

Returning to normal when things aren't normal: Back to school anxiety

Source: [Leah Staff](#)

Typically, when we talk about anxiety, it is about a sense of foreboding and fear that is not linked to any immediate danger. But today, many people are experiencing ongoing anxiety because of the very real and present threat of COVID-19.

It's not just the virus itself - we are experiencing anxiety about its impact on the economy, personal finances and conflict around safety practices. We can find ourselves worrying about what we can and cannot touch, what has or has not been disinfected, who isn't wearing a mask, how close people are getting and if that is just a dry throat we are feeling or is it a symptom? The list can feel endless and the concern ever-present.

Worrying about our kids and their anxiety

When we talk about anxiety, it isn't so much about imagined fears but valid concerns about not only our own well-being, but that of our loved ones as well. For many, these concerns are amplified every time our family leaves the house. The process of our kids venturing out daily to return to school may elevate this fear.

Not only will they have to leave the house, but they will be in an environment where they have to interact with other people for the entire day in a space that we can't completely control; however, we can proactively address the anxiety that so many of us, and our kids, are feeling.

One of the primary things a parent can do for their child who is experiencing anxiety about returning to school is to recognize and validate their emotions. Take the initiative to create these conversations and listen to their concerns. Acknowledge that what they are feeling is understandable and normal.

Providing support of their emotional state is a key factor to empowering children. This parental recognition can help reduce the risk of their anxiety ramping to the next level, which is meta-anxiety: being anxious about the fact they are feeling anxious.

How to support your kids

- Normalize their emotions. Especially during this pandemic, experiencing anxiety is completely normal. They are not alone. Simply confirming that their anxiety is normal and ok will decrease a child's feelings of being isolated with their fears. Even if their friends aren't talking about it, show your kids that they have you on their side.
- Empower them with facts. There is a plethora of misinformation that can be confusing to kids. Keep them up to date with facts from recognized health organizations like the CDC and Health Canada.

- Safety first. Teach children about safety practices that will be in place at school such as regular hand washing, wearing masks and physical distancing. At the same time, reassure them that these importance habits will keep them and their friends safe.
- Find the fun. Kids are great at finding the fun in almost everything. Maybe they can come up with a dance or song to accompany hand washing or decorate their face mask to make it represent their personality or find new rules to outside games. Putting their own stamp on safety rules will also reduce their anxiety by giving them an element of control.

These times are not normal so don't expect yourself or your kids to feel normal. Pandemic routines may be here for the foreseeable future, but so many changes and uncertainties are bound to bring about undulating levels of concern. The key is to keep the discussions open and continue to support each other as we all navigate this next stage. Stay safe out there!

Sometimes, even after trying to reduce our stress and anxiety, we may continue to struggle. If you still feel significant distress around COVID-19 and feel you are not coping well, you may need extra support from someone like your family doctor or a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker or other health professional. Please remember that you are not alone during this time. Reach out to family, friends, co-workers, your supervisor or any leaders within the organization as we are here to help. You can also speak to our EFAP provider. This service is available not just to our employees but also to their partner or family members.