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Survival Tips from Ground Zero

With Evergreen Hospital across the street from our office and Life Care Center a few miles away, our community turned out to be “Ground Zero” for the corona virus outbreak. Within the past two weeks many of you have been working from home, our schools and universities have been cancelled, and we have been asked to exercise Social Distancing, and even self-quarantine to keep ourselves and vulnerable members of our community well. Information is changing by the hour and our ability to adapt is taxed. We are not living our normal lives and there may be more changes to come. With all this disruption, we at Centered in Wellness in Kirkland have put together some ideas on how to not only survive these challenges, but perhaps even grow and deepen ourselves as we face the uncertain days ahead.

1. Please Follow The Recommended Healthcare Guidelines

This includes minimizing your time in public spaces even if you believe you are healthy. We do not want to cancel school to minimize exposure and transmission of the virus only to have school children gather and then crowd other public spaces. Find opportunities to “get out” in outdoor open spaces that have limited contact like bike rides on trails in more rural parts of your community or take walks or hikes. Spring is coming and spending time in nature seeing the new growth as it unfolds benefits us psychologically and physically and can help with our resilience.

By now you have probably talked with your children about the virus and how they can stay healthy. Although the risk is much lower in children, they still need to take necessary precautions and follow the health recommendations. Be sure to tell your children very specifically what the recommendations are and why. It is good to talk with children in an age appropriate manner about how their healthy habits will have a positive impact on protecting the vulnerable people in our community. Most children have a natural sense of social justice (think Greta Thunberg) and enjoy the opportunity to do something specific and positive for their own community.

2. Keep To A Routine

This applies especially to bedtime, eating, and activity schedules, particularly with children. It may be tempting to treat this time like you would a vacation or time off, but with the uncertainty ahead, it is best to keep to a schedule. Having the predictability of a daily routine can reduce the potential for more significant mental health challenges in the days ahead. We

suggest everyone get up, get dressed, and be ready for the day. If you have schoolwork for your children from their teachers to complete, set daily expectations and establish a routine for getting it done. We recommend school be completed in the morning following breakfast and getting dressed so you don't have to get them to stop playing or get off devices to get them to do their schoolwork. It is difficult to get children to transition from highly enjoyable activities (like devices) to less enjoyable activities (like schoolwork) and it's a set up for a conflict. Reserving highly desirable activities for later can help with getting started on schoolwork beforehand.

If you do not have schoolwork for your child to complete, consider assisting him/her in discovering a skill or subject they would want to master that they don't have time for during the regular school year. Their "work" time can be exploring, investigating, and developing their knowledge or new skill. You can help them gain life skills in goal setting, planning, and the enjoyment of accomplishment. Getting to learn something of their own choosing can rekindle children's natural love of learning and discovery. Working toward a goal and achieving it boosts our psychological resilience, develops our self-confidence, and really helps with the boredom that comes from restricting our activities and social contacts.

3. Stay Informed But Don't Get Obsessed

With so much information happening so rapidly, it can be tempting to stay glued to information sources. While it is important to get timely public health information, too much media exposure can increase fear and anxiety that your children will pick up on. Check in with trusted information sources such as your local school district, local news source, CDC, or World Health Organization regularly, but be sure to balance this with other activities.

4. Stay Connected With Others, Even If Virtually

Now is the time to take advantage of all that technology has to offer us with maintaining social connections! We can minimize the problems that come with social isolation if we take advantage of reaching out regularly and staying connected with others. Help your kids stay in contact with their friends and family by setting up Facetime and Skype "dates" like you might a playdate. Even if they can't "play," they will still benefit from "seeing" their friends and family. Some more adventurous kids can even have similar toys, dress-up materials or art supplies and enjoy the activity together across the distance virtually. Look for family friendly online games where families can team up to play with another family, or better yet, have kids play against the adults. Try to make connecting with others a regular part of your daily routine. Talking with our special people and sharing our experiences with each other can soothe and comfort us.

5. **Maintain A Healthy Lifestyle**

Get enough sleep, eat well, and get exercise. You knew that already, but we will say it again here. It helps us stay physically AND mentally healthy. Take advantage of your children's time away from school by focusing on helping them learn the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Children can help create the routine your family plans to follow during this time. Encouraging their participation (within reason!) will help with their motivation to follow the routine. Learning to cook, plan menus, prepare healthy food, and help with the tasks of the household can ease boredom and gain important skills. Let kids help with choosing a daily activity and put it into the daily schedule. Don't forget about online resources for exercise. There are online suggestions for active games (remember Simon Says and Red Light, Green Light?), exercise classes and even kid's yoga. Let them choose what they like. Helping the family with tasks can also be turned into activities. With less time pressure, see how you can make these "chores" more playful.

6. **Be Mindful of Managing Stress and Staying Positive**

These trying circumstances can be an opportunity to develop your children's coping abilities and help them find their psychological resources. Whether you and your family need to practice Social Distancing, need to quarantine, or even need to exercise isolation to prevent infection, you may feel all kinds of emotions including boredom, irritation, gratitude, frustration, anxiety, fear or worry. To cope, help your child(ren) name their feelings and validate them. See if there is anything that can be done to address the feelings. For example, if they are worried about catching the virus, help them learn facts and develop a plan of action. If someone they know has caught the virus, see if they want to make a card or write a letter. Ask your child if they can think of something that would soothe their feelings before you start to offer suggestions. They will feel more empowered if they can come up with their own ideas to address their feelings. Often just listening and being a comforting presence is enough. If they seem to get stuck and don't respond to comfort or developing a plan, gently acknowledge the feelings and shift to a more positive activity to help redirect their focus. Suggest a board game, a cooking project, or kicking the soccer ball together in the backyard.

Take advantage of this time to develop positive psychological habits within your family. Studies have shown that having gratitude, developing compassion and concern for others, being of service, and meditating have positive benefits for our physical and psychological health. Consider having your child(ren) create a gratitude journal during their daily writing time if they don't have school work or encourage family members share things each are grateful for at dinner together. Gently help them shift their thinking from complaint oriented to gratitude oriented. It doesn't mean we don't want to hear their complaints; we just want to shift the balance to emphasize appreciation instead. As we mentioned earlier, help your children understand how their health habits now protect vulnerable people in our community to develop

their empathy and concern for others. Seek opportunities to volunteer or assist people you know who could use your help to encourage in your children the need for acts of service. It's important for children to feel the positive benefits they experience from knowing their actions truly made a difference.

Finally, consider introducing your children to meditation or to prayer if your family has a faith practice. Both prayer and meditation have been shown to help with emotion regulation and coping. Consult your spiritual advisor on recommendations for teaching children prayer practices. If you would like to explore meditation for children, there are many online apps that have child specific instructions for meditation including guided imagery and breathing practices. More active children may do better with yoga activities or tai chi.

In closing, know that medical and mental health professionals are here for you. If anyone in your family has extreme stress, ongoing trouble with sleeping, inability to carry out daily tasks or follow the routine, or an increase in substance use, please contact us or seek other professional resources. We will get through this time together, possibly the better for it.