



# How You and Your Kids Can De-Stress During Coronavirus

By Deborah Farmer Kris

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A few weeks ago, my eight-year-old daughter made a glitter jar for my students: "Tell them that when their brain has a glitter storm, they can shake this up and take deep breaths as the glitter falls."

We could all use some help settling our glitter right now.

If you are feeling stress about the COVID-19 pandemic, your brain isn't misfiring. Stress is a normal, healthy biological response to perceived threats and challenges. It's a response that gets us ready to act — to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

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**READ MORE: Wondering how to talk to your kids about coronavirus? Get some tips on what to say and how to practice healthy habits.**

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But too much stress can hijack our ability to reason through a situation; it can put us in fight, flight or freeze mode even if that's not a helpful reaction. And as much as possible, we want to be responsive instead of reactive.

My kids are watching me as this global situation unfolds. Just this morning, they watched to see how I reacted to the news that the local public schools had suddenly closed. Last week, they watched how my husband and I broke the news that we needed to cancel a family trip — and how we helped them navigate their understandable tears and disappointment.

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Thankfully, we have good tools for calming this stress response when it's not helping us — tools that can be used in this or any other situation. The strategies we use to help children navigate their big feelings are the

*exact same tools* I need to be using right now to navigate mine!

This is something parents and children can work on, together.

## **Breathe**

When we are anxious or upset, our heart rate increases and our breath becomes more shallow. When we take deep breaths, we send a message back to the brain: It's okay to calm down.

Deep breathing resets the central nervous system and helps us respond with a clearer head. Think about a kid throwing a tantrum in a store. They don't respond too well to cool logic! But once their glitter settles — and it will — we can help them think through a situation. Deep breathing can calm the storm a little faster.

With your child, try pretending your fingers are birthday candles and blow them out one by one. Or maybe your child will respond to a "breathing buddy:" Lay on your back, put a favorite stuffed animal on your tummy, and watch that animal slowly move up and down as you inhale and exhale. Do this together — it's playful and helpful for the whole family.

**Here are some PBS KIDS videos you can watch with your child to practice deep breathing together:**

From *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*:

- Daniel Learns to Be Calm on the Trolley
- Calming Down Strategy Song

From *Sesame Street*:

- Belly Breathing with Elmo

From *Esme and Roy*:

- Practice Belly Breathing
- Glitter Jar (Make your own glitter jar to practice being calm!)

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**Is school closed? Get daily activities and tips you can use to help kids play and learn at home. Sign up here.**

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## **Turn Down the FireHOSE**

In the moment, stress can feel like taking a firehose to the face: It's hard to think clearly. This year, I put together an acronym to help both my young kids and the tweens I teach. It's four questions we can ask ourselves when we feel our mood dip or their anxiety rise — four questions that help us turn down the hose.

- **H: Am I hungry?**
- **O: Am I overstimulated?**
- **S: Do I need to sleep?**
- **E: Do I need to exercise?**

### **H: Am I hungry?**

Hunger affects mood. When we haven't eaten for a while, our blood sugar dips, and this triggers the release of hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline — the same ones that are released during a stress response.

Sometimes a snack is just what our kids need to improve their emotional regulation. At predictable times each day, try taking a healthy snack break with your child — a time to connect with them and with your own body.

### **O: Am I overstimulated?**

Every parent knows about the meltdowns that happen after school, after a long outing, or at the end of a long day. There's only so much our brains and bodies can take in, and we all need downtime to recharge.

As a parent, if you feel yourself on "overload," ask yourself if you can take ten minutes to step away. Turn off the news, take a walk around the block or a warm shower, meditate or pray, drink a cup of tea, snuggle up with your child to read a favorite book, or sit in nature. Tell your kids what you are doing. "I am listening to my body and it needs a little break." Help them take similar breaks.

Play is also a great way to relieve stress and build connection. Give your kids unstructured play time, free from too much adult direction. But also find some time to play with them — to toss a ball, color together, tackle a puzzle or play a game. Laugh! Be silly! Research shows that just being in the presence of a compassionate, safe adult can help kids calm down. As families, we can be "that person" for each other.

### **S: Do I need to sleep?**

As the child psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour told me, "Sleep is the glue that holds human beings together." When we are sleep-deprived, we are less emotionally resilient. One of my students spoke for all of us when she summed it up this way, "When I don't get enough sleep, everything is harder!"

In stressful times, it is even more important to preserve good sleep routines for ourselves and our children. Routines help cue our brain that it is time to settle down. For example, Daniel Tiger uses this strategy song to help kids follow a bedtime process.

### **E: Do I need to exercise?**

Little bodies and big bodies need to move. Neuropsychologist Wendy Suzuki says that “exercise is the most transformational thing you can do for your brain” because exercise boosts mood and improves focus and cognition. It helps us be responsive instead of reactive.

As Dr. Suzuki shared with me in this interview, “When [kids] run around, their brains are getting a bubble bath of good neurochemicals, neurotransmitters and endorphins... Adults need this, too... Even if it’s just a walk up and down the stairs or a walk around the block. That is a surefire way to make your work more productive. It’s how humans were built. We were not built to sit in front of a screen all day long. Our bodies and brains work better with regular movement. It’s better than coffee.”

Movement time can also be a time to connect with our kids — from a family dance party to a family hike.

## **Seize the Opportunity**

This morning, I heard my daughter explain the school closures to her kindergarten brother this way: “This sickness isn’t a big deal for you or for me, but we want to be germ-busters so that we can protect other people — like grandma and grandpa! This is how we help.”

Yes, our routines are being disrupted. Yes, the news is sobering. Yes, we are going to need to respond with flexibility and agility. But let’s not underestimate the bonds that can be strengthened when we face challenges together. This is a chance to take a deep breath, turn down the fireHOSE, and model for our children how to navigate life’s uncertainties with calm, courage and compassion.



Deborah Farmer Kris is a writer, teacher, parent educator, and school administrator. She works on parenting projects for PBS KIDS for Parents and writes about education for MindShift, an NPR learning blog. Deborah has two kids who love to test every theory she's ever had about child development! Mostly, she loves finding and sharing nuggets of practical wisdom that can help kids and families thrive — including her own. You can follow her on Twitter @dfkris.

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