

The Pandemic's Gift of a Lifetime—Empowering Your Kids to Handle Stress

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Thank you, Covid-19, for proving we *all* need to learn more about managing stress and for finally making stress a safe topic to discuss in every venue. [One third](#) of Americans report the virus has an impact on their mental well-being, and over 60% say it has affected their daily lives.

Sadly, we entered this pandemic already stretched too thin—mentally and physically. Stress in adults and children has been rising steadily and mental health declining as we've trudged onward to survive in a culture that, not only didn't teach us effective tools to deal with the realities of demanding lives, but also makes us feel guilty or ashamed when we don't feel/act/look like some Insta-worthy super-human. Let's not keep passing this legacy on to our kids!

What if you could make a big difference in your children's ability to handle stress from this day forward with some simple shifts? This horrid pandemic serves up the perfect opportunity to poke your head out of the sea of disruption, uncertainty, and panic to get curious. What does science prove really works to help you and your kids be happier, healthier, more confident in the face of stress?

One key [research](#) finding is that “**coping confidence**” is critical to resilience. When you feel like you have the skills and resources to handle the challenge in front of you, stress is less toxic. In fact, you may be energized for your best performance! Clearly, the demands of life keep rising. You can make choices to reduce your stress load, but the real secret is to ramp up your coping skills and resources—your capacity to meet those demands. Don't you want your kids to develop that confidence?

Building **self-awareness is the first step**. In a world so focused on external goals and metrics, it's easy to lose touch with the critical internal cues that let you know if you are “ok” (safe, happy, healthy, loved, worthy, etc.) or how to self-adjust to make yourself “ok.” You have been trained, even rewarded for “stuffing” your emotions and covering vulnerability, instead of taught how to manage the very real, human experience of life.

Right now, you can start to encourage your kids to develop better self-awareness, to listen within, to honor (not necessarily act on!) their feelings and needs, and to use data, values, and wisdom to make better choices. These are skills that will make them less susceptible to external pressures. Of course, your 15-year-old drama-prone daughter will still care more about what her friends think, but she can also start to hear her internal compass.

The good news: It only takes tiny tweaks in what you think, say, and do in response to stress to add up to an enormous difference in your power to handle challenges and your ability to mentor and teach your kids how to use their own power, develop their own confidence.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Even before the enforced social isolation of Covid-19 pandemic life, stress was known to amplify feelings of [social isolation and loneliness](#). Now as the world emerges you are juggling more than ever and with little, if any, respite. Please know that you are not alone in this challenge—even if your mind is telling you so! And though independence is an admirable trait, social connection is a key to resilience. Asking for help can be a sign of strength—model it! Besides you are doing your helper a favor, raising his/her well-being.

Starting with a little self-compassion may give you the boost you need to pause those automatic parental guilt and self-criticism thought pathways long enough to get curious about how you can have a different relationship with stress and help your kids find their healthy coping confidence. Check out [Kristen Neff's work](#) for a little inspiration.

BACKGROUND UNDERSTANDING

Thanks to recent research we have a far better understanding of the human stress reaction and that knowledge gives us better ways to change our experience of stress and to better explain it to our kids. As Covid-19 tested everyone's resilience, as well as parent-child and parent-parent relationships, it is obviously even more important to learn ways to diffuse the tension in the moment and for the long haul.

Human brains are wired to protect you from danger, and this primal wiring overrides all other functions! So, when your brain perceives *any kind* of threat from your inner workings or environment—from the physical danger of a snake on your path to the internal alarm of pain to the emotional trigger of feuding families to the potential/future harm of scary news reports—your brain sets the automatic stress reaction system in motion. This one-size-fits-all, full body reaction raises your heartrate, breath rate, and blood pressure, and diverts blood flow from your smarter thinking frontal lobe to your legs. Why?... So you can run from danger! You are non-consciously thrust into flight, fight, or freeze mode.

This automatic reaction is well designed to handle acute situations like that snake. But it turns toxic when triggered over and over for chronic stress situations, like Covid-19 and many other life challenges, including those invented by overactive human minds. You need your frontal lobe working to keep your perspective, access your wisdom, get creative, stay emotionally stable, and find solutions and responses instead of automatic reactions.

What is even more important to note is that one of the most important pieces of research to come out in recent years demonstrates that what we think about our stress, not the actual stress, is more important in determining whether or not it is toxic.

The good news: you can train yourself and your kids to interrupt this involuntary cascade. This allows you to regain a sense of control so you can choose a wiser response instead of the automatic, and often not helpful, reaction. And this doesn't require rocket science, the

discipline of an Olympian, or the patience of Job. (*Trust me... I've tested that!*). It does involve a willingness to get curious and play with new ways of thinking, speaking, and doing with a light and compassionate heart and perhaps a healthy sense of humor.

It is important to note that the goal for you or your kids is not some impervious state of equanimity, but to build your/their inner strength, wisdom, and resilience to meet the challenges of life as a whole healthy human, able to find more calm in chaos, courage and strength in vulnerability, and compassion in everything, including yourself.

HOW STRESS SHOWS UP FOR KIDS

Though the automatic stress reaction wiring is universal, the way in which repeated or prolonged stress manifests in each parent or child is very variable. Some people are naturally more resilient. This may be a combination of factors: genetics, family stories/expectations, cultural influences, life experience. Signs and symptoms may show up mentally, emotionally, physically, or behaviorally. The more you learn to recognize your early signs of stress overload, the faster you can make adjustments to change your experience.

Here are some typical changes you might notice if your children are struggling with stress:

- Increased crying, irritation
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits,
- Difficulty concentrating, increased disorganization/forgetfulness
- Reverting to outgrown behaviors
- Increased sense of urgency, frustration
- Moodiness
- Change in school performance
- Change in social interaction, withdrawal
- Increased aches, pains, or physical symptoms
- Increased colds or illnesses
- Substance abuse

Of course, as parents, you see can over-read just about anything you observe, or project your own stress and worries. Take a few long deep breaths, read on, and then decide if you and/or your child would benefit from learning some new ways to handle stress.

A note about stress vs. anxiety: while they share many characteristics, anxiety is more of an internal reaction that persists past the external stressful situation. Here is a good review of the [differences](#). And please, if you have lingering concern that you or your child may really be at risk or is dealing with persistent anxiety or depression, please reach out to consult with a health professional. There are so many helpful, and often non-pharmaceutical, ways to address anxiety.

5 WAYS TO TALK ABOUT STRESS

Make stress a safe topic and let your kids know that we are ALL on the path of learning more about how to handle ourselves and our lives. We all make mistakes and hopefully learn from them. The important part is to **stay curious and compassionate and explore together!** Sprinkle insights, reflections, and questions in only when appropriate and the mood/tone neutral to happy. This is more about better framing of stress, than going on the lecture circuit—we all know how well a parental agenda can backfire!

1. **Just do it!** Do not even try to pretend you can sneak your stress by your kids—it [affects the quality of your interactions and shows up in physiological changes](#) in parent and child. Stress is contagious even when you don't speak it. Humans are wired to pick up each other's stress, especially the non-verbal cues, because that helps alert us to possible danger. (If I just saw a tiger outside our cave, it's good for you to get your heartrate ready, too!) Kids hone in on your every breath and grimace and tend to take it personally. Remember watching your parent's faces to see if you were "ok?" Kids learn from how you talk about handling life's pressures.

Of course, I'm not saying tell your 3-year-old son that you are worried about losing your job. But it is helpful for him to hear you say, "Mommy feels sort of jumpy/grumpy right now and needs to do her belly breaths to feel calmer. Want to do them with me?" (*Lie down on the floor together, with hands on your bellies—this can be a great teaching moment and comic relief!*)

It is effective to tell your 14-year-old daughter that you are feeling a little overwhelmed right now so you might have been less than patient with her—you are sorry you didn't handle your feelings so well. Tell her you know that is a sign that you need to take a little time to clear your head (exercise/breathwork/etc.) and think about what matters most and what has worked before. This models how to sort out life challenges. Then ask her what makes her feel more in control when she feels overwhelmed.

2. **Demystify it.** Stress is part of all life—not something you can completely avoid. You actually [need some stress](#) to get motivated to do your best. There is nothing "wrong" with you if you feel it—you haven't "failed life!" It is natural for it to make you feel more alone. It is a normal reaction, your brain protecting you, calling your body to action to keep you safe from a perceived threat, from being "not ok." It is critical inside information. Kids like to learn about their brains—use that!

You get *stronger than your stress* by learning more about it. *Explore together* what tends to trigger it for each of you, what you typically feel, how to use these inside feelings (self-awareness) to make adjustments and better choices. Learn tools to find calm in the moment, and learn skills to build resilience and strength for the future.

3. **De-demonize it.** [Research](#) shows it is more powerful to embrace stress than to reduce it. Realize that what you say about stress out loud and between your ears colors your perception of it and teaches your children how to label what they feel. Minds are meaning-making machines, assigning meanings to inputs. Is this a mountain ("I'm doomed!") or a molehill ("I've got this!")? This is your "stress lens."

Becoming aware of and adjusting your lens gives you power to radically alter how much energy you spend on a problem, how much misery you feel, and even how much needless shame compounds the situation. Science also shows that stressed brains tend to be more negative and more black and white. And these tendencies are amplified in a culture of drama, superlatives, and rampant fear.

Recognize this, adjust your own thoughts/language first, (maybe do your own breathwork first!), then ask questions to help your child put his/her worries in perspective without minimizing their very real feelings. Figure out what is really at stake, what is still in his/her control, and what matters most. "I'm curious, on a scale of 1-10, how big is this problem? What feels scary about it? What parts of this can you control? What's most important?" *(Note: this is much easier once you help your child get physically calm, so their smarter brain cells get some blood flow back.)*

And while you're at it, you can de-demonize vulnerability, the source of so much stress and shame. Instead, learn and teach more about the [power of vulnerability](#)!

4. **Ask more than tell.** This one has multiple benefits! Get curious; be specific; use humor and play; minimize judgment. Making the world safe for yourself and others to be fully human is a gift to all!
 - a. **Build self-awareness**, critical to resilience, and too often drilled out of us in the pursuit of success. Ask your children what they feel in their bodies when they are worried. Teach them (or use an online guided visualization) to scan their bodies and notice where they feel the stress. Share what you notice.

These feelings become cues to check-in and think about what they need to be "ok." ("When my brain gets buzzy, I know I need to do a calming exercise, or I just can't think as well.") Ask what they need right now so they learn to better identify and advocate for themselves. Pinterest abounds with engaging feelings and emotions charts you can download. The [Center for Nonviolent Communication](#) also has great resources, many of which have been put into image form on Pinterest as well. (Example: [needs wheel](#) for adults.)

- b. **Model curiosity**, a powerful skill. Getting curious shifts blood flow back to that frontal lobe, opening up problem solving creativity. It depersonalizes the problem and teaches cognitive flexibility. ("I'm curious, what do you think your teacher was really upset about when he yelled?")
 - c. **Build self-efficacy** by helping your child explore how to solve his/her own problems, brainstorm to get unstuck, access inner knowing, and understand that some of the best learning happens when things don't go right. Ask what has worked well before? Then ask your child to list as many possibilities for what he can do now as he can—at least 10 (to get his mind unstuck). You can get silly—fun always helps learning, and brainstorming promotes creativity, a true

resilience skill. Ask her what she “feels” is the best solution to promote trusting her instincts. Ask him to play out the possibilities in his mind to teach consequences. (“If you tell your friend that you saw him cheat, how will you feel? How will he feel? What good might come out of it? What’s at risk?”)

5. **Leverage Strengths.** The human mind is wired with a [negative bias](#), keeping you vigilant for possible danger and making problem-focused thinking an easy default. Yet [Positive Psychology research](#) reveals that a positive mindset and strengths-based approach will help you and your children cope and bounce back. It does take intention and attention to shift from the problem perspective to optimism, but simple questions can make a [huge difference](#) in your child’s outlook.

It is important to note, this is NOT about glossing over difficulties in a “Pollyanna” fashion or encouraging magical thinking. It is about authentically bringing attention to strengths that promote self-efficacy and broaden perspective in the moment. Have each family member map his/her strengths with an easy [survey](#). Ask your child what makes him/her strong? What has worked for him in the past? What strength might be helpful right now? Your questions have so much power!

5 PRINCIPLES TO TEACH

1. You have a wonderful brain that is designed to keep you safe and that is a good thing much of the time. Thank your brain for wanting to protect you, then remember that sometimes in the process it tricks you, making things seem more worrisome than necessary. You can get stuck thinking about only one side of something, or you may catastrophize, or feel like you are responsible for things you cannot control. Your mind may keep trying to undo something from the past or make up stories for the future that may well not come true.

BUT you are NOT your thoughts and feelings. Everybody has “bad” (negative/mean/scary) thoughts. In fact, you don’t even have to label them, and you definitely don’t have to act on them. Sometimes you can just pretend to watch them go by, like clouds, or share them with someone you trust. And sometimes your emotions may be your brain asking you to consider something and decide for yourself what is your best choice.

While your thoughts and feeling are often automatic...**you always have a choice in what to do with them**, how to spend your precious attention (focus), time, and energy.

2. **Self-awareness is a superpower!** You get powerful when you learn to recognize your personal triggers and signs of stress so you can learn to pause and choose how you want to respond, who you want to be. What you think and feel may be very different from someone else, even in your own family. The more you figure that out, the faster you can shift from reacting to choosing how to respond. (Fun activity: ask your kids how they know when you are stressed 😊.)

3. **Learning to pause and calm yourself is a superpower!** Because of how you are “wired” you can use your body to help calm your mind through breathwork or movement. You can create a **toolbelt of skills** to calm yourself in the moment, sort out tough situations, and deal with strong feelings and emotions. Again, Pinterest has a plethora of creative activities for kids to learn calming tools.
4. Your other **superpowers are curiosity, compassion, courage, and creativity... and gratitude.** These are the mindsets of resilience that can be practiced. Help your kids notice when they are in healthy, strong mindsets, when they use these superpowers to figure out challenges.
5. **Self-care makes you stronger.** Self-care is not selfish; it is your responsibility. Your brain and body need regular recharging, just like your cell phone.

Activity: Have your kids design superhero capes, labeled with their strengths, their ways of being that feel good and strong, what matters most to them, and what skills they can use to solve problems.

5 TOOLS TO TEACH

1. **Breathe!!!** You can always use your breath to help your mind—it’s free, easy, and no one needs to know you are doing it 😊.

There are a myriad of breathing techniques and for the most part, whenever you pause to bring your attention and intention to slowing your breath and bringing it down to your belly, you can help calm your mind. The key is to pick one and repeat it every day until your brain learns that this is its cue to calm down. Practice with your child. Make a star chart (even adults love those!) Make it fun—giggling is allowed.

Start by lying down on the floor and put a hand on your belly. Take a slow, easy, deep breath in, so that hand rises as your diaphragm (bottom of your lungs) pushes down on your abdominal contents. That is soft belly breathing. You can count in and out to 5, add a pause between the inhale and exhale, or put on music and just enjoy slow breathing for several minutes.

A fun one to do with younger children is 5 finger breathing. Have them (very) slowly trace their index finger along the outline of their other hand, breathing in when their finger goes up and out when it goes down. And, of course, there are many online resources and apps (exs: Breethe<https://breethe.com/>, [Calm](#), [Stop Breathe and Think](#)) for breathing exercises for every age group, situation, subject, and time constraint.

2. **Move!!** Humans were designed to move. In fact, emotions contain the word, “motion”, because they are part of our safety system, cuing us to move from danger. Movement has so many benefits, but one of note, is that exercise actually ramps up oxygen,

nutrients, and feel good chemicals, such as dopamine and endorphins in the brain. It even increases BDNF, a sort of 'Miracle-Gro' for brains. At the same time physical exertion clears away the toxic stress chemicals = win-win!

One key for kids (ok, and adults!) is to make this fun. Get creative. Add music. Let family members take turns picking activities, making up games. There have been some amazing indoor obstacle courses on Instagram! Show kids that their bodies are part of their feel-better toolbelt.

3. **Sense!!** I love this technique because it is part distraction and part mindfulness, and very powerful. Basically it's 5-4-3-2-1. Start with a few deep breaths and then continue slow breathing while you notice or even name:

- i. **5 things you can see**
- ii. **4 things you can touch**
- iii. **3 things you can hear**
- iv. **2 things you can smell**
- v. **1 thing you can taste ...**

Now check back in and see what has changed.

4. **Ask questions.** This one is good for a problem or situation. So often your brain takes a few "facts" and adds so many stories and assumptions, that you escalate the situation or attach it to others worries. Some call this "climbing the assumption ladder."

- i. **What do I know for sure?** *The teacher didn't call on me again.*
- ii. **What story/assumptions am I adding?** *He doesn't like me. Eric always gets all the attention. I'm not going to do well in this class. I should have worked harder on that project. I'm not going to get into the college I want. Etc., etc.*
- iii. **What do I (or the situation) need right now?** *I need to check in with the teacher to see if I am doing ok in this class. I need to take a run to clear my head to study tonight.*
- iv. **Who do I want to BE?** *I want to be a mature student, worthy of college work, and who is not afraid to check on my progress and take feedback.*

Even little ones can learn how to sort what they really know from what their minds are adding to make them worry more, then how to check on what they need to be ok.

5. **Take 10!** Sometimes you need a little vent. *The key is to set some boundaries.* It is important to continue to use tools like those above first, as well as to practice good self-care, but life has some truly unfair moments, and honoring your frustration can be healthier than stuffing it.

Take 10 minutes. Write down or speak out loud to someone safe, everything that is wrong right now. Why are you frustrated; what's the problem with that; what's going to happen because of that; why is this unfair? Now take 3 deep breaths and ask yourself if you are still as frustrated. If yes, write/speak for another 10. Feel better yet? Repeat as

many times as you need to feel your mind and body start to calm. For many a good 10 minutes of “dumping” dissipates the chemical chaos of stress and may even lead to some clarity about how to accept/let go or find a solution.

MORE GOOD NEWS

There are so many resources available and a good place to start is the [American Institute of Stress](#), a group of health professionals dedicated to vetting the science and management of stress. Stay inspired! Every tiny positive shift you make in how you look at stress, speak about stress, or experiment with managing it will add up to better health and happiness for you and your family.

This being human can be challenging, so let’s help our children learn to embrace the amazing human capacities to adapt, self-heal, find brilliance, resilience, grace and heartfelt connection as they go forward to make the world a better place!

Stay well, and please reach out with questions, comments, and ideas!

---Cindi

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