

Help enhance kids' sense of control amid coronavirus concerns

By Ned Johnson, Washington Post

In 2009, I contracted H1N1. The symptoms were mild, but the doctor who confirmed the diagnosis asked jokingly, "So, do you have a dungeon? I think you should stay there for three or four days. Stay away from your family."

Four days later, I emerged from my self-imposed quarantine, feeling a bit like a superhero with a whacked-out superpower. ImpervioMan! He's impervious to viruses that fell mere mortals! I had gotten through what was supposed to have been a dreadful, even life-threatening event and I was not only fine but perhaps a bit stronger, at least psychologically. It's made me think of studies of psychological resilience and whether, with some luck and foresight, we can extract some benefit out of what looks to be a lousy upcoming series of months.

As I anticipate the approach of the coronavirus, I find myself vacillating between thoughts of "I can handle this," and a voice imploring me to run for the hills. With the sense that others are watching me, I am aiming for prudent caution and measured calm. Stress is contagious, and I'm keenly aware that there are things beyond viruses we can infect one another with.

The stress researcher Sonia Lupien observes that the causes of stress fit into the acronym NUTS: Novelty; Unpredictability; Threat (or perceived threat); (low) Sense of Control.

Pandemic viruses hit on all of those stressors, more so for the young, for whom the novelty is higher and a sense of control lower. Neuroscience shows that it is adversity in life, dealing with tolerable challenge and stressors, that wires the brain for resilience. Ideally, we practice to develop that "muscle." So, while ideally we will be spared the worst of casualties, economic disruption, and inconvenience, there's an opportunity to make something more of the situation. We can use it to help us, and our kids, increase our sense of control.

Here's how:

1. Make a plan . . . and a Plan B. Visualizing how to navigate a situation activates neural pathways in ways similar to actually doing the thing. This is why airlines give the same instructions to passengers time after time. Worrying is not preparation, but anticipating difficulties and making multiple plans to navigate them is. To credit Lupien, there are few things more paralyzing than feeling you have only one tool that doesn't work or one route that is blocked, so make a plan B, too.

2. Make a list. Putting plans, thoughts, and concerns on paper can increase a sense of control, lower the power of those concerns, and free up cognitive resources.

3. Assign kids something to do. Parents want to make kids feel safe. But it's better if we make them feel brave. Protecting them makes us feel better by increasing our sense of control, but works against their feeling a sense of control.

4. Teach kids where to get help. When my daughter was 5, she wandered away from us in a crowd. When we reunited, we waited for her to calm down and then talked about what she could do if that happened again. With a plan, she felt more confident and less afraid. Certainly, it was not the plan that she again become separated from us. But we also didn't want her to feel fearful, or that she had to cling to us even more closely. By engaging in that conversation, she engaged her prefrontal cortex and its problem-solving faculties, calming her amygdala (her stress response) and strengthening the connections between the two.

5. Teach kids how to help. When kids can see washing hands as something that helps others and not just themselves, it increases their sense of control. Hygiene becomes a super power!

6. Spread calm. My brother, a paramedic, is unflappable in a calamity. He cared for a patient in crisis recently and afterward one of the hospital nurses told him, "It was so helpful to have you here. You were so calm, which helped us be calm, too." In scenarios where family members are understandably alarmed or panicking, he'll calmly say, "Do I look alarmed? This is manageable. If you like, I can let you know if you should panic." We can effectively create herd immunity.

7. Make an effort to recognize things you cannot control. Hypervigilance is exhausting, so don't see every person as a sick person.

8. Take the long view. Studies after the catastrophic Hurricane Katrina in 2005 found that those who were older weathered the disaster better. According to the National Institutes of Health, "They were able to take a comparative, long-range view of their situation, often stating that they had 'lived through other hurricanes' and through 'tougher times' that, they felt, were more psychologically destructive than Hurricane Katrina." Like the older generation in Katrina, we can remind ourselves of the difficulties we and our families have weathered in the past. It engages our coping skills, helping us better figure out how we will get through this challenge if it comes our way.

9. Talk back against your own fear in front of your kids. For example: "It is really scary that so many people are sick. It's all they talk about on the radio. But I know that the news doesn't talk about the fact that everyone else is doing fine, or all the people who are only a little sick. And I know that if one or more of us does get sick, we have a good plan and other people looking out for us."

Like my H1N1, much of who contracts the coronavirus will come down to luck. But, as it is the sense of control that colors the experience, a classical conditioned

response, doing things to increase a sense of control can be the source of future resilience. After this virus has run its course, not only will we have a greater herd immunity to virus (through exposure, like we used to do with chickenpox), we may have greater herd immunity to the stress. And if we handle it properly, our children will too.