



CHILDREN CELEBRATE Purim this week. Maintain a routine whenever possible. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Coping with the coronavirus

Reactions can impact family members – most notably, children

ADVICE

• By DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

I experienced a sense of déjà vu this week when I asked my husband if anything has been written about how to help children cope with the coronavirus situation.

In the panic that has surrounded coronavirus, it is easy to get caught up in the massive media exposure and forget all about how this exposure, as well as how you as an adult are coping, impacts other members of the family – most notably, your children.

For those accustomed to living in the moment, at this moment, as a country, we are faring quite well – and this is a very important thing to keep in mind and to relay to our children. Life is an unknown, and while we as adults like to plan and predict, so do our children. Right now this isn't easy. Routine is important, and the best way to lower anxiety is to be able to maintain a routine whenever possible.

SO, WHAT do I suggest you tell your children and how do you help them cope?

1. How your children cope will depend on their age, emotional development, previous and current personal experiences and the perceived safety of your family.

Yes, people will be disappointed that they may be unable to travel, that a celebration may be canceled, that they may be asked to not kiss someone or need to wash their hands well. But unless a direct relative or friend is ill, they have little to be concerned about.

Ask yourself: What message have I given to my children in the past regarding flu exposure, and am I abiding by similar rules now?

2. Talk to your children, but first assess your own issues. Are you scared or concerned?

There is a very big difference. Because of so many unknowns and not being able to plan or predict from moment to moment, it is natural to feel concerned. Yet, it is important to assess just what it is that concerns you. More important for you to answer is whether you are scared – and if so of what?

Are these fears justified and based on reality, or are they irrational when you are honest with yourself? One way to check this out is to see whether you have real evidence, or if it just "feels" like it is true when you confront your fears.

In other words, is there really any justification for panic, or is this panic you may feel being driven by too much societal fear that is trickling down and impacting your world? It is important to separate the two, because you will need to do this as you present yourself as a role model for your children. Get your information from reliable sources.

3. Talk to and with your children. They need to voice their concerns and know you are there to listen and help. While you may have few answers, it is important to focus on each child's issues.

They need to know they are safe and that you are there to look after them. You must provide reassurance to them that all is okay in their world while validating their feelings.

4. Provide accurate, honest, truthful and age-appropriate information. Children need simple and straightforward explanations and must be included in basic discussions. Don't get bogged down with unnecessary detail. You want to help them feel in control.

5. Remember, you cannot be anxious and calm at the same time. This is an important message to teach your children as you help teach them techniques to breathe and relax and be focused on this present moment when both you and they are both okay.

6. Ensure that you limit your and your children's obsession with social media with respect to coronavirus. Children need to understand the difference between your insatiable interest and any concern.

The younger they are, the more difficult this is. And while you may think you don't need to take breaks from it all, children certainly need to.

7. Be aware of what might happen in the next days and weeks. The situation is dynamic and unpredictable, but we can still anticipate and plan. The likelihood is that the virus may become more prevalent in spite of the many measures the Health Ministry has taken to reduce its spread.

As with any illness, its course has a beginning, a middle and an end – and will, given the experience with the virus thus far, likely have minimal health impact for most people. Again, the goal has been to plan for the worst and hope for the best. As you explain to your children that you take an umbrella if it may rain, or food when you go on a hike, it is always important to be prepared as much as possible.

8. My daughter-in-law sings a two-minute fun song while she helps her daughter brush her teeth. This is a great idea to help with hand-washing as well. Good hygiene is always important and especially so at this time.

9. Talk to your children about being patient, being helpful and doing acts of kindness regardless of age. Let education be a wonderful guide as older children teach younger children about actual facts and not the hysteria that abounds in the news. It is easy to catastrophize, but it is never helpful.

10. Remember, if you or your children are not coping, seek professional help. While there are no easy answers, enabling your child to feel good is one of the best gifts you can provide during these difficult times.

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana and author of *Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships—Resolving Conflicts*. She has written about psychology in *The Jerusalem Post* since 2000.