

DEALING WITH POTENTIAL EXPOSURE: THE STRESS OF PHYSICALLY REOPENING SCHOOLS

As officials push to reopen schools, many people still don't feel safe going back in person yet. Across the U.S., districts differ in their plans—some are fully virtual, others are fully in-person, and many are following various hybrid models. You're probably experiencing stress about an uncertain future. If you're on edge and feel like you're waiting for something bad to happen, that's anticipatory grief.¹ It's especially confusing with COVID-19 because you know that the virus is out there and causing harm, but you can't physically see it. The threat of potential exposure to COVID-19 is scary. Some fear is good because it makes you vigilant about taking precautions, but too much fear can do more harm than good. If you are a teacher or have a child that will be going back to school in-person—whether full time, every other day, or every other week—it's important to prevent that fear from becoming debilitating.

FOR PARENTS

ACKNOWLEDGE PRODUCTIVE VERSUS UNPRODUCTIVE WORRIES.

Some worries are productive to think about, like what you'll do if your child comes home sick. Other worries don't have any answers, like how long will we have to live like this. When a worry pops into your head, figure out if it's something you can plan for or if nothing can be done. If you can make a plan, do it! If not, remind yourself that thinking about it won't change anything.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.

People like predictability. During such an uncertain time, controlling what you're able to will likely give you an added sense of security. Make a schedule for yourself that includes time for things you enjoy (and stick to it). Plan ahead for anything that feels overwhelming—deciding on weeknight dinners over the weekend can take some of your mental burden away from the following week. Think about other things you can do to increase your feelings of safety during this time.

TAKE A BREAK FROM THE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

While it's important to stay up to date on the news, a lot of media coverage related to school reopening is the same thing over and over. Social media can be riddled with false information, worst-case scenario stories, and heated arguments that go nowhere. Save yourself the added stress by limiting your overall consumption or tuning out once in a while.

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR NEEDS.

You know your family and kids best, so speak up if there is something about going back to school that needs adjusting for your circumstances. Maybe you're an essential worker and can only help your kids with distance learning at night—let their teacher know if you need to schedule an evening phone call to make sure you're on the same page. Or maybe someone in your home is immunocompromised, so you don't feel safe with in-person schooling right now. Ask your district about options to continue virtual learning despite the general plan to return to schools.

DO WHAT IS BEST FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.

Deciding what to do in terms of schooling right now can be difficult. When weighing choices, think about both your family's needs and situation as well as your comfort level with what your school is doing to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Every student and family are different, so do what works best for you—no apologies necessary.

FOR TEACHERS

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF FREQUENTLY.

To a large extent, you can actually control your feelings and their intensity. The best way to do this is to explore those feelings. Ask yourself: What's my level of anxiety? What am I worried about? How can I help myself cope?

EMBRACE YOUR EMOTIONS.

You may be feeling angry, scared, or a number of other feelings about your school reopening. As uncomfortable as they may be, you can't get rid of your emotions. Ignoring them will only delay their surfacing. Give yourself 10-15 minutes to journal about everything on your mind. Often just taking the time to process your feelings can help them be less overwhelming.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU DO HAVE CONTROL OVER.

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TAKE A SOCIAL MEDIA BREAK.

While social media can be a great source of news, it can also be incredibly toxic. You're probably seeing some unverified claims, scary news articles, and people on your feeds broadcasting their opinions about school reopening. This takes a toll, so close out of the apps and browsers to give yourself a break.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION.

Give yourself grace—don't place blame on yourself for things outside of your control and avoid holding yourself to standards that are too high, even if you could meet those standards during pre-pandemic times. Doing your best to protect yourself and your loved ones is enough.

Remember—this is an especially difficult back to school season. Nothing will take away the pandemic right now or that fact that teachers and children may be in classrooms that don't feel safe. It's normal to feel some distress right now but pay attention if it starts to take over your mind or affect your functioning. Not sure if your emotions are signaling a bigger concern? Take a quick mental health screen at mhascreening.org. It's free, anonymous, and confidential. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results. Screening results can be a helpful tool for starting a conversation with a health care provider.

Results aside, if you're feeling like it's hard to cope, it may be time to talk to a professional who can help you identify strategies specifically targeted to your worries and needs. You can find a therapist or other health care provider through your insurance. If you don't have insurance, your local MHA affiliate may be able to help (search for the MHA affiliate closest to you at mhanational.org/findaffiliate). Many therapists are using telehealth right now, which may provide an extra sense of comfort and safety.

SOURCES
¹Berinato, S. (2020, March 23). *That discomfort you're feeling is grief*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

