

Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

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How is your mental health at this time? When was the last time that you self-reflected on your mental health? This year, our mental health is more important than ever. The stress and uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic, and the everyday struggles we're all facing at home prompt us to look for new ways to prioritize mental health for our families and ourselves.

Susan Damico, former Legislative Assistant and current Director of the Devereux Center for Resilient Children, says that the COVID-19 crisis has taken a toll on the mental health of every one of us and disrupted the lives of everyone. We all face some degree of uncertainty about what the future holds. It is unclear whether a second peak or spike of COVID-19 will happen. Will a second set of closures happen? Families are under more stress than perhaps ever before. And while it is normal that our bodies are responding to this threat in ways that heighten our anxiety and stress levels, it is equally important that each of us find healthy ways to cope. If you're worried about how you'll handle the coronavirus crisis once the days get shorter and temperatures drop, you're not alone. But while winter might be a challenge this year, there are strategies you can use to cope with stress and keep spirits up. As Susan Damico states, "The good news is that each and every one of us has what we need to navigate this crisis. The better news is that a few ordinary strategies can have extraordinary, positive results for our mental health."

Listed below are multiple strategies for managing our mental health and get us headed in the right direction.

- Put yourself first. Adults who care for young children during COVID-19 play a critical role in the healthy development of young children. A typical day is often both rewarding and exhausting. In order to have the energy it takes to provide quality care, we need to have the stamina to be creative, patient, kind, silly, loving—and the list goes on. It is impossible to bring all of this positive energy to the job if we are not taking care of ourselves first. So ask yourself this question: "What practices am I engaging in each and every day to take care of myself so that I have what it takes to be a great parent and at-home teacher?" Grab a pen and paper, make your list and commit to making these activities a priority. You deserve it and your children and family depend on you!
- When dealing with challenging times seek out the silver lining in a situation. The COVID-19 crisis has created overwhelming challenges on so many fronts, and it may be difficult to think about positive aspects that have resulted. I would challenge you to reflect on how the COVID-19 crisis has created opportunities for increased family communication and how we can continue to build on these opportunities. Who doesn't need a reminder to make room for joy?
- Remember to breathe. Stress comes from unexpected and unpredictable situations. So much is unknown right now. Focus on what you can take care of today while hoping for a

better tomorrow. Practice gratitude each day. For example, "Today I am thankful for the way my children share silly things that make each other laugh."

- If you should be conducting at-home instruction with your children, go outside when you can. Try to take a walk prior to beginning the day and/or at the end of the day.
- Focus on what you can control. Uncertainty is uncomfortable, but right now it's unavoidable. Try to make flexibility your family's norm and avoid getting caught up in worst-case scenarios. Instead, engage your kids in planning the things you can control: What fun indoor activities can we do this winter? How about new traditions if the holidays look different this year?
- Maintain social connections. Connecting with friends and family might feel like a luxury, but social support is crucial in stressful times. It doesn't have to be elaborate — try five-minute phone calls with distant friends or a short socially distant walk with a neighbor. If you've been socializing outside in the warm weather, now is also the time to plan ways to keep that up. Consider doing an inventory of everyone's winter gear or making a list of outdoor activities that you can do with friends to keep moving and socialize at the same time.
- Set ground rules early, and stick to them. Quarantine fatigue is no joke, and it can be tempting to loosen up family rules about things like socializing indoors. But in order to keep everyone safe this winter, it's important to know what your family's boundaries are. Is your family part of a quarantine pod? Open a conversation about winter rules. Are extended family members planning holiday gatherings? Start figuring out if and how you can attend safely. By getting a jump on these conversations now, you'll avoid stress and awkwardness down the road.
- Build your self-care toolkit. You might not be able to avoid stress, but you can plan ahead for it. Make a list of quick stress reduction techniques that you know work for you. This might include mindfulness techniques, breathing exercises, favorite songs, short exercise videos or calming activities like playing with a pet. You can even encourage your kids to build their own self-care toolkits. That way, you'll all have easy strategies ready to turn to in tough moments.
- Don't hesitate to seek help. Right now, anxiety is very common, but it doesn't have to be part of your new normal. If you are experiencing symptoms of anxiety (like trouble sleeping, withdrawing from loved ones, or constantly mulling over the same worries) and informal strategies aren't helping, it might be time to get support from a professional. Many mental health professionals offer telehealth sessions that you can access safely from home.

The holiday season is fast approaching. Be proactive and do a self-check on your own mental health and even the mental health of those who are around you.

Editor's Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.
Always remember – **CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!**

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