

ADOLESCENCE

5 Ways to Help Teens Manage Anxiety About the Coronavirus

Adults can help by making sure adolescents don't overestimate the dangers or underestimate their ability to protect themselves.



By Lisa Damour

March 11, 2020

People of all ages are concerned about the spread of the coronavirus, and teenagers, as a group, tend to experience emotions especially intensely. If you are raising, teaching or otherwise caring for an adolescent who is feeling very nervous about it, here are five things you can do.

1. Normalize Anxiety

Anxiety can be healthy. But not all adolescents, or adults, know that it typically acts as a useful and protective emotion. Accordingly, teenagers sometimes fear that their heightened nerves signal the onset of a full-blown anxiety disorder. They become worried about the fact that they are worried.

Adults can help young people appreciate that healthy anxiety has a purpose: It alerts us to potential threats and helps us move toward safety. "Feeling some anxiety," we might say calmly, "makes sense right now. You're having the right reaction to the emerging news about the coronavirus."

From there, we can encourage teenagers to channel their discomfort into useful action, such as learning about and following the recommended health guidelines.

2. Offer Perspective

For psychologists, anxiety is unhealthy only when it occurs in the absence of a threat — when there is nothing to be worried about at all — or when it reaches heights that are grossly out of proportion to the threat involved, such as when a teenager experiences a panic attack over a minor quiz. We can help adolescents keep their worries about the coronavirus at an appropriate level by making sure they don't overestimate the dangers or underestimate their ability to protect themselves from those dangers.

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Toward this end, we might say, "Right now, the health risk from coronavirus is very low for most Americans." To this we can add, "And there's a lot you can do to lower your risk even further: Keep your hands clean and away from your face, avoid anyone who might be coughing or sneezing and protect your immune system by getting enough sleep."

3. Shift the Spotlight

During difficult times, research suggests that teenagers feel better when they turn their attention to supporting others. After a 2006 flood destroyed a small town in southern Poland, one study found that the teenagers who provided the highest levels of social support to fellow flood victims were the ones who went on to express the most confidence about their ability to face challenges in their own lives.

Knowing this, we can remind teenagers that we wash our hands and follow other health recommendations not only to protect ourselves, but also to help to ease the strain on local medical systems. Along the same lines, adults can note that making personal sacrifices — such as postponing a vacation or staying home if we're not feeling well — helps to reduce the chance of carrying illness into our own communities. If you are stocking up on groceries in case of being asked to self-quarantine, take the opportunity to talk to your kids about the challenges faced by people in need and consider donating nonperishables to a local food bank.

4. Encourage Distraction

When we fixate on dangers, anxiety grows, and when we turn our attention elsewhere, it shrinks. That said, it might be hard for some teenagers *not* to obsess about Covid-19 given that the topic pervades headlines and social media, and that concerns about disease spread have been closing schools and causing the cancellation of long-scheduled events.

Further, the constant availability of fresh information about the coronavirus may spur some teenagers (and adults) to compulsively check for news updates. This, however, may offer little emotional relief. Research shows that obtaining clear information about a potential threat helps people feel better, but ambiguous information does nothing to reduce anxiety or the urge to seek reassurance. Remind them not to rely on rumors or unreliable sources.

So long as the updates remain vague, teenagers who are feeling highly anxious about Covid-19 should be encouraged to take a break from seeking, or even accidentally encountering, information about the virus. For example, we might ask teenagers to consider scaling back how often they check their phones for information updates, or to trust that we'll share any significant news should it arrive. Similarly, we might encourage finding distractions, such as doing their homework or watching a favorite show, while shielding themselves from digital intrusions.

5. Manage Your Own Anxiety

Anxious parents are more likely to have anxious teenagers. This research finding has many possible explanations, but here's one: young people look to adults for cues about how nervous or relaxed they should be when encountering something new. Wittingly or not, parents are sometimes fearful in a way that puts their children on edge.

Teenagers can tell when adults are saying one thing and feeling another. Offering reassuring words won't do much good when our own anxiety is riding high. And being worn thin by tension leaves us less able to comfort teenagers and young adults who feel upset about missing events or enjoying spring on their college campuses.

Before trying to support a fretful teenager, tense adults should take steps to calm their own nerves. To do so, they can use the same strategies outlined above.

Modeling a level-headed response is the best way to keep anxiety from getting the better of our teenagers as we all find our way through this new and uncertain challenge.

The Coronavirus Outbreak

Answers to your most common questions:

Updated March 16, 2020

- **What is a coronavirus?**

It is a novel virus named for the crownlike spikes that protrude from its surface. The coronavirus can infect both animals and people and can cause a range of respiratory illnesses from the common cold to lung lesions and pneumonia.

- **How contagious is the virus?**

It seems to spread very easily from person to person, especially in homes, hospitals and other confined spaces. The pathogen can travel through the

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