



Mental Health Matters

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Back to School Anxiety During COVID-19

By: Caroline Miller

Source: [Child Mind Institute](#)

Children who are heading back to the classroom soon are facing unusual challenges, and one of them is anxiety about being separated from their families after months of togetherness. For some kids it will trigger separation anxiety in addition to the anxiety they may feel about leaving their safe harbor from the pandemic.

When kids go out now, they're often reminded not to get too close to other people, to keep their masks on, to use sanitizer, and to wash their hands. They are likely wondering: *Are we sure it's safe to go back? And are other people safe? And is it safe to touch this?* These are, of course, realistic fears that many adults share. And parents also know that there's a real risk that in-person schooling may be suspended if it leads to outbreaks of COVID-19.

So parents have a complicated mission dealing with all this anxiety and uncertainty: reassuring children that it's safe to be away from them, while also encouraging them to be careful and preparing them to be flexible in case the situation changes. How do you do that? Here are some pointers:

- ✓ **Validate their feelings.** It's worrisome when kids are clingy or fearful about separating from you, but it's important for parents to stay calm and stay positive. If your child is telling you that they're worried or having those negative feelings, you want to validate that and let them have some space to express that. But you don't want to feed it too much and you want to help them think of something they can do about it.
- ✓ **Set the tone.** The most important thought about going back to school is that parents lead the charge. If you lead with your own anxiety, you're only going to fuel anxiety, so you want to say what you know, answer questions and act calm even when you are not.
- ✓ **Help them think positive.** For younger kids worried about separation, it helps to know what you're doing while they're away, and how you're staying safe. Another way to help kids focus on positive things is to try to get them to talk about the good things about school. What are they looking forward to? What did they enjoy the previous day?

- ✓ **Practice separating.** For children who are anxious about being apart, experts suggest practicing separation, starting in small ways and building tolerance for more and more independence.
- ✓ **Have a routine.** Making sure that your child has a predictable routine leading up to school can help kids, especially younger ones, feel more secure. It can also help to try out small variations in the separation process. Maybe your child does better with one caregiver than another, or maybe carpooling with someone in your “pod” makes the process easier. It’s okay to figure out what works in your family and use whatever resources you need to.
- ✓ **Emphasize safety measures.** We can’t promise our kids that we won’t get sick, but we can express confidence that the schools have done months of planning to minimize risk and keep everyone safe — that’s why all the new rules are in place.
- ✓ **Encourage flexibility.** Since there is a possibility that children who start school in person may be expected to switch back to remote learning, at least for some periods of time, it’s helpful for kids to know that you’re prepared for changes that may occur. Let your child know that the whole family is going to have to be flexible.

Kids who have trouble separating often just need time, and support from parents and teachers, to adjust. But if your child is having severe meltdowns at drop-off time for more than two or three weeks, and is unable to recover or to even stay at school, for more than three or four weeks, then seeking help can make a big difference. Treatment for separation anxiety is usually involves a therapist working with the child and the parents to plan step-by-step ways for them to practice separating a little at a time. Therapists often work with teachers, too, to see what they can be doing to help and make sure they are on the same page with parents. Therapy also involves helping anxious kids talk to themselves and reassure themselves that they’re okay in difficult moments.

Dealing with COVID-19 Vaccine Anxiety

Source: [Mental Health America](#)



Most vaccines are developed over a few years; with COVID-19 first being reported just a year ago, many people are concerned about if a vaccine developed in such a short time frame can truly be safe. And without years of trials it is difficult to predict long-term side effects. Most people, and especially health care workers, have been living and working with high degrees of uncertainty for a long time now. The state of the pandemic changes daily and recommendations from government officials fluctuate as well, so it’s understandable to feel hesitant about the vaccine in its first phase beyond trials.

Though the development process has been sped up, the aspects involving safety haven’t been compromised. This vaccine has been fast tracked for a few reasons. Researchers typically need years to secure funding and get approvals, but given the nature of COVID-19, emergency funding was made available to begin these processes immediately. And by exploring many different vaccines in the beginning (95 by the end of April 2020), scientists didn’t have to start over after some failed.

While waiting for more evidence on the vaccine and guidance from government officials, it’s important to manage your stress and anxiety.

- **Do your research.** Fear is often based in the unknown, so learn as much as you can. Consider what is worrying you, whether it’s the side effects, how recommendation decisions are being made, or uncertainty about how the vaccine works, and make sure you’re informed. The [CDC’s COVID-19 Vaccines page](#) is a great place to start.
- **Stay up to date.** Keep yourself in the loop as progress is made with the vaccines and further decisions are being made about distribution. Be careful to not get sucked into consuming too much news or social media – stick to a vetted [vaccine tracker](#).
- **Look towards officials you trust.** American voters say they trust their personal physician, Dr.

Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the Food and Drug Administration regarding vaccine safety. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization are also reputable sources.

- **Think about the benefits compared to the risks.** We don't know everything, but so far leading trials have been safe. Under an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA), known and potential benefits must outweigh the known and potential risks before a vaccine will be approved for use. The vaccine will help you develop immunity to the virus that causes COVID-19 so that you're able to naturally fight it if exposed in the future as well as build up herd immunity.
- **Make decisions in your best interest.** If the anxiety surrounding vaccination is too much to cope with, it's okay to ask for some time off and step away from it all for a bit.

My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?

First, determine how much your symptoms interfere with your daily life.



Do I have mild symptoms that have lasted for less than 2 weeks?

- Feeling a little down
- Feeling down, but still able to do job, schoolwork, or housework
- Some trouble sleeping
- Feeling down, but still able to take care of yourself or take care of others



If so, here are some self-care activities that can help:

- Exercising (e.g., aerobics, yoga)
- Engaging in social contact (virtual or in person)
- Getting adequate sleep on a regular schedule
- Eating healthy
- Talking to a trusted friend or family member
- Practicing meditation, relaxation, and mindfulness

If the symptoms above do not improve or seem to be worsening despite self-care efforts, talk to your health care provider.



Do I have severe symptoms that have lasted 2 weeks or more?

- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite changes that result in unwanted weight changes
- Struggling to get out of bed in the morning because of mood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable
- Unable to perform usual daily functions and responsibilities
- Thoughts of death or self-harm



Seek professional help:

- Psychotherapy (talk therapy)—virtual or in person; individual, group, or family
- Medications
- Brain stimulation therapies

For help finding treatment, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

If you are in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or text the Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741).



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Four Things You Can Do to Support Your Teen's Mental Health

Source: [*Unicef For Every Child*](#)

Whether you and your teen are getting along well or having challenges, it is important to show that you love and support them, that you can help them navigate tough times, and that you are always there for them. Here are four things to keep in mind when having that 'how are you doing?' conversation with your teen and to show that you are always there for them.

1. **Encourage them to share their feelings.** Look for ways to check in with your teen. Ask them how their day has been and what they have been doing. It could be by inviting them to join you in a task so you can use the time to chat about their day. Remind them that you are there for them, no matter what, and that you want to hear how they are feeling and what they are thinking. It is important to acknowledge and understand emotions they might be experiencing, even if it feels uncomfortable. It can be easy to notice the things your teen is doing that you do not like, but also try to notice and praise them for something they are doing well.
2. **Take the time to support them.** Work together on setting up new routines and achievable daily goals. You could fit in home chores around school work or set a target like getting homework done before dinner. Adolescence means independence, so try to give your teen the appropriate time and space to be on their own. Needing space is a normal part of growing up. If your teen feels frustrated, work with them to brainstorm some solutions to problems. Try not to take over and tell them what to do.
3. **Work through conflict together.** Listen to your teen's views and try to sort out conflict calmly. Remember, everyone gets stressed. Never discuss an issue while you are angry. Walk away, take a breath, and calm down – you can talk with your teen about it later. Also, avoid power struggles. With the world feeling unpredictable and options looking limited right now, teens might be struggling to be in control. As difficult as it can be in the moment, empathize with their desire to assert control in a scary time, rather than attempting to fight back or overpower it. Be honest and transparent with your teen. Showing them how you deal with your own difficult feelings can help them know their feelings are okay. When there is conflict, take some time to reflect on how you and your teen can resolve it.
4. **Care for yourself.** Caregivers have a lot to deal with. You also need care and support for yourself. Showing self-care is also a good way of modelling the practice to your teen. Don't wait to ask others for help if you are feeling overwhelmed. It is normal and okay to feel this way. Find a family member or someone you can talk to. Make time for your own relationships. Try to find a few people that you can share feelings and experiences with, and set aside some time with them each day, to check in on how you are feeling. Also, make time in your day to do the things that help you cope with and manage stress. Do the things you like or simply taking a few minutes off from your day can help you feel relaxed and re-energized. Try different positive coping strategies that work for you. Some ideas could include exercising, talking with friends, planning ahead, maintaining routines, or reflecting on what you are grateful for or proud of.

How Teenagers Can Protect their Mental Health During COVID-19

Being a teenager is difficult no matter what, and COVID-19 is making it even harder. With school closures and cancelled events, many teens are missing out on some of the biggest moments of their young lives, as well as everyday moments like chatting with friends and participating in class. For teenagers facing life changes due to the pandemic who are feeling anxious, isolated and disappointed, know this – you are not alone. Here are some things teens can do to practice self-care and look after their mental health:

- ✓ **Recognize that your anxiety is completely normal.** If school closures and alarming headlines are making you feel anxious, you are not the only one. Those feelings are helping to keep not only you safe, but others too. While anxiety around COVID-19 is completely understandable, make sure that you are using reliable sources to get information. If you are worried that you are experiencing symptoms, it is important to speak to your parents about it.
- ✓ **Create distractions.** What psychologists know is that when we are under chronically difficult conditions, it's very helpful to divide the problem into two categories – things I can do something about, and then things I can do nothing about. There is a lot that falls under that second category right now, but one thing that helps us to deal with that is creating distractions for ourselves. Such things may include doing homework, watching a favorite movie, or reading a great novel.
- ✓ **Find new ways to connect with your friends.** If you want to spend time with friends while you're practicing physical distancing, social media is a great way to connect. But it's not a good idea to have unfettered access to screens and/or social media because that's not healthy or smart and may amplify your anxiety. It's best to work out a screen time schedule with your parents.
- ✓ **Focus on you.** Have you been wanting to learn how to do something new, start a new book, or spend time practicing a musical instrument? Now is the time to do that. Focusing on yourself and finding ways to use your new-found time is a productive way to look after your mental health.
- ✓ **Feel your feelings.** Missing out on events with friends, hobbies, or sports matches is incredibly



- disappointing. The best way to deal with this disappointment? Let yourself feel it. When it comes to having a painful feeling, the only way out is through. Processing your feelings looks different for everyone, but what's important is that you do what feels right to you.
- ✓ **Be kind to yourself and others.** Some teens are facing abuse and bullying at school due to coronavirus. Activating bystanders is the best way to address any kind of bullying. Kids and teenagers who are targeted should not be expected to confront bullies; rather we should encourage them to turn to friends or adults for help and support. If you witness a friend being bullied, reach out to them and try to offer support. Your words can make a difference.

Just remember, now more than ever, we need to be thoughtful about how we treat others.

Source: Unicef for Every Child