young adult) versions. We especially like the family apps that have something for everyone in the family, such as "*Stop Breath and Think*," "*Calm*," "*Headspace*," and "*Insight Timer*."

Peer Interaction

Find safe ways for your children to interact with peers using technology. Let them meet their peers online once their schoolwork and chores are complete.

Get Outside

Kids can still go outside with rules and boundaries that include keeping a safe distance from their peers. Limit physical touch and closeness with others. Be sure they understand even though you care about someone, this is not the time to hug or touch.

Do Fun Family Activities

Draw pictures or write encouraging notes for health care workers. Popular children's authors are hosting readings and family activities. Zoos and aquariums are doing daily safari programs that are live on social media and later posted on their websites and YouTube. Similarly, museums are doing virtual tours. Watch shows or movies, play board games, do jigsaw puzzles, color with chalk, draw pictures, and write notes to mail to family and friends.

Exercise Daily

Kids are used to recess, and sports' practices and games. Their bodies need to move and they may be accustomed to instructions from a coach. We love the online exercise websites where you and your children can stay fit. Check out online resources and be sure to search for the kid's sections using keywords such as "kids workout," "kids yoga," or "kids fitness."

Model Good Hygiene

Sing songs or recite poems that last 20 seconds while you show them the correct way to wash their hands. Include their thumbs down to their wrists, between their fingers, underneath their nails, and the backside of hands too. With young children, you can help them create the germ bad guy and teach them how to fight that opponent. Their weapons are soap, hand sanitizer, how to cough, and why and how to social distance. For older children, use videos on YouTube to show them how long it takes to scientifically kill a germ.

5. Process Grief NOW

Individuals of any age are feeling anxiety and depression about missing milestones in their family's lives. From sports teams that are now disbanded to proms, graduations, competitions, showcases and recitals, big birthdays, planned vacations near and far, we are all left with feelings of loss and anger. You and your family can grieve together. Parents should model how to grieve these losses.

Acknowledge a path forward. If we push away valid fears and sadness we have about these losses, we risk that pain, anger, and fears stuffed down can resurface later. This can be an opportunity for working together through uncertainty and grief. You and your family can grieve together.

Adults should model how to grieve, pick themselves up, and move forward. Postpone important events rather than cancel them. You may not get exactly what you want, but you will discover that you have some personal power over this situation and acknowledge that celebrations are worth rescheduling.

We are not able to do everything we want to right now, but we can teach our children what we can control in the present moment. **In our clinical work, we often emphasize the importance of being truly present in the moment and having values rather than feelings guide our behavior.**

The above is for informational purposes only, does not constitute medical, psychiatric or psychological advice, and is not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the input of your physician, mental-health professional, or other qualified health provider with any questions you have.

Dr. Virginia G. Cooper is a clinical psychologist in Columbia, SC. She is in private practice at Lake Psychological and specializes in anxiety and anxiety-related disorders for persons ages 16 and older.

Dr. Martha R. Durham is a clinical psychologist in Greenville, SC. She is the founder of North Main Counseling, specializing in anxiety, depression, and grief for individuals and families ages 6 and older.