

STRATEGIES TO HELP PARENTS, EDUCATORS, AND CHILDREN COPE WITH THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR



By: Lauren Cogan, LCSW

As the new school year quickly approaches and we begin to make preparations for what is to come, parents, educators, and children are faced with more uncertainty than ever before. According to Wikipedia, uncertainty refers to a state of limited knowledge where it is impossible to exactly describe the existing state, a future outcome, or more than one possible outcome. Uncertainty is a word I often use in my work as a clinician as it can lead to strong feelings of anxiety and becoming overwhelmed.

In this age of constant information, we are all bombarded with broadcast and social media coverage regarding COVID-19 and its impact on the world. One thing is certain: the impact of COVID-19 has left many of us feeling fearful, worried, confused, anxious, and uncertain.

Actively exploring with our children how they perceive the material that they read and hear on the news can be an important first step to opening the lines of communication. Exploring your children's viewpoints with curiosity rather than judgement will help facilitate open and honest dialogue. Children are naturally curious, and, even if your children do not open up easily, rest assured that they have a lot going on in their brains!

Being aware of our own thoughts and feelings about safety is important when discussing our children's

return to school. Observing their behaviors can also be a powerful indicator of how they are feeling inside since children often have a difficult time labeling their emotions, feelings, and thoughts. In addition, children who are experiencing powerful emotions often "act out" as a result. As we brace ourselves for this upcoming transition, it is important to be mindful of how our body reacts to stress and fear, so that we can be proactive in addressing our children's needs.

These educational considerations, tips, and coping strategies aim to help parents, teachers, educators, and our children cope with the uncertainty that lies ahead as the school year begins.

1) Teachers, educators, and staff are returning to school with more stress than ever before with frequent hand washing, wearing masks, and the constant worry of getting sick. These stressors can create intense feelings of being overwhelmed, becoming irritated, and worrying about what is going to happen. These are normal responses to stress when our survival is threatened.

2) Our brain's most important job is to make sure we survive. Our brain is constantly scanning for threats, and, when our brain experiences a threat, the alarm part of our brain makes a decision to either fight, flee, or freeze. If running away or fighting the threat is not possible, our body and brain respond by freezing. When children and adults are stuck in "survival mode," they may experience stomachaches, feeling nervous and/or anxious, poor sleep, reluctance about returning to school, hyper vigilance (high alert), lack of motivation, mood swings, poor concentration, and an inability to focus.

3) Understanding our bodies and brains from this perspective helps us to see that how we respond to threats around us is normal and a part of survival. How

we respond to fear, stress, and perceived threats can be especially important in helping ourselves and our children to feel calm and safe. "Name it, tame it" can be a great tool that allows children to notice what they are sensing in their body and saying it out loud. An emotion is a full-system response, and our emotions are constantly trying to tell us something. Being aware of our feelings is far more important than always trying to feel calm.

4) Educating children on health and immunity can

also be beneficial. Eating the right foods, getting enough sleep, and exercise are vital to keeping our bodies healthy. Maintaining our health and wellness enables our bodies to manage stress more effectively and protects us from getting sick.

5) Consider lowering your expectations. We cannot expect ourselves, our educators, and especially our children to simply "bounce back." Try to avoid over-scheduling your children. Too many activities and tight schedules lead to feelings of stress and anxiety as well as poor sleep.

6) Validate and help manage children's emotions when they are not feeling calm and safe. Regulating your own emotions and modeling these techniques to your students/children is a valuable tool to help facilitate connection. Reading, playing board games, and engaging in creative tasks also provide positive experiences. Taking body breaks (within the classroom or at home) such as stretching, dancing, or simply moving around can help our body regulate our natural responses to stress and anxiety.

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