



Bradley Hospital

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Coronavirus, Kids and Signs of Stress



The ongoing coronavirus pandemic may cause your child to experience stress and symptoms of anxiety.

Most children will experience mild or intermittent symptoms, such as having days or times when they eat less, have trouble sleeping, seem more irritable, or express more worries. However, some children may have difficulty adjusting to the changes we are all experiencing due to the pandemic and may need more support to cope.

Signs your child may need more support

It's important for parents to be aware of behaviors children exhibit when they are stressed or feel anxious. These signs may indicate a child needs additional support to manage their feelings. Also, it's important to monitor how intense the symptoms are and how often they are occurring.

Parents should watch for:

Changes in sleep patterns. If sleeping less or more becomes a pattern, it could be a sign of stress. Children may have difficulty falling asleep or may wake in the middle of the night and be unable to fall back asleep. Younger children may start avoiding bedtime routines or seek out parents in the middle of the night. Others may also start sleeping more. Young children who have not done so for a long time may return to bedwetting.

Changes in eating patterns. Patterns of eating less or eating more may also signal a child is anxious or stressed. Children may report not feeling hungry and begin skipping meals or eating smaller portions. Others may start asking for food more frequently, eat larger portions, and express feeling hungry all the time, even after eating.

Increased aches and pains. It is common for children to experience headaches, upset stomach, and other aches and pains when stressed and anxious. If children are experiencing pains frequently, and these pains are interfering with their participation in daily routines or favorite activities, it's a sign that your child may need more support.

Increased focus on their body and looking for evidence of illness. It is common to become more aware of physical sensations when we are worrying about becoming sick. However, if your child starts seeking out frequent reassurances

about their health, it could be a red flag. Examples include asking to have their temperature taken frequently, asking if they look sick, or spending a lot of their day checking their symptoms and evaluating whether they might be sick.

Changes in mood and behavior. These changes can vary widely, so if your child seems out of sorts for a few days, ask how they are feeling. Watch for frequent tearfulness, sadness, irritability, anger, and fearfulness as well as increased oppositional, aggressive responses and arguing. Children may also show less interest in having fun or taking part in favorite activities.

Increased clinginess/difficulty separating. If kids show intense, prolonged distress when separating from parents, aren't able to sleep at night in their own room or bed, or are unable to tolerate having parents out of view or in a different room, it's a sign they may be struggling with their emotions.

Withdrawal/isolation. Many children respond to stress by disengaging. Notice if your child starts to spend more time in their room and refuses to join the family in daily activities, especially those they usually enjoy. They might become quieter. These can all serve as cues for parents.

Difficulty concentrating. We often are easily distracted when worried. If worries and stressors are distracting your child to the point that they can no longer complete school assignments or sit through a favorite movie or television show, they may benefit from additional support.

Increased worries/inability to focus. It is natural for your child to express worries about the coronavirus pandemic. However, if your child spends a lot of the day talking about these worries or finds it difficult to stop dwelling on them, they are signaling they may need support to help with their feelings.

How to Get Help

Kids' Link RI at 1-855-543-5465 (KID LINK) is a pediatric behavioral health triage service and referral network that can help parents access treatment for their child.

BH Link at 401-404-5465 enables all Rhode Islanders 18 and older who are experiencing mental health and substance use crises to receive the appropriate services they need as quickly as possible.