



FAMOUS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



Ryan Reynolds

The actor has been vocal about his struggles with anxiety throughout his life..

Bouncing Back to a New School Year

It's not uncommon for kids to struggle with the transition from summer fun to school and studying, but this school year brings its own challenges for students. How can parents help kids cope? Two local experts offer advice. *By Stacey Winconek*

The excitement of back-to-school shopping and swapping class schedule details with friends has been replaced by the anticipation of a new normal in education due to the coronavirus.

In any given year, it's common for kids to feel nervous about returning to school after a summer of unstructured fun and the beginning of something new.

"I think it's just the sense of newness, even if they are still going to the same school," says Judith Malinowski, behavioral health therapist for Ascension Eastwood Clinic in Novi.

However, this year presents its own set of unique challenges for students. Some may fear catching COVID-19 in class, while others may struggle with the isolation of remote learning or feelings of sadness over missing their friends.

"It's fair to anticipate that there are going to be so many situations that are stressful for kids that are returning to school," says Heather Brown, a licensed professional counselor and owner of Detroit-based Brown Counseling who specializes in helping children and adults navigate their way through loss and trauma.

"I think it's most helpful to understand that all of these different scenarios involve one sort of loss or another, whether it's a routine or a setting, the friend group, or the in-person social interaction," Brown adds. "It's normal to feel the grief, the sadness and the shock" brought on by the

COVID-19 pandemic and the ripple effect this virus has had on our daily lives.

How can parents help their children cope with back-to-school worries during this unprecedented time? Read on for five tips.

- **Establish routines.** "We are creatures of habit, and we like the certainty of our routines," Malinowski says.

Establish a predictable rhythm to the day and week when it comes to meals, school and sleep, Brown suggests. Be sure to pepper in some fun, such as binge-watching a show on Saturdays as a family or having a virtual visit with grandma on Monday evenings.

"It helps kids anchor in. Making it visual is even better, and especially for the kids that are being virtual, making sure that you include meet-ups with friends and family," is key, Brown adds. "They know what they can count on. It doesn't have to be awesome — it has to be predictable."

Strive to give kids a sense of ownership over their routines, Malinowski adds. Take the lead but give them choices — such as if they want to pack their backpack the night before school or in the morning.

- **Communicate.** Don't feel uncomfortable asking your child how he or she is feeling, especially if you notice changes in mood or behavior.

"It is really the parents' responsibility to be checking in on how their child is doing," Malinowski says.

For children who have anxiety issues or are concerned about getting COVID, Brown suggests parents acknowledge their child's feelings and be empathetic. Provide information about what you do and don't know about the virus, and what is being done to mitigate its spread.

"Point the kids to all the people in their lives that they know and that are out there doing the best they can in their area of expertise to help this get better," Brown says. And remember, do not minimize your child's feelings by saying, "Everything is going to be fine," or "Don't worry."

- **Monitor your behavior and anxiety.** "As a parent, do not lean on your child for support," Malinowski says. "A child has no business comforting the parent."

- **Stay informed.** Parents should stay in communication with their child's school, Malinowski notes. Read email correspondence and get answers to questions about COVID protocol in place at the school and anything else to help prepare your student for the school year and help ease his or her anxiety.

- **Play together.** "Make space for them to explore something they are interested in," Brown says. Make time for imagination and play — not through screens, but through doing things together that are silly or funny, she adds. Moms and dads should get in on the fun, too.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

After an unprecedented end to the 2019-20 school year, a new school year begins with some students attending in-person learning, others opting for remote learning and some embarking on a hybrid approach.

Students who struggle with back-to-school anxiety could be feeling those emotions more acutely this year. After all, the landscape of the school system here in Michigan has drastically changed due to the coronavirus outbreak that halted in-person learning at the end of last school year.

While there are many changes and likely some challenges ahead for students and their parents, we strive to provide support to families, and we hope that this installment of Opening Minds, Ending Stigma does just that.



Dr. Thomas Zelnik
Trustee,
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