

Talking About COVID-19 with Kids

New technology, changing systems, and physical distancing restrictions are a lot for anyone to adapt to. On top of all this you have students, staff, and families counting on you keep moving forward. Each week I hope to use this newsletter to offer updates, distribute helpful resources and hopeful stories to remind us that we have each other, and our wellness matters.

I have heard many of our fellow SD.22 staff find feelings of hope, gratitude and connection even amidst the flurry of change and uncertainty upon us.

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Where's the Manual?

Responding to kids about COVID-19 When there are More Questions than Answers

We've all been there. We know questions are coming about an important topic, and we know our answers will provide more than information. They will shape perspectives and reactions through a myriad of verbal and non-verbal cues separate from the actual information or words we say. No doubt our professional development and personal experiences have prepared us to talk puberty, inclusivity and even politics; but what in all of our lives are we to draw from when it comes to having dialogues with children and youth about Covid-19?

We can start by conceptualizing COVID-19 as a beacon to our body and mind's survival system, and choose our language and framework accordingly. This might be likened to creating a folder for the parent, teacher, or with developmentally appropriate language, the student, to file some of their recent experiences.

Never in our time have we collectively faced a threat such as this. While cognitive processes might quell the surface anxiety such as thoughts of catastrophic consequences, our nervous system is undoubtedly reading a danger that it isn't quite certain how to prepare for or protect us from.

We can explain to the families, teachers and students we are supporting that our brain does a lot of guesswork to keep us safe. While it usually gets it right, it's not a perfect system. For example when we speak out to stop someone from being mean to our friend, that's our brain helping us move towards a threat to help keep someone we care about safe (fight). During a game of tag we retreat from the "it" person therefore backing away from threat (flight). When we play hide and seek we quiet our voice and footsteps and hold very still when we hear the seeker near, stopping our movement (freeze).

It may help to explain that there are differing levels of sensitivity to threat, much like household smoke detectors. In some of my past homes blackened toast wouldn't set off the alarm. In others just frying up pancakes on high heat would leave me running for the tea towel and opening all of the doors. A key difference between this device and the brain is that with the latter, the more that alarm has been set off in the past, the more sensitive it generally becomes. Therefore, and I know it is no surprise to any of you that our previously vulnerable children and families that will be having the most difficulty coping.

Some of the questions that come up for me in the face of this pandemic, is how can we help people better understand and accurately respond to their experiences in this time? How can we promote a helpful

attitude towards varying capacities for engagement and productivity in this time when our frontal cortex is competing with the limbic system for essential oxygen and nutrients to run? In what ways can we promote compassion both within ourselves and our work? Hopefully the following 4 Step response will provide a framework to offer up to parents and teachers as a starting point.

Explain that our brain is getting confusing messages on how best to keep us safe from COVID-19. Like playing a video game with a sticky joystick, our brain might be getting mixed signals on which way to move and so it might be jumping between modes such as forward, backward and stop...



4 Step Response to COVID-19

1. **NORMALIZE** that our body and brain do not read this situation as normal because it's not!

2. **EXPLAIN** the mechanics of our survival responses and why our thoughts, feelings and actions might be unfamiliar and confusing.

3. **INQUIRE** by asking questions that get kids talking about what this is like for each of them. Hardest parts? Positives? Whether they are feeling okay and what they are doing that others can learn from.

4. **VALIDATE** by resisting the urge to calm their fears by telling them not to worry. Instead, show them you understand by telling them WHY their concerns make sense to you. ex "I can see why you worry you'll never see your friends again **because** we don't yet have an end date for this" or "it is super frustrating learning all this new technology **because** there are so many steps to learn just to do one task."

Using the word "because" when responding to COVID-19 related distractions and concerns is key.

It sends the message that you are listening to understand. This can take kids out of the fight, flight, freeze response and bring the reasoning part of their brain back online, making them better able to receive new information.

COVID-19 & YOU

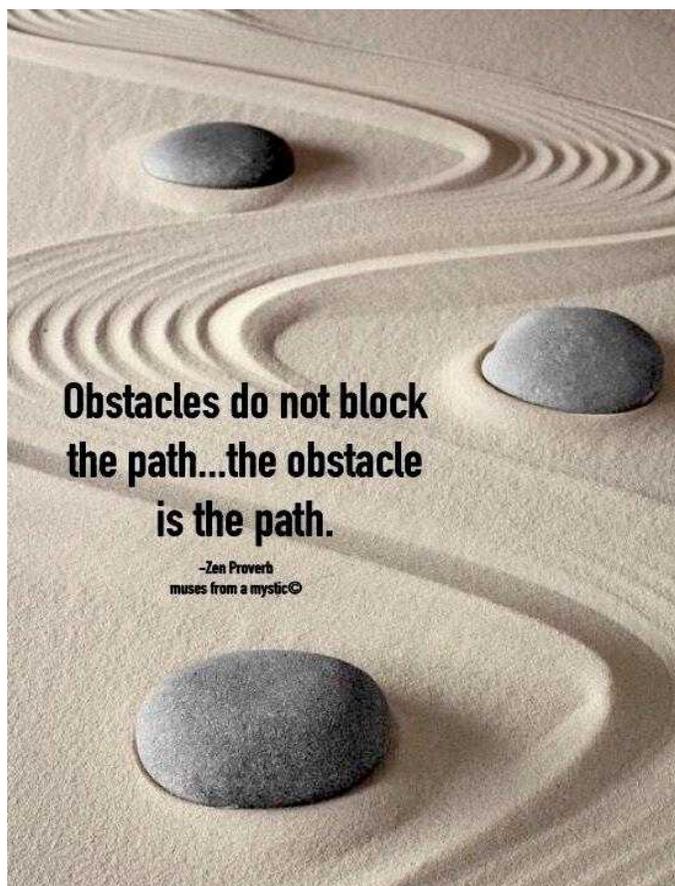
If you have been meaning to develop increased self-compassion, there is certainly ample opportunity to practice now.

Maybe we can start by recognizing that whatever “path” we were on three weeks ago, had a boulder the size of a mountain dropped on it.

As an art therapist I often get to watch people as they create metaphorical as well as literal depictions of their visions for the future. Creating plans for the future can bring about purpose and meaning as well as provide structure, predictability and containment.

Unless your 2020 vision board had COVID-19 strewn across it, chances are this wasn't your idea of life going according to plan. Some questions I've been asking myself these days include: How can I honour the loss of my anticipated reality? In what areas of life can I adjust your expectations for myself?

The idea of the path being the obstacle, as depicted, as a hard and fast rule is beyond where I am willing to venture,



however, I did appreciate this pictures as a gentle reminder that uncertainty is our only guarantee, and that we are constantly adapting to new plans, ideas, ways of life etc. it's just usually not on such a global scale!

‘FACE COVID’

When it comes to living through COVID-19, we can look to Dr. Russ Harris author of *The Happiness Trap* to figure out how to help our children and youth as well as ourselves to stay healthy through COVID-19. Dr. Harris uses acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to offer a guide comprised of 9 steps to coping with

COVID-19 all with a clever, easy to



remember acronym.

F=Focus on what’s in your control
 A=Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
 C=Come back into your body
 E=Engage in what you’re doing

C=Committed to Action
 O= Opening Up
 V=Values
 I=Identify resources
 D=Disinfect & Distance

FOCUS-Helping children and youth to focus on what’s in their control is about recognizing that we can all have fear and anxiety about COVID-19 while also understanding the value

in taking control of what we can. For example, we don’t have control over what happens in the future, but we can choose to wash our hands and follow other safety guidelines.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS-

involves encouraging children and youth to create space for thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations and urges that come up, without necessarily judging or trying to change them.

COME BACK TO YOUR BODY-

involves showing how to be aware of the feelings and sensations in the body (when we reflexively do our morning stretch

and notice the pulling and shifting in our joints and muscles for example). You can talk about different ways to become more aware such as practicing by having them slowly push their feet into the floor, take long deep breaths, to notice how their chest and lungs feel as they breath, or to notice the air on their face or their feet on the ground as they walk.

ENGAGING IN WHAT THEY ARE DOING- this can look like guiding

them to focus by instructing them to notice:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can hear
- 1 thing you can taste

COMMITTED TO ACTION- beyond following the recommended safety measures like washing hands and physical distancing, this is about helping them understand the importance of prioritizing their time doing things that are truly important to them. The guiding questions is “what is something I can do right now-no matter how small it may be-to make a difference in my own, or someone else’s life (pet’s included!).

OPENING UP- is about helping them acknowledge difficult feelings such as fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, frustration, confusion, grief and many more. Once they surface we can remind them that they are normal reactions. One way to respond to these difficult emotions is to ask them what they would say to a dear friend who was going through the same type of experience, or what a loving relative such as a grandparent would have said if they were here.

VALUES- We may have already done

(Continued)

some work with our children and youth around values. When they make decisions driven by their values, we get a clear sense of how we want to treat ourselves as well as others. See if they can identify their five top most important values and find ways to weave them into their day. Examples include trust, love, learning, success, humor, courage and there are many more to choose from.

IDENTIFY RESOURCES FOR HELP- This includes inviting them to gather contact information for services that might be needed such as crisis support, emergency services, community programs, relatives to contact in emergency situations and more. Additionally, discussing reliable sources that can help keep them informed such as the World Health Organization can be helpful.

DISINFECT & DISTANCE PHYSICALLY- IS about staying connected to others emotionally and mentally while keeping safe physical distance. Children and youth are likely to need help figuring out ways to keep emotional connections strong during this pandemic.

For more information on these steps and links to further, related information, see 'FACE COVID' by Dr. Russ Harris author of The Happiness Trap



Today's Tool

Psychology Today released a fantastic workbook about worry and anxiety related to COVID-19

One of the reasons I appreciate this workbook is because it walks the reader through the differences between helpful and unhelpful levels of worry.

On the one hand, worry can help us anticipate and prepare for upcoming challenges. On the other, it can send us into survival mode and decrease the amount of nutrients and oxygen that make it to our frontal cortex, which we rely on to make informed,

rational decisions and best manage our thoughts, feelings and actions.

Here is an example of a “worry chain” as described in the Psychology Tools workbook: I have a headache>What if it s COVID-19?>Maybe I passed it on to everyone at work

(Continued)

yesterday>Everyone will pass it on and die>Imagining an apocalypse and losing everyone you know and love.

The workbook helps you support others to sort the differences between “real problem worries” such as not having enough food at home, and “hypothetical worries” such as what will happen if their life is struck with tragedy as a result of COVID-19.

While it is human nature and at times adaptive to worry, it’s also important to help them identify whether they experience a normal amount of worry, or an excessive amount of worry.

Normal worry helps them get what they want and solve problems in their life, while excessive worry gets in the way of living the life they want and leaves them tired,

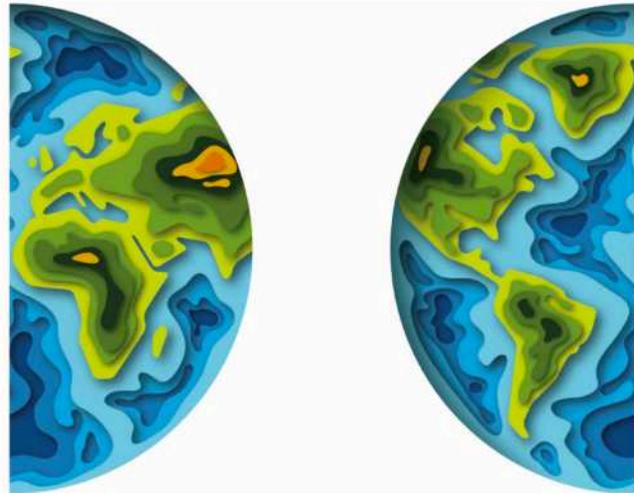
sad and unmotivated.

Once they have determined that their worry is excessive or unhelpful, the workbook walks them through steps they can take.

These are covered more in-depth in the workbook, but they include staying connected with supportive others, scheduling a worry appointment with yourself, building in daily activities that you find calming or soothing, and speaking to your worries with an attitude of self-compassion.

To access the free guide with worksheets and more details, either for yourself or for working with students, visit https://www.psychologytools.com/assets/covid-19/guide_to_living_with_worry_and_anxiety_amidst_global_uncertainty_en-us.pdf.

Guide
US English
Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty



PSYCHOLOGYTOOLS®



Stay Calm & Collected
with a

<https://mildlymeandering.com/lavender-chamomile-latte/>

LAVENDER CHAMOMILE LATTE

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups milk
- 1 tbsp loose leaf chamomile or 2 chamomile tea bags
- 2 tsp honey
- 1 tsp dried lavender
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

1. In a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, heat milk until very hot, but not boiling.
2. Once milk is hot, turn the heat down to low and add in all other ingredients. Let steep for 7-10 minutes before straining into a mug.

This Week's Feature Wellness App

Sleep Cycle: Sleep Analysis & Smart Alarm Clock

Lack of sleep seems to be a common struggle for children and adults alike these days. This app is available for on ipone, android and huawawei. You set a window of time that you need to wake up in, and it chooses the best moment to wake you based on your sleep cycles. You get valuable information about your sleep patterns, and you don't need to get **MORE** sleep to feel rested by waking up at the **RIGHT** time. <https://www.sleepcycle.com/>

Feelings Wheel

It's starting to feel like gone are the days of the robotic "Hi, how are you?" with the classic reflexive "I'm good thanks." When people are checking in these days, it feels nuanced, genuine and attentive. Responses seem to be getting bolder and more courageous as well. This is all anecdotal of course, but it seems as though I am witnessing an explosion of authenticity with the shifting social tides and expectations. People that I'm exposed to have been willing to share the challenges and dips they are facing, even with complete strangers in the grocery store lineup!

Finding the right words to describe our experience is key in keeping us connected. Maybe you already have your favourite resources for building emotional literacy. I've attached my all time favourite wheel here. Just start from the center and work your way out. (see wheel on p. 9)

GOT NEWS? Please send topic requests, pictures, stories, information articles, recipes, announcements, helpful resources and anything you want included in this newsletter to kzuest@sd22.bc.ca

