

The responses to these frequently asked questions are general advice and are not meant to be diagnostic, crisis intervention, or individual therapy. This list is not a substitute for mental health services. Please call 911 if you have imminent safety concerns about yourself or your child.

## **1. My child seems to be struggling with anxiety and/or depression right now. What should I do?**

It is important to engage your child in a conversation. You can begin by expressing your concern by calmly commenting on what you are observing. For example: “You seem really down. I see that you are staying in bed longer than usual and that you don’t seem to want to talk with your friends. I’m worried about you.” Or, “I hear you arguing more with your brother, and I see you struggling with keeping to a routine. I’m feeling concerned for you.”

Commenting on what you observe and expressing your own feelings, can open up dialogue with your child. You can normalize and validate your child’s experience by saying something like “This is a really hard time. A lot of people including other teens and people of all ages are feeling scared, angry and sad. I’m feeling sad and worried too. This is so challenging.”

Ask your child how they are feeling and to share some of their thoughts. Listen quietly. Validate. Parents understandably want to help their child and want to lessen any difficulties or challenges. This can make us want to move into “fix it” mode. Sometimes we just need to listen with our full attention to what our child is experiencing. After listening and validating, we can say something like “I appreciate you telling me what’s going on for you. It sounds like you are feeling upset and a bit lonely. Do you want to look at ways to start to feel better or do you just want me to listen?” If your child is not ready to move into identifying ways to feel better, let them know that you will be there for them when they are. Remember to check in with them routinely until they are ready to problem solve. You can say something like: “Thanks for letting me know what’s going on. I’m going to check in with you about this every day. Just let me know when you want some help. Until then I am happy to listen to you.”

Help your child brainstorm some coping skills. Talk about the importance of adhering to a schedule and implementing self-care. Develop a schedule that works for your child and your family. Include pleasurable activities in the schedule, including screen time, as social connection is especially important for adolescents. If possible, make sure your child’s daily routine includes uninterrupted one-on-one time with you, time with friends online, engagement with distance learning activities, proper sleep schedules, nutritious food, exercise and hydration. Model this self-care for your child, to the best of your ability. Practice compassion for yourself and others, and talk with your child about doing the best they can. This means being kind to yourself and your child, remembering that we are all doing our best in a difficult situation.

\*\*\*If your child is experiencing a marked change in behavior and their daily functioning has significantly declined (for example they are eating significantly more or significantly less than usual, they are sleeping significantly more or less than usual, they no longer have interest in activities they used to be interested in, they are noticeably more irritable and/or sad, they report feeling hopeless, they have suicidal ideation or are engaging in self-harm) contact mental health professionals as soon as possible for additional supports.\*\*\*

## **2. How do I set limits on screen use during Shelter-in-Place orders?**

Adolescents in particular are struggling with mandates to stay home. It is developmentally appropriate for them to prioritize social connections above all else. Come up with a daily

schedule of activities, including screen use, and agreements that you can both adhere to, including rewards for sticking with the agreements, and consequences for breaking the agreements. For example, develop a daily schedule that you post in your home that includes a specific time for screen use. It is ok to allow slightly more usage than you might under ordinary circumstances. Explain that you are doing so given these unique times. Model appropriate and responsible screen use. For example, refrain from screens during meals. When speaking with your child, give them your undivided attention and put your phone down while speaking. Put your own device away one hour before bed to model good sleep practices as they pertain to screens. Consider awarding additional screen time in exchange for your child's compliance with the daily routine you've agreed to. If screen use is getting in the way of agreements you've made, explain to your child that you are decreasing their allotted time as a result.

### **3. My child's behavior is negative and sometimes out-of-control. How should I respond?**

For some children, regression in behavior is understandable given the increase in anxiety and worries about safety. Some children respond to overwhelming feelings by acting out behaviorally. These children need help expressing what they are thinking and feeling and may need reassurance that they are indeed safe. Out-of-control or negative behavior can be very challenging for parents. Before engaging with your child, make sure you are in a calm space. Take some time to calm your own thoughts and feelings. Actively connect with your love for your child. When you and your child are in a calm space, let them know you are worried about them. Ask your child if there are things that they are worried about. Listen and repeat back what you are hearing, first. For example, if your child says that they are scared that you or another family member is going to get sick, you can say "it sounds like you are really worried that something bad is going to happen to me or grandma and grandpa. Is that right?" Once you've validated your child's feelings, then provide information. You can go online with your child to read about the facts of COVID 19, talk about the measures you and your family and community are taking to ensure that you are safe, etc.

If your child's behavior is negative due to other circumstances such as increased family time and/or family stressors, or loss of routine, make sure you develop and adhere to a daily schedule. Include your child in developing the schedule so that they are more likely to be invested in it. To the best of your family's ability, daily schedules should include enough sleep, daily hygiene, proper nutrition, daily exercise, time for fun as a family, and time for social connection. Adhering to a daily schedule can help to calm children who are displaying negative behaviors. If your child displays respectful, responsible and safe behaviors, reward these with specific praise. For example, "I really like how you came to the table on time and asked to help me serve the food. Thank you!" Or, "thanks so much for washing your hands after you came back from your walk. You're helping keep everyone safe. Thanks!"

### **4. I am having a hard time parenting right now. Is that normal?**

Yes! As we are all experiencing and have heard many times, this is an unprecedented situation. Parents are juggling many responsibilities all at once, whilst also experiencing their own stress. Stopping for a moment to acknowledge your feelings and allowing yourself time and space to feel the sadness, loss, fear, anger—whatever you may be experiencing, is critical. Allow yourself some time to take a moment and breath into your feelings. Remind yourself that you are not alone. See if you can identify thoughts that are causing worry or sadness. Ask yourself, "Are these thoughts 100% true?" Even if the thought seems true, ask yourself, "Is this thought helpful to me right now?" If it is not helpful (and chances are that it is not) try to come up with an alternate, believable and less scary thought. Here's an example: "I am thinking that this will never

end and we will be stuck like this forever. I can't take it." Ask, "is that 100% true, that this will never end, I'll be stuck forever, and I can't take it?" A possible answer to this query could be: "I don't know when this will end. It's unlikely that this will be forever." An alternate, believable and less scary thought is that "Actually, people are working on vaccines. Forever is an unlikely time frame. There are days that I am managing this fairly well. Even if this goes on for a long time, it's not helpful to me to think this thought."

Practice a coping skill to calm yourself. For example, practice deep breathing for several rounds until you feel your body relaxing. Take a short walk, a hot bath, listen to music, talk with a friend, do some journal writing, watch something funny or inspirational online. Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can. If you regret a moment of less-than-stellar interaction with your child, forgive yourself in the same way you might forgive a friend who was telling you about their parenting struggles. Remember that you are not alone.