

Helping Your Family During Scary, Hard & Uncertain Times

When scary things happen or our lives are turned upside down, it can be challenging to feel grounded and know how to best support ourselves and our children. Remember that even amidst incredible change, loss and turmoil, your own well-being matters. Your care, love, and connection with your child is the constant. Your connection with your child is an emotional “home base,” even when a stable physical home base isn’t available. This resource offers guidance about things you can do to help your family navigate challenges.

How am I feeling and What do I need?

It’s important now, more than ever, to check in with yourself. Place your hand on your heart, take a breath and tune in. Ask yourself how you are feeling and what you need. Don’t judge what comes up. This is a simple act of self-compassion.



Whatever your emotions are, they are okay

Try to welcome your emotions. Think of them as helpful guides, providing important information about what you need in the moment. Knowing how you feel will help you be more receptive to others.



You may feel compelled to control what you can

In reaction to uncontrollable or unpredictable stress, trauma and loss, it is natural to seek control. In the short term, this helps to reduce our anxiety. Be curious when you notice this reaction and acknowledge the impact it is having on yourself and others. You can ask yourself or those around you, “Is what I am doing helpful? Or not so much?” Try to soften and let go of what you can.



View your body’s stress response as helpful

Remember that the body’s natural stress response is helpful. Your body is “rising to meet a challenge” and is/was doing exactly what it is supposed to do. Not only is cortisol increased during times of stress, but so is oxytocin, the love/bonding hormone which helps us to seek support from others and offer support.

Together time

One of the ways you can nurture your relationship during challenging times is making sure that you spend even 5-10 minutes a day just focused on your child. No distractions (to the degree that is safe and possible). Play a game, take a walk, listen to them, and/or talk about whatever they want to. Your only goal during this time is to be together.



Keep your relationship as central

While so many other things change, stay focused on your relationship with your child as the constant. Despite changing circumstances, continue connection with your child in whatever ways possible. This helps us maintain a sense of emotional safety and belonging.

Be transparent about responses and reactions



When dealing with stress and challenge, it may be helpful for you and your child to name your feelings and reactions, both as they happen and after the fact. If you notice your body’s stress response or if you respond in a way that is surprising or hard for your child, calmly name it. “I’m feeling stressed and my heart is beating fast. I raised my voice a bit. I’m sorry about that.” This is a compassionate way to give you both permission for the inevitable missteps that will happen as you recover.

Keep communication flowing



During stressful and scary times, communication is both more necessary and more challenging. You and your family members may have different styles of coping that impact the ways you communicate with one another; some may withdraw, others may pull closer.

Communication will not always go smoothly. Missteps will happen. Circle back to connect and repair as soon as you and the other person are able.

Get back on track

When you’ve had a challenging interaction, come back to your child as soon as you are both able. Slow down and soften. Acknowledge that what happened was challenging. Take responsibility for your part and communicate your openness and interest in learning about the child’s perspective and feelings.