

Coping with anxiety during unsettling times: *Advice from a Clinical Psychologist*



Advice from Dr Helen Care



Tips on surviving school shutdown and coronavirus anxiety



Top tips on surviving school shutdown and Coronavirus anxiety

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We chatted with Clinical Psychologist Dr Helen Care for some helpful tips and advice for teenage students and parents about being okay whilst the schools are closed.

Read on for more details about what Dr Care has to say about coping at this time.



Some other great sources of information and guidance on **worry, anxiety** and **youth mental health** are:

- [British Psychological Society](#)
- [NSPCC](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre](#)



If you feel that you or someone you know (be they a parent, child, teacher or young person) are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek immediate professional help.

Seek an emergency GP appointment or call 999 if you or someone you know is at immediate risk.



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For students (teens)

These are strange times but remember that everybody is in the same boat. There may not be a clear plan yet, but everyone is doing the same thing that you are and is waiting for that plan to become clearer. If you feel worried or panicked, try to recognise the things that are not in your control, and think through the kinds of things that are in your control.

Here's Dr Helen Care's top tips for staying okay while the schools are closed:

Take each day as it comes.

Try not to get lost in the feeling that this is endless, but take each day as it comes, focusing on the smaller things that you can do to keep each day moving along. Remind yourself that this will come to an end and that life will continue.

Try drawing up a list of goals that you can work towards.

Anything that you would like to achieve and would matter to you. Break them down into smaller steps.

Think about setting these as **SMART** goals.

If you have never used these before, SMART stands for:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Time-limited



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What you are looking for are detailed, specific steps that are small enough to be measured.

Ask yourself: *would you know if you had achieved your goal?*

Achievable

Set yourself goals that you could realistically complete.

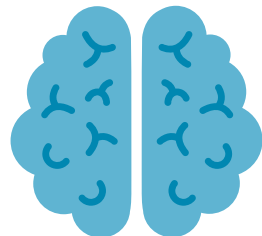
Your SMART goals should be **relevant** to the overall goal you are trying to reach.

Finally, your goals should be **time-limited**, so you have a set idea of how long they are likely to take and set a time for when you are going to complete them.



Keep your brain active

You have an incredible brain, whether it always feels like that or not. The best thing is to keep it active. Brains are like other parts of our bodies, if we stop using them for thinking, they will stop working as well. Keep them busy and active. Think of it as **exercising your brain** for when it needs to get going with all those tasks again. **Keep learning**, whatever it is that you think would be helpful for you in the future, whatever skills you are interested in or feel like you struggle with now that you would like to strengthen.



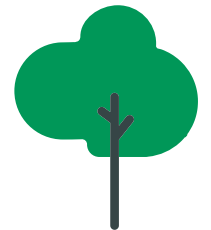
This is a great opportunity to **learn a new skill**, whether that is a formal skill that might be useful in the future at school, or just something you've always wanted to do like learn how to cook or how to code a platform game.

Brains are also physical. They are part of our bodies and our bodies thrive on certain physical signals. It is helpful to keep these signals going as normally as possible – eating, sleeping, seeing daylight, getting exercise. **Creating a daily routine to stick to is another idea that can help to create a sense of things being normal.**

Exercise

Exercise is the best way we know of to keep all the chemicals in your body and your brain working as normally as possible. It also helps to burn off any stress or worry that builds up.

We have to stick to government advice for the safety of everyone in our communities, so it might not be as easy to carry on with the exercise that you would normally do. Try to find substitutes that you can do for your one session of daily outdoor exercise. Perhaps try walking, running or cycling (as much as you can do whilst maintaining social distancing). There are also lots of ideas on the web for ways to keep physically active – perhaps try out an online exercise class or a yoga tutorial.





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Keeping in touch with each other

Humans are also social animals. We need attention and social contact to feel well. Keep in contact with others as best you can. Social media may be helpful for some, as you can share what you're up to and how you're feeling as well as seeing how your friends are doing too. For some that do not use social media, keeping in contact through instant messaging or through gaming can be another helpful way to be social. As you can't see your friends in person then doing video calls with them is the next best thing. Remember to only chat and video call friends who you already know so you are sure it might not be someone pretending to be someone else.



Be kind to yourself

Don't set yourself unrealistic expectations in terms of what you're learning or studying as well as exercise. Some days you might feel a bit flat or lacking physical energy and may need to have some rest.

Cut each other some slack

Everyone is going to be struggling right now. Parents are stressed and worried, siblings are bored. Give each other some space if you can and be kind to each other.

Lastly - don't underestimate your skills

Your knowledge will be important to your family and your community. If you have friends you haven't heard from, reach out to them. If you have family members who are not as tech savvy as you, teach them. You have skills, knowledge and energy that your families and communities could use right now.



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For parents of teens

These unsettling times are unprecedented, and we are all having to feel our way through it.

Take it day by day

Try to focus on enjoying what you can and take it as it comes. Try not to get lost in the endlessness of it all. OK, so we haven't got that 'end of the summer holidays date' etched into our minds like we might usually do, but just because we don't have an end date doesn't mean there won't be an end.

Structure

Try not to panic about this. Go with what feels right and what works for your family. Teenagers often have different body clocks from adults, and this is the one time of their lives when the world doesn't have to revolve around teachers schedules rather than theirs! If they are getting up late but managing their own routine, go with this.

Physical exercise is important for everyone

Try to encourage your teens to use the opportunities they have, within social distancing safety rules, to get out and exercise as much as possible. Suggest activities you can do together, invite them out for walks, runs or bike rides. Try out a home exercise class together.

Cut each other some slack

We are all going to be stressed, including our children, so we might all be grumpy, short tempered or worried. It's important to be a bit more patient and give each other space. Teenager's need personal space and don't be offended if they don't want to be with you all the time or reject your offer of a family board game. But don't stop offering!



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Social connections matter

We are all social beings, and teens relationships with their peers are incredibly important. We assume all teenagers are total whizzes with social media, but not all of them enjoy it. Encourage your teens to find things that work for them – texting, messaging and online gaming with friends are all totally valid alternatives to video calls. Any young person who is feeling self-conscious about their appearance may find video calls difficult. Some teens, just like some adults, also find it hard to sustain unstructured ‘chatting’ and onscreen calls can feel weird. You could try suggesting some other structure, like playing an online game e.g chess or scrabble, watching a film at the same time and chatting about it.

Keep busy, but don't worry about being productive

It is important not to get too bored or cut off from daily life, so activity is helpful. But don't worry too much about how ‘useful’ this is. Try not to put too much pressure on for activity to be meaningful or educational.

Offer joint family times together and enjoy those moments

even if they are only for a minute or two, but try to let some of them be led by what your teen wants to do.





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For parents of children

Structure

Children generally thrive best if they have some sense of structure. That doesn't mean you have to have a rigid set timetable (unless this helps you) but try to keep some sense of daily routines.

Try to stay with some sense of what normal looks like for your family

Don't expect to become a completely different style of parent overnight! If you were someone who needed routine and structure in your day before, then stick to that now. If you were someone who needed to go with the flow a bit more, then keep doing that.

Physical exercise is going to be really important.

Kids have a huge amount of energy and behaviour will deteriorate even more than it might otherwise if they don't get to burn it off. We have to stick to government guidelines, but at the moment, most of us are still allowed out of our houses for an hour of daily exercise. Get as much physical exercise, sunlight and fresh air with your kids as possible in that time. There are also loads of things on the web popping up with ideas of how to keep active indoors or with limited space.

Children are social beings, like us, and they will need social contacts

Keep in contact with people as much as possible (by phone, video call, web-meetings). Young children are not always great on the phone or video call, but even a thirty-second 'hello' to Granny will help keep them connected to the world outside. Older children are often great at it. They may happily play online games, have a game of scrabble or draughts, or just play alongside each other. From a safeguarding standpoint ensure that your children are just speaking to friends they already know and trust rather than strangers they may have online.



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Keep your children learning

Give yourself permission not to be the perfect teacher. You can't be everything, and right now, children need their parents more than anything else.

Try to find learning opportunities in everyday activities

Like getting them to write a shopping list for you, or to do the maths of working out a recipe. There are loads of brilliant resources and ideas on the web too!

Try to keep a connection to school

Talk about school and make plans for what they will look forward to when they go back. This will of course depend on the age of your children and the engagement of your child with school before. Keep checking the school website, engage with any resources the school are sending back that seem helpful, and check-in with friends.

Email teachers even if they are unable to respond right now. It is helpful to show your children that you can send messages about what they are doing to their teachers.

You can also use your child's teacher as a positive

if they do something great, tell them you can send a photo or an update to their teacher (check it with the school first as they may already have a policy on this).

Use screens as rewards

Don't use taking them away as a punishment. We are all going to need screen time, so try to flip it and make screen time something you can earn.





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For everyone: Surviving coronavirus anxiety

We are living in strange times. **It is OK to feel anxious.** We all feel like we are fumbling in the dark and everyone is worried, but we may not all be reacting in quite the same way.

Talk to people you trust and give yourself permission to deal with things in the best way for you.

Stress is the mismatch between our perception of a problem and perception of our resources to cope with it

Many of us do stressful jobs but cope well. There can be big problems, but if we feel that we have the resources – the time, skills, energy, money or knowledge – to manage the problem, we don't feel distressed by it. We might even enjoy the challenge. The coronavirus situation is a big problem, and many of us feel we have few resources to cope with it, particularly because so much is unknown and feels out of our control. So naturally, our stress (and distress) levels are high.

Don't worry if other people are reacting differently to you

Since we won't all perceive the current problems in the same way or see our own coping skills in the same way, our responses can be different. Different life experiences, skills and circumstances will change our responses.

Limit your social media and news intake to what you feel comfortable with (or none if that feels best for you)

There is so much information out there and it can be totally overwhelming. Try setting a short time period, twenty minutes maybe, after breakfast, when you will read the news and look at updates. Try not to check at other times. Don't keep looking for the answer that will solve everything or get caught in the trap that says if you just keep checking often enough, someone will tell you how to make this all go away.



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If you are finding the amount of news and commentary stressful, you could try nominating someone you trust who is not finding the information so anxiety provoking and ask them to update you with key information.

Anxiety, stress, worry (whatever you choose to call it)

is a mechanism for alerting us that there is a problem. When we are feeling stressed or anxious, it can be incredibly physical. Especially when the anxiety surrounds something with physical symptoms that everyone is talking about, like a cough or chest pain, it makes us really notice our physical symptoms which then creates more worry. There are separate documents in this series talking more about these (see [‘Top Tips for helping an anxious child’](#)).

Music also helps us to produce endorphins

These are chemicals which can give us a bit of a boost. Try joining in with the music: dancing, singing or just tapping along to the beat.



‘Being in the flow’

anything like cooking/baking or doing art or craft which focuses the mind can be a real way to be in the present moment and move away from a mind which might wander to worrying about things.

Remember how technology and science can help us

Technology has never been better for keeping in touch and for finding ways to entertain ourselves, even if stuck indoors. We have never before had so much incredible science on our side to help fight back, and there are amazing people out there working on this right now. New treatments and possibilities will come along.

If you, or someone you know is starting to retreat into their cave, reach out

Try telling someone you trust. Send each other messages, pick up the phone. If you haven't heard from someone for a while, check in with them. Hang on in there. This will end and we will all get through it – together.

