Our Mental Wellness: Managing Stress and Overcoming Anxiety

**Q&A with the panel**

**Main speaker**: Associate Professor Jennifer Wild

**Panel members**: Associate Professor Jennifer Wild, Emeritus Professor Robin Dunbar, and Dr Polly Waite

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In challenging circumstances – such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, difficult work situations, when dealing with challenging people – feelings of stress, anxiety and being overwhelmed may seem understandable. How can we best manage stress in these contexts?

**Response – Robin Dunbar:**

Friendship is probably the ultimate solution, if only because the number of friends we have correlates very strongly with our health, happiness and well-being. From an evolutionary point of view, friendships are there precisely to buffer stresses. The important aspect of this may not be the friends so much as what we do with our friends. Casual touch (all those hugs and air kisses), laughter, singing, dancing, telling emotionally wrenching stories, eating and drinking together – all of these trigger the endorphin system. Endorphins are the brain’s “own painkillers” and, weight for weight, they are thirty times more powerful as an analgesic than morphine – without being addictive! The point about endorphins is that they calm you down, make you feel relaxed and create a sense that all is well with the world. Endorphins also seem to boost the immune system bigtime, so you get a double benefit!

Of course, unless you happen to live in Italy and fancy singing operatic arias from your window balcony at the moment, this may be all a bit academic. However, a good substitute is simply exercise, since exercise also triggers the endorphin system. So a daily jog really does get you in the mood to tackle the day ahead! Interestingly, if you can do exercise socially and in synchrony with someone else, it seems to double the endorphin uptake. We don’t know why, but the effect is remarkable for both physical exercise and dancing (and we assume singing). At least you can go jogging with someone and still maintain your social distancing.

One observation I would make is that friendships seem to decay very rapidly (within as little as a few months!) if you don’t keep reinforcing them. Friendships take time and effort to maintain. So it is important to use social media to keep your friendships ticking over while you can’t physically be with them.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings many, but variable, potential challenges ­– isolation, family stress, managing competing demands of work and family – what are realistic strategies for managing stress in this context?

**Response – Polly Waite**

We’ve been running an online survey called the [Co-SPACE survey](http://www.cospaceoxford.com/survey), to track the mental health of children and young people during the pandemic and to find out how best to support parents and families. Within the survey, one of things that has come up in our early findings on parents, is that the majority of them were trying to juggle work and looking after the children and 2/3 felt they were not sufficiently meeting the needs of both work and their children. In terms of the top 3 stressors for parents, they were worrying about their work, children’s wellbeing and then family/friends outside the home.

So if you are a parent/carer and feeling overwhelmed, this is entirely normal and something most people are experiencing. It’s hard dealing with all the changes and an ever-changing uncertain situation. And some families, like those with younger children, children with additional needs, where there isn’t a parent available to support the children with home education, they may be under particularly high levels of stress.

Remember that on the whole children are remarkably resilient. Also, this is really good opportunity to help children recognise that a certain amount of anxiety and stress is normal but the crucial thing is for them to see how to deal with it.

So if you are a parent or carer, it can be helpful to work out what you need to do to feel like you can cope and feel more in control. And this is likely to involve the kinds of things Jen has talked about. That might be you reducing the demands on you or working out what are the priorities right now. This might involve a discussion with your boss or team or maybe writing a to-do-list for work jobs so you feel less overwhelmed. Don’t expect to be able to do everything at the standard you would like, and not beating yourself up when you can’t. It is helpful for children, especially those that are more prone to getting stressed, to see you dealing with stress in this proactive way. Also, this is an opportunity to develop children’s life skills so look for ways your children/family can help support things domestically with cleaning, cooking, and other jobs that are appropriate for your child’s age, and ways your family can enjoy time together. If the stress relates to things your children are or are not doing, be compassionate, try to keep regular channels of communication open with everyone and if there are problems, try to find ways of addressing them at times when people aren’t stressed, for example having regular family meetings – and be prepared to compromise to reach solutions that work for everyone. Finally, make sure you get support where you can – that might be grandparents/other people reading a story or playing a game with your children over zoom, connecting with other parents or accessing services where that is needed.

Given fundamental differences in our personalities and biological make up, to what extent is your level of stress or anxiety really changeable (vs something some of us will just have to learn to manage)?

**Response – Polly Waite**

In looking at the literature for the development of anxiety difficulties in children and young people, the two most robust predictors are a temperament when you tend to withdraw, avoid or respond fearfully to new situations, which increases the risk of later anxiety disorders more than sevenfold. These findings are in keeping with evidence from twin, family and adoption studies that suggest genes account for around a third of the variance in explaining child anxiety symptoms, but also highlight the substantial role of the environment. And of course, the two aren’t completely separate – it’s a complex relationship, so we know that children who are prone to developing anxiety may be more sensitive to things going on in the environment than someone who is more laid back. So some of us may find the current situation with COVID-19 much more stressful than others.

Although some of us will have particular variants of genes that may make us more vulnerable to developing anxiety or other difficulties, this is not all bad news. Recently, researchers have recognised that those of us with these same genotypes may also show the largest benefit in response to low stress or enriching environments. And you can think of the skills and strategies that Jen talked about (and that you might learn through therapy) as creating a more enriching environment.

Consistent with this, studies have found that groups of individuals with greater genetic vulnerability do just as well if not better, when they receive a psychological treatment. In this circumstance, the genotype appears to enable individuals to be more sensitive and responsive, but in an adaptive way. Reframing genes in this way, can allow us to let go of unhelpful beliefs around it not being possible to change and see that change can be possible for everyone.

How can I (as a parent, carer, manager, friend) help others manage stress and anxiety?

**Response – Robin Dunbar**

My advice is always: join a hobby club/group – anything from Zumba classes and a running group to book clubs and model-making. That way you both get the benefit of the activity and an opportunity to make friends. We have always found that singing is the best answer – we refer to singing as the “Icebreaker Effect” because an hour’s community singsong can turn complete strangers into people who think they have been lifelong friends. It’s quite magical. You don’t have to be able to sing, as there are now groups that meet just for the pleasure of it. And there are a number of online virtual choirs as well, so you can even join in from home.

There is a tendency to reach for talking as the general panacea, and I think that this works well for women because that’s how they bond their friendships – by talking. But males don’t: in our studies of 18-year olds, talking had absolutely zero effect on the future quality of their friendships – because boys bond by “doing stuff” together. Theirs is a much more physical world and, I think, needs a very different approach.

**Response – Polly Waite**

Speaking about worries with your child is really important. Sometimes children and young people worry about speaking about their fears to their parents or other people because they worry about upsetting or burdening them and this can really get in the way of them seeking help.

When you talk to your child about COVID, you really want to reinforce the idea that it is understandable to feel worried or anxious. It is also normal to feel lots of other feelings too – angry, sad, frustrated. Try not to minimise or dismiss worries (e.g. “It will be fine!”, “Don’t be silly”), because it’s really important that your child feels that their worries are being taken seriously and also we can’t know for sure things will be fine. So for example, if your child is worrying about their grandparents, we can’t say for sure “nothing bad is going to happen to granny” as much as we’d like to believe it, we can’t know that for sure. You want your child to be able to trust what you say. So instead, try to focus on what is within your control. The things that we can do to protect ourselves and help other people, are things like following the government’s advice around social distancing, washing your hands and chatting to granny on zoom instead of seeing her.

It is great if you can talk to children and young people at the time that they raise worries, as clearly they are feeling able to talk at that time. But we know this is not always possible. So we would suggest trying to talk at a time when both you and they are not stressed, busy or tired. It can also be helpful to try to avoid discussing worries immediately before bed as things often seem scarier and more worrying at bedtime. If children raise worries or concerns at these times let them know that you have heard their worry and that you definitely want to talk to them about it and agree another time to have the conversation (and stick to this plan). So like Jen was talking about using dwelling as cue to focus on other things, then perhaps come up with some other things that they can switch to thinking about instead of engaging in worrying.

When you do come to have the conversation, as well as talking about worries and doing some practical thinking, it’s often helpful to pair it with taking action of some kind – so working out what you are worried and stressed about and then making a plan of how to deal with it. So for example, if your child is worried about friendships now that they are not seeing their friends at school, it might be about planning to do things that make them feel more connected to those people when they are not able to see them in person, e.g., making a card, having a video or phone call the following day – rather than worrying.

Are any of the key 7 tools Jen recommended particularly impactful when used by children and young people who are struggling with anxiety?

**Response – Polly Waite**

These strategies can be used with young people too. Worry is really common in children of all ages and actually focusing on facts, finding ways to deal with worry effectively, are really effective. For younger children this is something that parents can help them do – transforming ‘why’ to ‘how’ and then getting active in dealing with problems.

I liked Jen’s tool around noticing where your attention is. If you are watching or listening to the news with your child, there are some things that are really helpful to focus on. So as well as recognising the sadness about parts of the news, like the number of people dying and personal stories, you also want to look out for opportunities to reinforce positive, hopeful messages about things, e.g. such as all the people working to keep us all safe, including the doctors and nurses at the hospital, the scientists finding a vaccine, the amazing community organisations that have formed, and other actions people are taking to help each other, like Captain Tom Moore’s fundraising. This helps reinforce important messages to children that they don’t need to feel unduly responsible themselves for the current situation.

The tools are really helpful for dealing with low mood as well. Many of the teenagers we have been speaking to in lockdown have found themselves feeling down about things – especially things they might be missing and struggling with the idea of going back to school that it’s going to be all work and none of the enjoyable bits. So actually noticing when they are starting to dwell on unhelpful thoughts to use it as a cue to refocus on other things can be really helpful. Being compassionate to themselves and not beating themselves up if they haven’t done all the work they have been set and found it hard to concentrate. Planning ahead is also really important for young people – with teenagers, recent developments in the treatment for depression have very much focused on things like behavioural activation, so first of all, identifying activities that fit with the young person’s values and then making sure that there are activities every day that fit with this appears to be particularly important.

Many questions the panel received reflected on the unhelpful patterns that we can get in to when under stress, but which then contribute to keeping stress going, such as negative thought patterns, destructive behaviours, feelings of guilt and shame. How can we make sense of and change these vicious cycles?

**Response – Robin Dunbar**

I think I would go for exercise or singing any day. The more gentle and rhythmic the activity is, the better. In fact, these activities seem to be what really trigger the endorphin system. There are lots of online “Zumba on Zoom” classes available now, which at least makes you feel like you’re doing it socially! It needs a bit of discipline to keep doing something regularly, of course, but activating the endorphin system helps with that because endorphins are hugely rewarding and so give you an incentive to keep coming back!

Final comment from Polly Waite

A few weeks ago, the writer Damian Barr posted a poem on Twitter that said that although we are all in the same storm, we might not all be in the same boat. It is helpful to look for opportunities to support or be supported if your boat is a bit less watertight/seaworthy than others. It is important to look for activities that give you a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose and feelings of being competent.

Look for what you can control. Get outside in nature. Nature can boost your mood and now that we are able to spend more time exercising, make the most of it. Try to notice the positives – more time in bed, wearing more comfortable clothes, new skills you’ve learned, greater appreciation for people in society that might have been overlooked and more community spirit.