

Juggling home and work life with kids!

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A former lecturer and expert in the field of neurodiversity, her own experience with her neurodiverse family has given her a unique understanding, insight and passion to raise awareness and champion best practice when supporting dyslexic learners.

This is an extraordinary time for everyone and there are very few people who are not feeling anxious at some time. For parents with children of all ages and especially those who have children with additional learning challenges, it has also meant having to balance their children's needs and wellbeing alongside their own when we all thought it was going to get better!

In addition, juggling home working with trying to support children's learning means there is a fine line between coping and not coping at all and feeling overwhelmed.

Anxiety can come along in waves when you are least expecting it, and at these times it can feel like we have lost control. Every child will also be trying to cope with a changing reality with no timelines or certainty on the horizon. They may be trying to make sense of what is happening in their own way depending on their age. Some will be able to verbalize this, while some may become angry, irritable, or withdrawn. They will certainly be picking up on your concerns and the way you act and behave with them.

This article explains some reasons for our feelings and also provides some practical tips and strategies and activities that you and your family can use to help.

Why do we feel anxious?

This may be for example:

- Changes in the person's routines
- Lack of control over choices
- Fear about our wellbeing of others
- Uncertainty about the future (and the present!)

At the moment, we have all of these things going on and hence this makes us all feel more anxious because we can't be in control.

So what can we do?

One way of thinking about this is seeing ourselves as a 'bucket'. Each one of us has so much capacity. Varying elements in our lives fill up our buckets and they can fill at different rates.

If our bucket becomes too full and overflows, we then feel overwhelmed. In normal circumstances, we would find ways of coping by reducing the level in the bucket. This could be achieved, for example, by taking exercise, meeting friends, or talking to others.

At the present time, there is a lot flowing in, but less choice of how we empty the bucket! By understanding your own anxieties, you can help your children as well as yourself.

What helps if you feel anxious?

F = Focus on what's in your control

- You can't control everything, but you can control what is going on in your home and with your children

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings

- Allow yourself to recognise when you feel anxious

C = Come back into your body

- Stand up or press feet to the floor; or place your hands on a chair
- Shrug your shoulders
- Take some slow and deep breaths

E = Engage in what you're doing

Start by being kind to yourself

For most of us,, we are trying to work and be at home all at the same time in really strange circumstances.

Start by mapping out the day. Be realistic in what you can achieve and start by being kind to yourself. You may need to plan your work and your children's time.

Unless you are a teacher – you are not a teacher! This may be more challenging if your child has additional learning needs and finds it harder to focus on some tasks. If you think about it, how much time does your child actually spend with their teacher each day?

Your day-to-day contact provides so many opportunities for learning that don't have to be scheduled by the minute. An average school day is 360 minutes and with about 30 children in each class, that means that 12 minutes per child is the total of time given if it was one-to-one. By being more relaxed with your children, and your children sensing this, they will also be less anxious too.

While it is important to structure the day, try not to over-organize it minute by minute. If you don't achieve everything you will just feel you have failed. Let your children put the plan together. Build-in achievable rewards. These can be a mix of small ones (more easily achievable) and bigger ones that can be gained.

Top Tips

Create a broad structure to the day such as ensuring there are regular mealtimes. An expected time to get up and get dressed for example.

Let your children help with chores every day (this also provides structure) and provide them with a menu of activities, so they can decide how many rewards they get when they engage in this.

Avoid talking about Covid-19 and watching the news and checking on your phone in front of your children all the time. Don't start catastrophizing as this can easily spiral your feelings out of control. Focus on what you can control.

Create times and ways to discuss worries with your children. Sometimes it can be easier talking about worries when you are not directly doing so.

Play a game of cards, do some colouring or painting, do a jigsaw together, or prepare a meal. It can be easier for your children to talk at these times when they can see you are more relaxed as well. You can have a more 'normal' conversation.

Have a worry box where worries can be posted. They can be taken away each day (and you can see what is concerning your child).

Build an 'anger volcano' – You could build this with Lego blocks, papier-mâché or Playdoh or draw a volcano (good for planning, turn-taking, creativity, and fine motor skills). You could also find out everything about volcanoes - how they look, where are the biggest ones around the world (geography, history).

Discuss with your child how a volcano rumbles and then erupts and how this can relate to feelings we have when we get angry or feel out of control. Talk to your child about how they feel when they want to 'erupt' and what can be done to stop that from happening.

Set time each day to fun stuff together

Write a family song or use kitchen instruments to create music together. Make a family history – your child could interview your family members on the phone or on the internet.

Cook together and do activities in the kitchen – your children can learn about food from other countries; maths concepts (fractions, weights, calculating amounts); fine motor tasks such as cutting up and even undertaking science experiments.

Watch live webcam from the zoos around the world or virtual museum tours.

Learn a new skill together – playing cards, learning another language, painting or drawing.

Read or listen to a book together – a few pages every day e.g.

<https://stories.audible.com/start-listen>

Create a regular time for exercise – it will help with sleep and mood too e.g. do some yoga together or do a daily activity class like Joe Wicks daily class.

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