The Coronavirus Crisis: How do we cope?

We are in the midst of a global pandemic that has resulted in a situation we have never encountered before. This is not the normality we are used to and there are significant uncertainties about the virus, its effect, possible treatments, and how long we may be living with this as part of our lives.

This is bound to cause a level of anxiety and, for some people, it will significantly worsen any existing anxiety.

Education staff are being called upon to re-open schools for certain year groups, in addition to those pupils that have already been receiving support since school closures in March. This has led to further uncertainty and anxiety about how this can be safely managed, in addition to the longer-term concerns over some children not returning until September.

So, how do we manage all of this? Some points to consider:

1. Be prepared for a degree of distress (trauma), but don’t assume it will happen. Children are very resilient and don’t necessarily process experiences in the way that adults do. Sometimes anxieties and traumatic responses are more a result of learning from/reacting to adult behaviour and dysregulation, than a reflection of the young person’s feelings.

2. School will not feel the same or look the same. Whilst we can make every effort to create a familiar environment, there will undoubtedly be differences. Let children explore this, talk about it, express feelings (positive and negative) about the change. This is part of how we process our experiences and make sense of the world around us. We do not have to know the answer to every question – sometimes it is a good learning experience to sit with a degree of uncertainty.

3. This is a collective, shared experience. This is important to remember for several reasons; firstly, we can all have a degree of empathy with one another – we ‘understand’, we are all having to adapt to new and changing situations together, which helps relationships and can add to a sense of belonging rather than isolation (this relates to Maslow, if anyone wants underpinning theory. After physiological and security needs, social needs are next – a sense of acceptance and belonging, and of feeling you are part of a group); and finally, we’ve experienced this together, but no-one has experienced anything like it before. This means that we have a degree of control about how we manage and interpret the situation, there is no ‘correct’ emotional response or behaviour.

4. Children have a much greater degree of neuroplasticity than adults; they are constantly learning. Just because they haven’t been in a formal education environment for a number of weeks, it doesn’t mean that they have stopping acquiring skills and knowledge. The brain doesn’t differentiate between a Maths lesson and learning how to bake a cake. This means that, with the exception of a natural period of readjustment, children can and will slip back into the ‘school habit’.
Practical steps:

1. Pre-empt the worries, concerns and questions of parents, pupils and staff. Produce a guide or outline detailing what the school day will look like, perhaps with accompanying pictures or a video so that children have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the new arrangements. Detail practical safety measures, such as where children will sit, who will be with them, how hygiene will be managed, what procedures will be in place if someone shows symptoms, what is expected of parents, what measures there are to safeguard staff and so on.

2. Prepare for what eventualities you can, but be aware that you cannot predict or prepare for everything. Communicate that fact to staff and parents. Everyone needs to be clear and transparent in their communications. This will help build and sustain trust and confidence in all directions.

3. Remember that you can support a certain level of need but, as in ‘normal’ times, anything that presents a significant concern should be referred on. Agencies such as CAMHS and Healthy Minds should be signposted to as appropriate.

4. Consider what supports can be put in place for staff wellbeing. This doesn’t have to be formal, it could just be a case of someone identifying a ‘buddy’, a trusted individual, who is accessible and willing to have a chat or offer the opportunity vent if needed. It should be made clear that this is not to replace more formal workplace support (which should already be detailed in policy) and any significant concerns over staff wellbeing should be dealt with as per the policy. It may be an idea, in the first few weeks of returning to school, to have a briefing first thing and a debrief at the end of the day to ensure concerns are highlighted and addressed quickly and aren’t ‘taken home’. This may also identify what is or isn’t working within the new school model.

5. Focus on giving children and staff time to readjust to school. Do not rush into formalised learning. If anxiety is present, it releases chemicals that flood the brain and literally render it incapable of absorbing information. Taking time to allow desensitisation, through familiarisation activities, games, creative tasks, will hopefully stop the brain becoming hyper aroused and ‘firing off’, enabling learning to take place.

6. Be aware that anxiety may not always present as distress. You may see anger, frustration, aggression, and withdrawal. Sometimes a little space and time to decompress helps, but consider changes in activities, movement, games (counteracting adrenaline and cortisol with movement is very effective). Distract rather than dissect. Children often won’t be able to verbalise what or how they feel, and they tend to struggle with the physical symptoms of anxiety more that the psychological.

7. Recognise the learning opportunities – children will need/want to make sense of the situation, or possibly express their thoughts and feelings about it. This opens up a plethora of opportunities to allow them to process the experience, from writing about or discussing their experiences, to drawing or painting things they have done or learnt, or even visualising what the virus itself looks like or what their thoughts are about ‘it’. This could help dispel some myths or misinformation. They may want to explore what they have missed about school, enjoyed about being at home and so on. This can work for both primary and secondary age children, as long as activities are tailored in a way that is appropriate to the age group.
8. Consider those who will not be returning until September, or those in Year 6 who will be transitioning. The aim here is to create a sense of ‘object permanence’ for existing pupils and create a sense of familiarity for those due to enter Year 7. Some of this will be going on anyway through the contact you are having with pupils. Object permanence is the sense of knowing that something exists even though you can’t see it/experience it. It gives us a sense of reassurance and safety. For pupils not due to return until September, this may involve continued phone calls, online input, postcards home during the ‘summer holidays’, an overview of what school will look like in September – the layout, plan of the day, as before. For new starters, this may be similar – pictures or a video of the layout of the school, how it is likely to look in September, a letter home acknowledging that transition is different this year, but that doesn’t make this year group any less important. Where practical, schools could record Year 7 staff introducing themselves and explaining their role, even discussing what they have enjoyed/disliked about lockdown, what their thoughts are about the new school year and how it will be different for them – be creative, this has never been done before so there are no rights or wrongs.

9. Check in with yourself. How are you feeling? What are your anxieties and concerns and how are you regulating? Do you have healthy mechanisms or not? Perhaps do the ‘Stress Container’ exercise to see how much necessary and unnecessary stress you are carrying and what steps you can take to manage that.

10. Remember that you have more knowledge and expertise than you think, and you will know your young people better than most. Allow everyone space and time to adjust, to ‘be’, to process. The next few weeks, possibly months, should be seen as a period of adjusting, rebuilding relationships and establishing new approaches. The aim should be connection not perfection.

11. Finally, keep it simple. Use music in the classroom creatively to disguise the lack of ‘normal’ noise, indicate changes of focus, and as a means of regulating mood – up or down. Allowing children some degree of choice over music (within reason…!) will give them some sense of control. Give children responsibilities, where appropriate, as this can again provide a sense of purpose, focus and control. Movement helps mood in so many ways. It activates our brains and bodies to be more receptive to learning, and it can help counteract some of the chemicals released through anxiety. It is also a good way of helping children re-focus, or regulate, or can provide a bit of a break from learning if they are zoning out. Their attention spans may have suffered!

Remember, be kind to yourselves. This is about managing our best in the midst of a crisis.

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