

FAMOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH



Kendall Jenner

The model suffers from anxiety and sleep paralysis, detailed in her family's reality show, *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*.



Raising a Mentally Healthy Child in a Fearful World

A licensed clinical social worker offers top tips on helping kids adjust their feelings, thoughts and behaviors for better mental health. *By Stacey Wincone*

Our world can be a scary place. Parents want to raise their children to be mentally healthy but with so much to fear these days — COVID, climate change, even day-to-day anxieties about school and more — it can be difficult for kids to cope.

It's something that Jessica Cortez, owner of Bloomfield Child and Family Counseling and a licensed clinical social worker, is all too familiar with in the children she sees.

"I think there's a lot more of the *busy brain*, as I call it, where there's just a lot of racing thoughts. There's a lot of *what ifs?*" says Cortez, who has been in practice since 2011 and works solely with children.

Those *what ifs* can cause anyone to spiral, but it doesn't have to be this way. There are many ways parents can help their children overcome these feelings and ultimately live a mentally healthy life. Here, Cortez offers some tips and advice.

Steps toward better mental health

"Don't worry about it. It's fine." If you find yourself saying this to your child every time they express worry, stop and take a step back.

Kids need to know their feelings are warranted so instead of dismissing them, Cortez says to validate those feelings and then to shift to focusing on resilience and what you can control in a situation. "I think a key is starting to practice more self-soothing, so trying to figure out if we can tune into feelings," she says.

There are many ways to do so, includ-

ing downloading a mindfulness app such as *Stop Breathe Think* for kids or *Calm* for middle or high schoolers. These apps help teach children breathing techniques.

Create a coping corner, which includes a box or basket of self-soothing items such as a visual timer, thinking putty, monkey noodles, Legos, coloring pages and crayons. Go to the coping corner when you're not in a good place emotionally, set a timer and focus on using some of the items in your box or basket. This can be great for children up to sixth or seventh grade, she says.

Older kids can exercise, light a candle or even lie down for 10 minutes — anything they can do without a phone, Cortez says. For some, journaling can help.

For super anxious kids, a temperature change could regulate and settle the body. A splash of cold water on the face can help when your child is feeling panicked. "The cold water changes the chemicals in our brain to settle down," she explains. "Sometimes we can't change our thoughts first, so we just have to settle the body down."

When away from home, your child should focus on practicing a pace of breathing that works for them, followed by grounding, which means looking around you and identifying everything that you see. Using all five senses quickly to check in allows you to feel more present and in control.

Parents can redirect, assist and recommend some ways to calm the body down. Don't push it — but be sure to remind your children that they have these tools.

Once you've self-soothed, it's time to

move on to addressing the feelings by identifying thinking errors.

Predicting that tomorrow is not going to go well or tomorrow I'm going to fail that test, or my friend is going to be mean are all thinking traps. Every time a child heads this direction, try to flag these traps as thinking errors, Cortez suggests. The same goes for extremes like "never" or "nobody." Once a child learns more about how they are talking, they look for better self-talk. "Life does not always go bad, but if that's where my brain goes, I need to start challenging that thought and noticing that might be a trap," she says.

Before a test, instead of saying, "I'm going to fail," say, "I don't know how it's going to go but I studied really hard and I think I know the material."

Your important role

As a parent, you can model by being aware of how you're handling your own stress, Cortez adds. Be sure to do some self-soothing things together: If you're rushing into the car because you're late for school, do some breathing and counting with your child.

When it comes to keeping kids informed, Cortez says, "I think it's OK to still have the news on or NPR on the radio," but it's good to have a discussion afterwards. Ask, How are you feeling overall? What are the teachers saying? What are your thoughts? Do you have some questions? "We still want our children informed and educated but we just have to have the filter of what is age appropriate or what is too much," she says.

FOCUSING ON FEELINGS

Both young and old want to be seen and heard, have their feelings validated and feel supported. As parents, it's our job to be the people who can support our children and validate their feelings every step of the way.

In the world we're living in, there are a lot of things to be fearful of, and many children struggle to cope with those feelings.

In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, a local expert provides wisdom on how to self-soothe and shift your child's focus to resilience — all in an attempt to raise them to be mentally healthy, no matter what is going on around them.

We hope you find this information helpful and that you'll share it with fellow parents.



Jack Kresnak
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