

Dear Parents,

As the isolation of American families continues, there is more and more information provided on how to help families, but especially children, through the difficult times. One of the leading authorities on trauma, Bessel vander Kolk has a website that offers some very useful tips. In a recent webcast, he made the following points that I will summarize. Other resources can be found on his website at [besselvanderkolk.com](http://besselvanderkolk.com).

We find ourselves currently in a pre-trauma situation marked by fear for physical, financial and psychological safety. The situation is unpredictable in that both the extent of the virus and the longevity is unknown, but there is also the unpredictability of how families respond to this highly unique isolation. Where our typical response to crisis is fight or flight, if not control, we can do none of these with the virus that is shaping our days. Vander Kolk gives several areas of which to be aware as preconditions to trauma. Interventions in these areas can be instrumental in limiting harmful impacts.

1. Lack of predictability

- a. Our lives thrive on order that involves schedules within and outside our homes. Those have been significantly disrupted to the core of even sleep- wake cycles. Many sources are pointing to the importance of maintaining a routine, even listed on a calendar, that involves allowable activities and regular contact with individuals via social media
- b. Suggestion: Put time frames on even the mundane activities of life (even housecleaning and school work) to give children a sense of passage of time. Many of us are forgetting what day of the week it is etc. so this becomes important to all.

2. Immobility

- a. With no place to go nor activities to accomplish, we lose our sense of agency and efficacy so that nothing seems urgent or worthy of doing, especially the most non preferred tasks. This causes some of us to go into a hypervigilant frenzy for a time while others drop into doing nothing. Neither of these responses are sustainable over time.
- b. The risk to this lack of agency includes increased irritability and even dangerously negative interactions i.e. we get on each others' nerves. Data indicates there has been a significant increase in family violence during this time because of the increased real pressures and lack of definite end.
- c. Suggestion: Take regular time to de-stress with such things as yoga, tai chi, mindfulness practices or breathing even though these have never been of interest in the past.

3. Human Connections

- a. We develop our sense of self in relation to others; a synchrony of actions and reactions exist that is stimulating and reinforcing. Our emotions elicit responses that allow catharsis and reaching out but that is now more difficult.

- b. Suggestion: Make sure to plan time together doing novel things that require interaction, even when the children of the family may resist. The end product acts as a reminder of meaningful time together. Such things as cooking, building, lawn prep, etc. memorialize the time spent together in crisis. Keeping a family journal can also highlight the connections within the family and outside.
  - c. Suggestion: There are adults who are lonely all the time but that is more pronounced now. Reaching out to an otherwise isolated individual can be psychologically rewarding to both the giver and receiver.
4. Numbing out/Spacing out
- a. It is important to restore our bodies and brains during this time because of the confusion that inactivity and lack of routine causes. Focusing on new learning can stimulate cognition, especially if there is social interaction involved. There are several colleges offering free online courses right now, including some ivy league colleges, or there may be a hobby or sport that you have always wanted to try.
  - b. Suggestion: For children, there are authors on YouTube giving talks on writing and illustrating, drawing, painting, making music, etc. Trying something new should be totally safe with the idea that any level of performance helps me learn.
  - c. Suggestion: Recognize there are many emotions tumbling within you during this time and allow that to be okay. Taking the time to journal can be extremely helpful in cathartically pouring out the feelings and then logically sorting them.
  - d. Suggestion: Meditation can also be helpful with many sites being free. This truly calming practice can be beneficial both psychologically and physically (a proven way to reduce blood pressure).
5. Loss of sense of time and future
- a. Since the sense of busyness we all faced has suddenly stopped, we need to regain a sense of time passing and assurance that things will get better. Focusing on the changes in every day, even on the progression of the virus as it peaks and the nation recovers, etc, can be reassuring to adults and children. Although this is not the first pandemic to hit, this is the first that your children have faced and possibly you. Helping them to see recovering happening is critical to their sense of optimism.
6. Concerns of safety
- a. Finally, it is important to know what makes us feel safe and what makes our children feel safe.
  - b. Suggestion: The most important sensation in conveying safety is touch, even a momentary pat on the back or a touch on the cheek. Pets are a big part of this safety as well since they are mostly just enjoying the increased presence.

We certainly hope you are all doing well and staying safe but we remain available if you have a need.