# How parents shape their children's mental health

**By Elissa Strauss, CNN**

Updated 5:00 AM ET, Sun October 4, 2020


Parents who are battling anxiety and depression can support their children's well-being by taking the time to talk about it. That way, kids don't think your struggles are their fault.

**(CNN) —** Most parents know that their behavior has an effect on their children's mental health, now and possibly *forever*.


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As such, we strive to call upon our better angels, modeling equanimity and empathy as much as we can, with the small hope that these moments will outweigh the unhinged ones.

There are times when this is easier, and times when this is harder. Right now, just in case anyone out there remains unclear, it's much, much harder.

With the pandemic, school closures, the fight against racial injustice, the climate crisis and political uncertainty, this year has made it difficult for anyone to reasonably hold it together. Now add to that list raising the future caretakers of this vulnerable world.

depression mean the kid will inevitably experience anxiety or depression now, or in the future.

What matters more than how unsettled we feel is how we deal with these unsettling feelings. This is the case whether it's we parents or our kids experiencing anxiety or depression.

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## The relationship between parent and children's mental health

There is a long-established relationship between parent and child mental health problems, explained Marcy Burstein, a clinical psychologist and employee of the National Institute of Mental Health, who has researched this topic.



Children of parents with anxiety disorders are four to six times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder in their lifetime, and children of parents with depression are three to four times more likely to develop depression. Often, these disorders appear in childhood or adolescence.


The why, however, remains uncertain. It's likely a combination of genetics, biology and environment, Burstein said. Also, it's not always something that is passed from parent to child; a child's behavior can impact their parent.

"This is a bit of a chicken-and-egg phenomenon," Burstein said. "The relationship between parent and child is bidirectional and complex. Sometimes the anxious child can elicit less parental warmth or overprotection, as studies show."

effects of quarantine

— Burstein wants parents to know that nobody is to blame.

"Mental health issues should be considered like any other illness," she said. "We don't blame someone for having diabetes."

Eli Lebowitz, director of the Yale Child Study Center's Program for Anxiety Disorders, agreed.

When it comes to children experiencing anxiety and depression, he rarely thinks a parent's own struggles with mental health are the direct cause.


"There is still this idea that it is all the parent's fault, which mental health, as a discipline, has a long history of saying," said Lebowitz, author of the forthcoming "Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents," "They have blamed parents for so many problems."

This isn't to say parents have no influence over their children's mental well-being.

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## It's all in the response

Emotional suffering is inevitable. Life is painful and uncomfortable at some point for all of us. If you never experience these feelings, well, I have some bad news. You're likely neck-deep in denial or toxic positivity (or both), and it isn't benefiting anyone, least of all yourself.

Sometimes anxiety and sadness can be managed without professional help. And sometimes they're so strong that they qualify as a clinical disorder and demand professional help.


Either way, denying this pain can cause our kids and ourselves harm in the long run. The emotionally healthy thing to do, which is also the difficult and brave thing to do, is to acknowledge our struggles in front of our children and model a healthy response to them.

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"Children look to parents to understand their reality and to understand the world. It starts in infancy" Lebowitz said. He pointed to a study in which infants respond to their parent's facial cues when deciding whether or not to crawl over a see-through floor. The babies of parents who looked scared stopped crawling. Those whose parents looked calm kept crawling.

"This is a major way we learn about what is safe and dangerous and happy and sad," he added. Our children pick up on our verbal and nonverbal emotional cues, and tend to be more perceptive than we often give them credit for.

This is not to say we always need to look calm. When we feel anxious about Covid-19, wildfires, racism or financial insecurity — or because we have a clinical anxiety disorder — we should acknowledge it head-on with our children in an age-appropriate manner.

might seem wrong, or, heaven forbid, selfish. But it's for everyone's good.


Pressure-letting might take place through exercise, time off from work, a phone call with a friend or therapy. "Find those little ways to recharge your battery," Lebowitz said.

But that's not all. In addition to finding ways to help themselves, parents should also talk to their kids about what's going on.

"It is scarier for a child to have a parent who is struggling and doesn't talk about it versus a parent who is struggling and does talk about it," Lebowitz said. "Just make sure to use words they understand."

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For young kids, "sad" and "scared" are likely better choices than "depressed" and "anxious."

Age-appropriate conversations about anxiety and depression can achieve a number of things. For one, talking to your kids normalizes these feelings and show children that it's OK to acknowledge and express them. Secondly, communication ensures children know a parent's stress and anxiety aren't the kids' fault. Lastly, when parents talk about what they are doing to deal with these feelings, they are showing their children how to deal with hard feelings of their own.

"Rather than engaging in unconstructive behaviors like catastrophizing, shutting down or yelling, parents should try to model coping behavior right now," Burstein said.


When it's the kids who are anxious, Lebowitz encourages parents to respect but not necessarily indulge their concerns. This may go against the deeply ingrained parental instinct to protect children from what scares them. But the line between protection and accommodation of unhealthy and irrational behaviors can be a slippery slope.

If a child is scared of going to a park because she worries she might get the coronavirus there, don't say: "I understand you are scared and we won't go." Instead, say: "I understand you are scared, but we know this is safe, and I know you can do it."

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"Show the child that you are confident that they can tolerate the stress and still be OK. Make them know you believe they can handle it," Lebowitz said. (For more on how to do this, check out SPACE. It's a method of therapy created by Lebowitz that tackles child anxiety by treating parents and teaching them these skills.

"Parents are like the mirror children look into to learn about themselves," Lebowitz told me.

In my experience, the mirror goes both ways. Knowing my children are watching my reaction to stress and sadness inspires me to deal with it in healthier ways than, say, hiding under a blanket and scrolling through Twitter for hours.

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In our house, when Mommy is stressed she tells everyone she just doesn't have it in her to cook and clean and we order dinner from our favorite Chinese restaurant. When Mommy is stressed, we get ourselves outside for a family walk. When

**Dr. Sanjay Gupta** every Tuesday from the CNN Health team.

The problems may not improve, but my ability to cope with them does.

*Elissa Strauss is a regular contributor to CNN, where she writes about the politics and culture of parenthood.*