



## Managing and understanding social and emotional distress among children during COVID-19

It has been close to three years now since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world like wildfire, leaving an immense impact on the psychological well-being of young people. The effects of this pandemic have further become more detrimental as Hong Kong is currently experiencing its fifth wave of COVID which has brought about a number of restrictions including school closures, reduced gatherings, early restaurant closures, travel bans to outline a few of these. Uncertainty and lack of control has left individuals feeling anxious and stressed.

As human beings we are usually primed to think about the 'light at the end of the tunnel' but since the current situation has persisted for quite some time now, we find people losing hope and that leads to a whole downward spiral leaving young people all the more helpless, angry, frustrated, and concerned about what their future would look like.

At the same time, it has been hard for parents to help and support the anxieties of their children, because of the presence of their own hardships which may be in the form of physical and emotional challenges, including the stress they encounter in their own lives. Some of the questions that worry some of my clients are: When will face to face lessons resume? When will we be able to travel next? How long will we have to keep wearing masks? Will I be able to celebrate my birthday with my friends next month?

It is hence normal for children to experience negative emotions, but if this is prolonged or chronic in nature, it can further exacerbate the situation and may lead to additional challenges such as increased screen time, social anxiety, lack of physical exercise, strained interpersonal relationships between family members etc.

Hence, the question here is what can we do to support and preserve the mental health of young people based on our roles as a parent and a caregiver.

### Identifying anxiety

It is important to observe your child and to be on the lookout for early signs of stress, anxiety, and worry. Very often these may be missed as we constantly lead busy lives, and with perhaps the entire family working from home, we may not be able to pick up on these cues. At the same time, I suggest it is important for parents to also reflect on their own mood and emotions. As it is very likely that the child can take on the emotions of their parent and can mirror/model what their parents may be feeling.

We can think of these behaviours and emotions like the tip of the iceberg but the causes behind these may be bigger and much deeper, and hence it is important that we address these or seek help from a mental health professional. Some signs and symptoms of anxiety may look like the following:

- Being preoccupied by stressful events
- Becoming more sensitive towards the news and information regarding the current situation, and constantly checking sources of information, and social media
- Trouble staying focused or not being able to concentrate on work for sustained periods
- Trouble falling asleep or feeling restless
- Experiencing physical symptoms such as shallow breathing, increased heartbeat, etc.

# STAY IN THE KNOW



## Being proactive

When conversing with children it is necessary to be calm and it is useful to check in with them to see if they require any help, and support. Parents can explain to their children that their emotions can change regularly, and it is perfectly normal to feel this way.

## Managing our own emotions

As mentioned previously children are more receptive to emotional cues of adults (including parents, teachers, caregivers etc.). As an adult it is important to manage our own emotions and remain grounded especially when listening to children's concerns, reassuring them, and speaking to them calmly.

## Talking about 'Feelings' and allowing vulnerability

Parents can schedule a time where the entire family gathers and is encouraged to talk about their feelings. This gives everybody a chance to express and communicate any negative feelings and an opportunity to express them in a safe and loving environment. Sometimes this can also be a way for young people to see they are not alone in experiencing these emotions, and grown-up adults can also feel the same.

## Self-Care

When dealing with the realities of the current situation which may involve being in quarantine and social distancing this can be a struggle for parents. Hence, the best way to help their child is to firstly help themselves. Engaging in self-care is not selfish but it enables a parent to be more 'present' with their child in helping them feel reassured and relaxed.

### Some tips for parents on how to engage in Self Care:

**Movement and mindfulness:** Both movement and mindfulness are useful in regulating oneself physically and help the body to release endorphins which are hormones released by our bodies that lead to the production of happy and euphoric feelings. Movement or exercise can be a walk, running, a hike, yoga, perhaps following a strength training program online or using YouTube videos. It is important for parents to take care of their bodies physically. Getting enough sleep, being active and eating healthy are some of the parameters to consider.

Mindfulness refers to having an intention to be present in the moment. It helps parents to slow down, stepping away from multi-tasking, and living in the moment. It may be in the form of paying attention to your feelings for example, when in a conflict with your child. Pausing before giving a response, and giving an opportunity to your child, by actively listening to them even if they have different opinions. Thereby, responding to them in a more loving way.

**Social support:** Connecting with other parents on social media or support groups can help normalise the situation. Telling someone your worries and fears and hearing someone else who has similar concerns as you can help the parent feel more accepted and aware that they are not alone. These forums or groups can also be useful mediums where parents/caregivers can learn from one another and give each other feedback.

**Having 'Happy Distractions':** Parents are encouraged to engage in activities they enjoy doing and recharge themselves. Sometimes parents can engage in small self-care opportunities such as joining an online bookclub, engaging in a quick 5-minute meditation, spending time in nature (for example, a quick walk in the park or a short hiking trail), journaling, listening to music, podcasts etc. A digital detox can be useful to reset some of your habits and can reduce the pressure of always being "on" especially when compelled to answer work emails 24x7, or the constant urge to access social media.

**Seeking support:** If parents are feeling overwhelmed with the current situation, it is encouraged that they seek professional help for themselves or for their children by contacting psychological counsellors/psychologists