



STAY HERE

A tool for parents to help your family cope with COVID-19

By Dr Tamar Black, PhD, Educational & Developmental Psychologist

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STAY HERE was developed for helping parents to help your family cope with being at home during COVID-19, and manage the stress, uncertainty and changes of not being able to attend school, work and social/leisure activities. It is based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and compassion-based approaches.

Each step will be described in greater detail after this explanation:

Select what matters to you

Take action to move towards what matters

Accept that you can't control everything: focus on what you can control & let go of what you can't

You are everything you need to get through this

Here is where you need to be (not in the past or future)

Enjoy the small things & notice yourself doing so

Recognize when you/your family are being flexible & embracing change, & praise yourself/your family for doing so

Empathize with what you & your family are going through, & practice & model lots of self-compassion

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Select what matters to you

What are the things that **really** matter to you right now?

What mattered to you before COVID-19 might be **quite** different from what matters to you now. You might select things like:

- Making some alone time for yourself each day (this might be hard if you have a family: your alone time might be late at night when everyone has gone to bed, when you give yourself permission just to sit and be, without having to do anything for/listen to anyone else, or you might like to do some mindful stretching or meditation before getting into bed at night, to release any tension and let go of the day).
- You might want your family to have some quality time together each day: this might mean ensuring that you all eat dinner at the same time, and sit together, without the tv on, and with all phones turned off.
- You might want to regularly check in with a neighbour, who lives by themselves.

Whatever you select, try to put aside what you think **ought** to matter to you right now, as well as what you've been reading about on social media, and think about what's **really** in your heart, and what you care most about.

Take action to move towards what matters

Now that you've selected what matters to you, it's time to think about actions/behaviours:

- What are some small things that you can start to do that will get you heading towards what you chose earlier? (For example: perhaps you want to start going for regular walks)
- Could you commit to doing at least one of these actions/behaviours once or twice a week?
- Is there anything that might make it difficult or get in the way of you doing this? (If yes, what could you put in place that might help? For example: You might find it really hard to find the time to go for a walk, could you ask your partner/teenage children to cut up the food for dinner while you go for a walk, or could you go for a walk once during weekdays in your lunchbreak, and schedule a walk in the calendar on your phone for one or both days on the weekend?)
- What are the actions/behaviours that you can model as a parent to your family, that might also give them the skills to move towards the things that matter to them?

This is your chance as a parent to teach your family **how** to move towards what matters, or if you and your family are already doing things that matter to all of you as a family, this is the perfect opportunity to practice those actions both frequently and regularly.

After COVID-19 is eventually over, your family might have developed some new ways of being as a family, which you might want to continue, even when things return to "normal".

Accept that you can't control everything: focus on what you can control & let go of what you can't

COVID-19 is really scary. We've been forced to stop doing the things that we might have taken for granted: like going to school/work/volunteer work, going to the park/beach, visiting our families and friends, going to the doctor/dentist/post-office/supermarket etc.

When we first faced COVID-19, a lot of us found loss of control really difficult, and our children looked to us for answers to questions such as:

When will I be able to go to:

- School
- Grandparent's house
- Friend's house
- Part-time job
- Sport training/dance classes etc.



We couldn't give our children answers, especially as the rules for what we could and couldn't do were frequently changing, due to the very rapid pace of the virus.

Most of us really struggle to tell our mind **not** to think about something, in fact telling ourselves **not** to think about something often just makes us think about it even more. For example: you might have noticed when you are really thirsty, if you try to tell yourself "do not think about needing a drink of water", you probably feel even thirstier.

Instead of trying to tell your mind what not to think about, you can **accept** all your thoughts and feelings, by noticing them and not trying to fight them. You can allow whatever thoughts show up to just **be** there, without trying to **do** anything with them.

There's a lot that we don't have control over. But there's also a lot that we **do** have control over. We can let go of what we can't control, by acknowledging that there's little purpose in focusing on what we can't control, and choosing to spend our time on what we **can** control.

You can try to let go of what you can't control by:

- Naming the story when it shows up (For example: "Here's the Trying to Control the Future Story Again"), and imagining how those words would sound if they were a voiceover in a movie trailer).
- Thanking your mind for that fascinating thought.

- Putting your thoughts to the tune of a favourite song. For example: some of the lyrics of The Sound of Silence by Simon and Garfunkel could be changed, to become something like:

“Hello self-doubt my old friend
It’s nice to see you again
You show up about my difficult job
You say I’m not smart enough
And I say, thanks mind”.



We didn’t choose to have this pandemic, and everything that it’s brought with it, however:

- YOU get to choose what types of coping responses you want to model to your children.
- YOU get to choose how many times a day you watch the news and check social media.
- YOU get to set rules about your children’s bedtimes, and the need for regular, consistent routines.
- YOU **also** get to decide HOW much interaction your family have with each other, and WHAT that interaction looks like.

You are everything you need to get through this

As a parent, you have faced challenges before (albeit different ones from this), and you do know how to cope with difficulties and adversity. The challenges you face due to COVID-19 might mean that you need to ask for help from your partner and/or children, which might be difficult for you, and feel unfamiliar, especially if you are the one who usually looks after your family, and keeps everything running smoothly. You may be working from home, which you might not have done before, and working from home comes with its own challenges and stresses. You might be working from the hallway, or from the kitchen bench/table, without peace and quiet.

You may need to set some clear boundaries between work and home by:

- Setting clear guidelines for your family about what you need from them when you are working, so that you can continue to do your job.
- If you have young children, you might need to let them know when you are available, and when you can't be disturbed.

Whilst you might not **have** everything you need right now, you **are** everything you need. When your children are stressed about the unknowns and unfamiliarity of COVID-19, let them know:

- They are everything that they need.
- This will eventually pass.
- They will be able to get through this, even though life is different right now from how they imagined this year would be.
- It's okay for them to ask for your (and/or your partner's help), and it's **not** a sign of weakness.

Here is where you need to be (not in the past or future)

“If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious you are living in the future. If you are at peace you are living in the present.” Lao Tzu

When COVID-19 entered our shores, there were multiple breaking news broadcasts on tv about latest outbreaks, governmental responses, and food shortages. Our entire social media newsfeeds were dominated. Most of us were overcome by sheer panic, and found it difficult to stay here, in the present moment.

Our minds are really good at worrying: many of us have become experts at it. But there are less of us who are experts at really staying **here**. This is the time to stay here, without dwelling on the past, when we usually had independence and freedom to come and go as we pleased.

This also isn't the time to be dwelling on “what if”, because we can't predict or control the future.

Each time your mind drifts to the past or future, try to:

- Catch your mind doing so, and practice coming back, and staying here.
- Try to notice your surroundings, with your feet on the floor/ground, being aware of what you can see, hear, smell, taste and feel.



You can also teach your family to stay here when you are sitting together eating dinner:

- Suggest that everyone be silent, and try to **really** notice the smells and colours of the food, the tastes and textures, and encourage them to eat slowly, as if they were tasting the meal for the very first time (your partner and/or children may even express a new appreciation for the meal that has been prepared for them!)
- Encourage them to notice when their minds drift away and they start thinking about what they are going to do after dinner/who they want to message etc., and suggest that they gently bring their attention back here, and try to stay here.
- In your family, you might like to try taking turns each day where one person suggests an activity for the day for the family to practice staying here. For example: listening to music, listening to each other, brushing teeth, cooking, walking and reading. Each evening you could share your experiences of how you went trying to practice staying here.

If you have trouble falling asleep at night, and your mind races, or is filled with thoughts of what you need to do tomorrow:

- Try to listen to the sounds outside the room, inside the room, and the sound of your breathing. You can also teach this to your partner and/or children.

Enjoy the small things & notice yourself doing so

Now is a great time to make some changes in your day-to-day life, to figure out how much time you have previously spent on 'autopilot', as a result of your very busy life: working and taking care of your family.

Many of us are busier now than we were prior to COVID-19: we may have been setting up how to work from home, figuring out how to best support our partners, as well as helping our children with online learning. This may have involved getting your children organized, making sure they remember to show up to their online classes, and helping them with homework.

Now is the perfect time to hit the pause button when you can, and try to enjoy the simple/small things that you might not have noticed before COVID-19, or might have stopped enjoying, because they either didn't seem important, or you were too busy:

- If your children are laughing when playing a boardgame together, or express great satisfaction that they have just completed a challenging jig saw puzzle, take the time to really listen, and enjoy the sound of their laughter/chatter.
- Encourage your family to watch the evening sunset with you, noticing the shapes of the clouds, colours, and patterns in the sky.
- If you are going for a walk, try to walk slower, taking the time to notice the colours of leaves, or a beautiful flower, bush, tree or butterfly. Take the time to smell the flower, and enjoy staying here, really looking at it, instead of hurriedly walking away. You might like to photograph it, and show it to your family when you return home.
- Try to notice yourself enjoying the small things, pointing them out to your family, and encouraging them to stop, slow down, and notice the small things too.



Recognize when you/your family are being flexible & embracing change, & praise yourself/your family for doing so

COVID-19 has forced us to make a lot of changes, **really** quickly. Many of us are creatures of habits, and used to doing things the same way for a long time. Some people find change scary and resist it, often because it's uncharted territory, and we were happy with how things used to be.

Many of us have lost our jobs, or we have been forced to work from home for the first time. We might not have been tech savvy, yet overnight many of us had to convert the way we did our face to face jobs, to working remotely, and using online platforms, in order to retain our jobs.

When you accept change (and in some situations you may be able to even embrace it, such as when you learn a new skill):

- Really praise yourself, recognizing how scared you were, and how much flexibility you have demonstrated. Take them time to notice and praise your partner and/or children when they embrace change too.
- Be your own cheerleader, being proud of yourself when you are coping well, and when you have done things differently.
- You might be learning to do new things, such as cook new meals: your children might have researched low-cost recipes, and cooked with you, creating a really healthy, tasty, and cost-efficient meal, or you or your children might have found a very good use for something that you would have previously discarded or thrown out. Acknowledge to your family how great this is, and let your children know that you appreciate their help.
- Don't just praise yourself silently, but tell your family how proud you are of yourself, and when you notice your partner and/or children being flexible and embracing change (especially for things they might have tended to resist or reject in the past), tell them how proud you are, and why.



Empathize with what you & your family are going through, & practice & model lots of self-compassion

This is the time to carefully listen to your own self-talk, and that of your partner and children. This is a REALLY tough time, that most of us don't have a precedent for, as there hasn't been a pandemic for one hundred years. As a result, most of us can't reflect on what we did last time, including what we did to cope and get through it.

We also might not know HOW speak to ourselves with kindness when we are distressed and/or overwhelmed. You can:

- Try to speak to yourself in a very caring and loving way. If this is hard for you, think about someone in your life, in the present or past, who spoke to you with unconditional love and support (this might be/have been a family member or friend).

If there hasn't been someone in your life who spoke to you like that, try to imagine the following:

- What would such a person say to you right now?
- What advice would they give you?
- If they were to say something really helpful, that is different from how you speak to yourself, what would that be?



If that was hard to imagine, think about a very close friend: if they were sitting next to you right now, telling you how much they are criticizing themselves, what would your response to them be? What could you say to them that might be really kind and show how much you care?

If your partner and/or children are struggling with being kind to themselves, you might describe the activity above, and ask them if they would like to try it. If they do try the activity, you could ask them afterwards if they would like to share their experience with you.

COVID-19 has impacted everyone, yet our partners and children may be impacted in ways that we aren't, or we might not quite **understand** or **relate to** our child's distress.

For example: whilst we might not think that our child not being able to attend their last school camp, or high school prom/graduation dinner face to face is a big deal, this might be devastating for your child, who might have been looking forward to it for months.

We can purposely bring a lot of empathy, love and kindness to our children, and let them know that we are available for them to talk to. We can also reassure them how much we understand and care, by acknowledging their pain, even if it isn't our own pain.

It's also important that we notice how we respond to our own self-talk:

- We can notice if we default to giving ourselves a hard time about what we haven't been able to do/achieve etc., and choose to be kinder to ourselves, instead of criticizing. When we notice our children and/or partner giving themselves a hard time, we can give them kindness and empathy.
- We can acknowledge that we and our children are trying our absolute best, and doing well just to get through each day, in very uncertain times.
- We can remind ourselves that this won't last forever, and that we can help each other to get through this.

This is the perfect time to practice, model and teach our family self-care, self-compassion and kindness, to stay safe, and **STAY HERE**.

About Tamar

Tamar Black, PhD, is an educational and developmental psychologist in Melbourne, Australia. She has more than 20 years' experience working as a school psychologist, and in private practice, working with children, adolescents and parents. Tamar is an ACT trainer and provides supervision. She is the author of *ACT FOR TREATING CHILDREN* (New Harbinger Publications, 2022) and *THE ACT WORKBOOK FOR KIDS* (New Harbinger Publications, 2024).



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