**8 Tips to Support Emotional Regulation During a Crisis**

An ongoing, unprecedented crisis such as the novel COVID-19 pandemic will increase the stress response for everyone, including parents, children, educators, and even counsellors! When our stress levels increase, our ability to self-regulate decreases. Every time there is change, our body adapts through the stress response. Often, this is a healthy and normal response, but during this pandemic, the change is happening quickly, and stacking up on top of the last stressor. This cascade of stressful events creates an environment where our nervous system may experience “change fatigue” and struggle to keep up.

During this period of “change fatigue” you and your child may experience fluctuations in your capacity to manage daily life activities. I recommend that you incorporate some of these new activities slowly, and with respect to you and your child’s current capacity.

Here are some tips and strategies to help regulate your emotions and help your littles manage their emotions during this stressful and difficult time. These strategies act to simultaneously reduce the stress response while increasing resiliency (you get 2 for 1, yeah!) Pick one (or two) to focus on, rather then trying them all at once, then slowly add new ones in over time.

1. **Increase kindness and love**

For every outburst, meltdown, screaming fit, or shutdown there is going to be an element of fear behind that intense emotion. If we can start with kindness towards ourselves, family, and friends it can help increase compassion, understanding, and cultivate greater resilience over time.

1. **Adopt mindfulness practices (1x/day)**

Coming into the moment is a key technique for buffering stress and anxiety such as worrying about the future and/or obsessing about the past. Coming into the moment will look different for everyone, for some it means going for a bike ride, or baking cookies.

**Mindfulness ideas:** Crafting, listening to music, meditation, cooking, drawing, fidgets, writing, journaling, solving problems, building Lego, dancing, sports, exercise, breathing techniques, grounding practices.

1. **Create a sleep hygiene routine**

**(8-9hours sleep per night, young kids and teens may need up to 10 hours)**

Consistent sleep is a fundamental element in helping the brain function optimally, including managing stress and being able to cope with emotional fluctuations. Sleep helps buffer stress, and mental health issues, but also helps build mental and emotional resiliency.

Sleep hygiene is a nightly sleep routine involving the parent and child. If stress is starting to build and disrupt functioning in you or your child’s day, make sleep hygiene your #1 focus and dedicate at least 2 weeks minimum to the routine.

* 1. Turn off screens 1 hour before sleep.
  2. No screens in the bedroom
  3. Child sleeps in own bed
  4. During the 1 hour before bed, incorporate calming activities such as; drink tea/warm milk, take a shower/bath, use a relaxation technique (body scan, breathing), read aloud favourite book, tuck-in routine.

1. **Exercise (minimum 1 hour/day)**

Exercise is an important mind and body activity. Moderate to vigorous exercise (hiking, biking, skipping rope, playing tag, running) increases the “feel good” endorphin hormones in the body which act to buffer against stress hormones. Exercise is also a wonderful way to “come into the present moment” and practice mindfulness. When done as a family, exercise can also be a co-regulation practice to help everyone get calm together. Exercise is a key element in helping to fall asleep and stay asleep. Find an exercise/sport/physical activity that you enjoy and add it to your daily schedule.

1. **Outdoor time (minimum 1 hour/day)**

Similar to exercise, being outdoors increases endorphins and reduces stress hormones. Being outdoors can also help with falling and staying asleep. Outdoor ideas: gardening, walking, playing in the backyard (tag, hide and go seek, camouflage, kick the can), drawing buds/flowers of spring, birdwatching. Combining outdoor time, exercise and family time can be a wonderful way to practice emotional regulation!

1. **Co-regulation (multiple times/day)**

Co-regulation is a subtle, yet powerful practice of 2 or more people (1 adult/1 child) engaging in a calming activity together to help calm one another. Co-regulation is a powerful practice during times of ongoing, chronic stress as it provides a few essential elements including- connection with loved ones, participating in calming activity, and reducing the stress response. Co-regulation works by having a safe adult engage with child in a calming activity. In this process, the adult’s nervous system will mirror the child’s nervous system and provide cues to the nervous system that it is safe and can calm down.

**Co-regulation ideas: (You and your child(ren) participating together):**

* Reading out loud to your child.
* Playing card games (UNO, Go Fish, etc.)
* Playing board games
* Solving puzzles
* Cuddling, back massages, foot massages
* Colouring/Drawing
* Crafting: making stress balls, calming jars, gratitude jars
* Practicing meditation or relaxation together, breathing activities
* Petting the dog/cat

1. **Relaxation practices (daily)**

Relaxation practices are an effective strategy for calming the nervous system. Relaxation practices can be informal such as a quiet walk, petting the dog, or taking a bath, to formal relaxation practices such as meditation, breathing practices, or grounding techniques. Here are some resources to help support a formal relaxation practice:

* 1. Mindshift App
  2. Headspace App
  3. Mindful Powers App
  4. Breathr App
  5. Calm App
  6. Cosmic Kids Yoga

1. **Play (everyday!)**

Play is child’s work and they are pro’s at play! Incorporate free play as a way to stimulate imagination and creativity. When children are in play, a part of their brain responsible for creativity activates and counteracts the stress response. Play incorporates elements of mindfulness, connection, and creativity which are all key for building resilience and buffering stress and anxiety. Add a safe adult for co-regulation practice such as building forts, lego, “rough and tumble” play (wrestling, pillow fights, tickle fights), game of tag or “hide and go seek”. Allow the child to take the lead in an imaginative game and notice how engaging in play, and having fun helps you come in the moment and relax!