

MENTAL HEALTH TIDBIT (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER)

MANAGING ANXIETY DURING REOPENING

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
JULY 2020 MENTAL HEALTH TIDBIT

As things reopen and summer continues, every family faces new and difficult decisions about how to stay safe. Can we visit grandparents? Should my teenager be trusted to socialize safely? Plus, there are still huge uncertainties like school in the fall and the job market. All this uncertainty, along with making difficult decisions, can increase anxiety. Even parents who have been able to manage anxiety in the past may be struggling now. Managing anxiety and tolerating uncertainty are important skills for anyone but are even more important for parents. Anxiety can cause us to lose our cool more frequently. And with our children close by 24/7, often watching and copying our every move, we want to have some strategies to manage anxiety and keep our cool. There's no one-size-fits-all solution for anxiety, but there are some ideas you can customize to manage your specific challenges.

Managing Anxiety

- ❖ **Focus on what you can control** – Uncertainty is very uncomfortable. Do not give into the impulse to try to force things to be more certain. Try to practice acceptance and avoid thinking about worst-case scenarios. Taking a balanced approach can be a big help when you are feeling powerless against anxiety.
- ❖ **Use existing skills to assess risks** – Parents are used to assessing risks before making decisions. Many of the decisions we are facing now can be handled the same way you usually do, even if the stakes feel higher. Parents already have the skills to take a step back and look at things from a practical perspective. If your child is desperate to see friends, gather as much information as you can. Are all children willing to wear masks? Is there a safe place for them to meet outdoors? Has anyone been ill? This will allow you to weigh the pros of having a happy child against the possibility of getting sick and make a reasonable, informed decision.
- ❖ **Maintain social connections** – During stressful times, people who have solid social support are less likely to feel traumatized and overwhelmed. If you've been disconnected from your social circle, reconnect with close friends who will listen and support you, as well as people who can make you laugh and take your mind off the stress in your life. You can reconnect virtually or cautiously if in person, following CDC guidelines.
- ❖ **Be clear about ground rules** - If you're worried about seeing friends in person because they may not have the same opinion on social distancing or masks, the best way to get over your anxiety is to take charge of the conversation. You can say something like, "We really want to see you, and this is what we're thinking. What are your thoughts?" Practice setting boundaries, even when it feels uncomfortable. For example, if friends are not practicing the same level of caution, explain that you will not be able to see them until you feel confident there's no risk of infection.
- ❖ **Take Breaks When You Need Them** – Anxiety can make you feel irritable and overwhelmed, causing you to snap at our child. It can help to take a step back, and a breath, before responding. Tell your child you need a few minutes and go into your bedroom. Practice deep breathing to help yourself calm down. Consider the cause of your stress. Ask yourself if there is something you can do right now to feel better, like eat dinner or finish work. Tell your child you are feeling overwhelmed, or feeling big emotions, and you need to do some things to feel better, like complete your work or relax before you can help them. Assure them this is not their fault. You will feel less stressed and model the right way to manage anxiety and express your feelings to others. If you did yell at your child, model how to repair the problem. Tell them how you were feeling, say what you should have done instead — like take deep breaths — and emphasize that you are sorry.
- ❖ **Do not hesitate to seek help** – If informal strategies are not working, find a professional. Talk with your family doctor and/or connect with a therapist. Persistent sleep, mood, or appetite changes, withdrawing from others or constantly going over the same thoughts, might be an indication that you need some outside help.