

Blog by our School Counsellor

I was thinking, as I contemplated writing this blog, how I would feel if I was isolated at home with my children, with limited ability to take them out, and persuading them that at least some school work would be a good idea!

I was a single parent when my children were 8 and 10, so have an understanding of the stresses and pleasures that can bring... But before we delve into some strategies that can help everyone in your household stay sane I wanted to reassure you that as well as being a parent myself, I'm a BACP accredited counsellor in child, adult and family therapy.

I trained originally in 1998 with the Scottish version of Relate, where I worked until 2006 and subsequently with Relate in Shropshire from 2006, until 2015. I now work privately in schools and private practice. I was also National Forest School co Ordinator for Scotland for 3 years.

While knowing acutely that I'm not always right, I thought I'd share suggestions of some ground rules and pointers on how to cope with lock downs, no school, anxiety, frustration, stress, and communication.

Let's start with **communication**, which I feel is the key area in all relationships.

The key is that both parties need to know they have been listened to and understood. There are a number of ways not to listen, which will immediately be noticed by the person you're talking to, usually leading to an argument.

A basic tool is to LISTEN, then CHECK YOU UNDERSTAND,(paraphrase back) then REPLY, once it's established that you do understand. If you know someone well, or the topic is a bone of contention, then you are likely to be thinking of your own answer rather than listening to theirs.

If you get upset or angry, say so by using an 'I' statement, eg " I'm getting a bit upset/frustrated/annoyed.. I'm just going to calm myself down with a time out for 10 minutes and I'll come back and carry on with this. I'm really interested in your view, but I can't listen when I'm upset.

Don't accuse the other person of upsetting you, they are not responsible for how you feel nor your management of your feelings. Most people who care about each other will notice the I statement and adjust. Try not to use it as a way of closing down difficult areas of conversation though!

Model the behaviours you expect to see from others. If they're your children and you would like them to listen, then model active, respectful listening (see above). If you shout then the lesson is that it's ok to shout, so expect it to come back to you.

If they want to talk and you're in the middle of something then say so and tell them when you'll be free to chat, preferably with a time and equally allow them to do the same.

Don't get into an I'm right you're wrong argument. If it's a matter of personal safety and you're a parent then they are your rules. If not then it's ok to acknowledge the other point of view and agree to leave it there.

Secondly **Frustration, anger, anxiety**

If you or they get angry then have a space where it can be vented safely in a time out. Your body will go into fight/flight if it's triggered via any of your 5 senses into remembering a childhood incident, or perceives a threat to your safety. This can result in anger, fear, or anxiety. If you recognise the symptoms; initial signs are feelings of nausea, sweating, tensing of the body, raising your voice... then take a time out, and find a safe space outdoors or inside.

What's just happened inside your body, is that its moved to **Fight/Flight**. This means the blood from your stomach has been transferred to your biceps, quads, and calves preparing you to run or fight. Your heart rate increases and your breathing quickens and shortens. And the stress hormones – adrenaline and cortisol begin to flood the thinking part of your brain, eventually stopping it working, so you then act without thinking, and say or do things you might regret afterwards.

As soon as you notice this you need to use techniques to calm down

I use elephant breaths: a form of mindfulness. One elephant equals one second. Breathe in through your nose for 5 elephants and out through your mouth for 5 elephants, x5. You can practice it anytime and if you do then your body will notice you're trying to calm down and begin to switch away from anger/anxiety.

Cushions on the bed to hit are a safe way to express anger, as is a punchbag. It can take up to 45 mins to come out of FIGHT / FLIGHT, whilst the adrenaline levels subside. Mindfulness breathing can help. Long breaths are relaxed breaths, and can be practiced. Short breaths are stress breaths.

Thirdly, **structure**

You and your family have been forced from a structured environment of work and school, to a completely unstructured one of home and constraints on liberty.

Too much activity and structure can eventually lead to burn out, too little can lead to rust out!

I suggest that you structure at least one 'thing' in to the morning and another 'thing' in to the afternoon, for everyone. Not necessarily as a family, but sometimes doing a scheduled 'thing' as a whole family would be useful.

Some space and alone time is good too.

Don't be afraid to include at least one session of school work a day. It's what they would have been doing anyway. If it's just adults then schedule in those jobs you've been putting off for ages... and reward yourselves one you'd done the 'thing' or 'things' that you put on the To Do List for that day.

An incentive can be **delayed gratification**.. a reward to get you through the day, week, month, quarter, year. It's more constrained at the moment, but you could save your walk outside for until you've completed your tasks. You could save your favourite drink or food until after you've done something mundane! Find ways to reward yourself for doing the things you need to, but may not want to get done!

Even treating yourself to a moment of mindful relaxation would be good for you. Stand still and breathe elephants, look up and around you and take in your environment. Look for colours, shapes, animals, birds, flowers, trees etc. There can be lots of interest in mindful appreciation of your surroundings, even for the bored teenager!

Limit media use and swap for games and books... not always easy in the first instance, because you're dragging them out of their comfort zone (area of known behaviour) which will be resisted at first.

Remember, if you change something, then to them it's forced change and they'll try to make you change back, by provocation or resistance. Once they accept change is happening they will gradually move to adjust (can take a couple of months depending on what it is!)

If your kids know that you want to understand them and that you will discuss their feelings with them, then you'll find that empathy and understanding builds within your relationship, and that'll be a great help at a time like this, for all of you.

The techniques and suggestions I've made are to help you provide a secure base for you and your family, because in times of uncertainty a feeling of security is very stabilising.

You can see the theory behind the advice in this article in Maslows hierarchy of needs <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-see/201212/our-hierarchy-needs>.

