

## **Keeping Kids Mentally Healthy During Challenging Times**

As the world deals with the coronavirus pandemic, it is vitally important to be aware of the mental health needs of children. During times of stress, children will naturally look to the adults around them for guidance as to how to react, act and cope.

Understanding a child's mental state, level of comfort and ability to deal with changes around them can help set the stage for their health and well being. This is an opportunity for adults to model problem solving, coping techniques, creativity and flexibility as we all adjust to a new normal.

### **The following tips are provided by the therapists and counselors at Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin**

- Discuss the situation in an open and honest way with children, relating facts in a way that is appropriate for their age and temperament. Listen to any questions they may have and provide them with simple, straightforward answers. Giving too much information may be overwhelming. As they process the information they may have additional questions. Let their questions guide you.
- Remind kids that medical, scientific and public health experts around the world are working hard to contain the virus, treat those affected and develop a vaccine as quickly as possible. Assure them they are safe and that it is normal for them to feel concerned. Let them know you are safe as well and following expert advice to stay healthy and well.
- Find out a child's biggest stressor. Some worry they'll lose their friendships developed in school, others are sad or angry about a sports season or event cancelled, and others hate all the unknowns around them. When you can pinpoint the stressor, you can work on ways to instill reassurances. Work to maintain that special friendship, encourage kids to work on their own sports skills to be better when their sport returns, pick apart each unknown with what is known and what is true.
- Create a daily schedule together. Kids are used to routine and structure in school and thrive on having consistency in their lives. A regular timeline of scheduled events can give them a sense of control in decision making and deadlines. Even a small bit of control is empowering to reduce anxiety and fear.
- Make a list of things people can do to reduce their stress and worries. Things like exercise, playing with a pet, doing artwork, listening or making music, practicing yoga or deep breathing. Not only will these help both kids and adults in the current situation, but they can be tools used throughout their lives.
- Discuss ideas or projects that might help others, such as writing letters to neighbors, doctors and nurses, friends or teachers. This activity can show them that they have the ability to make a positive difference and that they are part of a larger community.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, stay connected with friends and eat well.

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## Changes in Behavior to Watch For

If you are concerned that a child is overwhelmed with anxiety, fear or stress, it's important to consult a professional counselor specializing in childhood mental health issues and treatments. But what is normal behavior and what are trouble indicators? Following are a list of behaviors that, if continuing for over two weeks, may be a signal that the child may benefit from professional counseling.

**Ages 5 and under** – Irrational fears (the dark, monsters, etc.), sleep disturbance, regression in behavior such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, excessive clinging to parents, loss of appetite, displaced anger

**Elementary school age** – Irritability, displaced anger, excessively withdrawn from favorite activities, unwillingness to connect with friends, clinginess, nightmares, change in eating habits

**Adolescents** – Sleep and eating changes, uptick in agitation, complaining, displaced anger, withdrawing from family and favorite activities, delinquent behavior, obsessive talk about death and hopelessness

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It's normal to feel overwhelmed or stressed by the coronavirus pandemic. If you are concerned about your own mental health or that of a child, we encourage you to acknowledge these concerns and seek professional support.

Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin (LCFS) has a team of therapists skilled in working with both adults and children and are open and available to assist you. Professional counseling can assist people of all ages, helping to reduce anxiety, monitor depression, control addictive behavior, identify triggers and create solutions to instill hope and faith.

In office, one-on-one counseling sessions are available by appointment. In all LCFS's office settings, universal cleaning and sterilization precautions are being taken to ensure a safe environment for therapy.

Due to the scope of the pandemic, many insurance plans are accepting telehealth as a viable option to conduct therapy. LCFS is available for telehealth visits, dependent upon the individual's insurance coverage. Clients are encouraged to check with their plan in advance to see if they are covered or the staff at LCFS can also assist in determining this option.

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