

Tools for Families During the Coronavirus Pandemic

1. Structure your day. Plans and expectations have all shifted in this global crisis. Parents should work hard to continue routines with children. Our children are more tolerant to stress when it is introduced in predictable ways, such as daily chores, meals, bedtime routines, etc. It is when stress is unpredictable, extreme, and prolonged, that children become more vulnerable and stressed, rather than resilient.

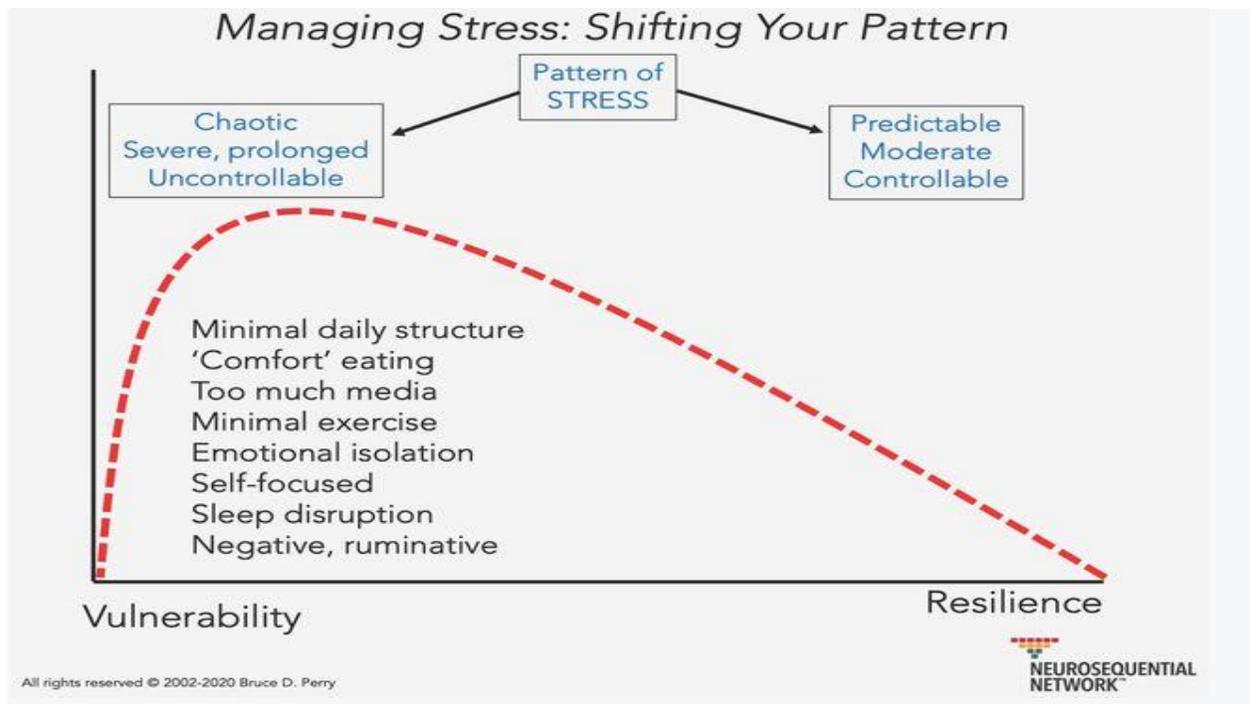
2. Have family meals. Mealtime is a great way to preserve structure and routine while checking in with our children. Issues and feelings can be discussed and we can ensure that our children feel safe and heard first. This will make them more receptive to our message. We must regulate people before we can possibly persuade them with a cognitive argument or compel them with an emotional affect. We can help our children *Regulate, then Relate, then Reason* (Dr. Bruce Perry). Ensuring meals are nutrient-dense will help families better manage an active stress response during this time.

3. Limit media. During this pandemic, many parents are experiencing anxiety and fear, and so are many children. Just like the Coronavirus, *emotions are very contagious*, and children often sense when others are anxious or upset. In a state of fear, children rely more heavily on primitive parts of the brains. We should avoid media that is violent, which can further activate the stress response system. This leaves children unprepared to learn using more sophisticated parts of their brains. Technology can be an excellent tool to build connection with others while physically distant, but relying on media too heavily can replace time spent developing empathy, learning to ease another's stress, and connecting emotionally.

4. Exercise. Now is a perfect time to be creative and get bodies moving while practicing social distancing. When children are in a fearful state, they are in a heightened state of arousal, relying on lower-functioning brain regions.

The best way to move from these super-high anxiety states, to calmer more cognitive states, is rhythm. Patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity: walking, running, dancing, singing, repetitive meditative breathing – you use brain stem-related somatosensory networks which make your brain accessible to relational (limbic brain) reward and cortical thinking. For children, play is a great way to discharge the energy that comes with toxic stress (decreasing distress and increasing pleasure).

5. Reach out. We are wired to connect. The most powerful buffer in times of stress and distress is our social connectedness; remember to stay physically distant but emotionally close. Reach out and connect. Handling such unprecedented circumstances is nearly impossible on our own. Reach out, seek help, and accept assistance. Taking care of our own needs is vital when it comes to meeting the needs of our children. An unregulated child cannot be regulated by an unregulated parent.

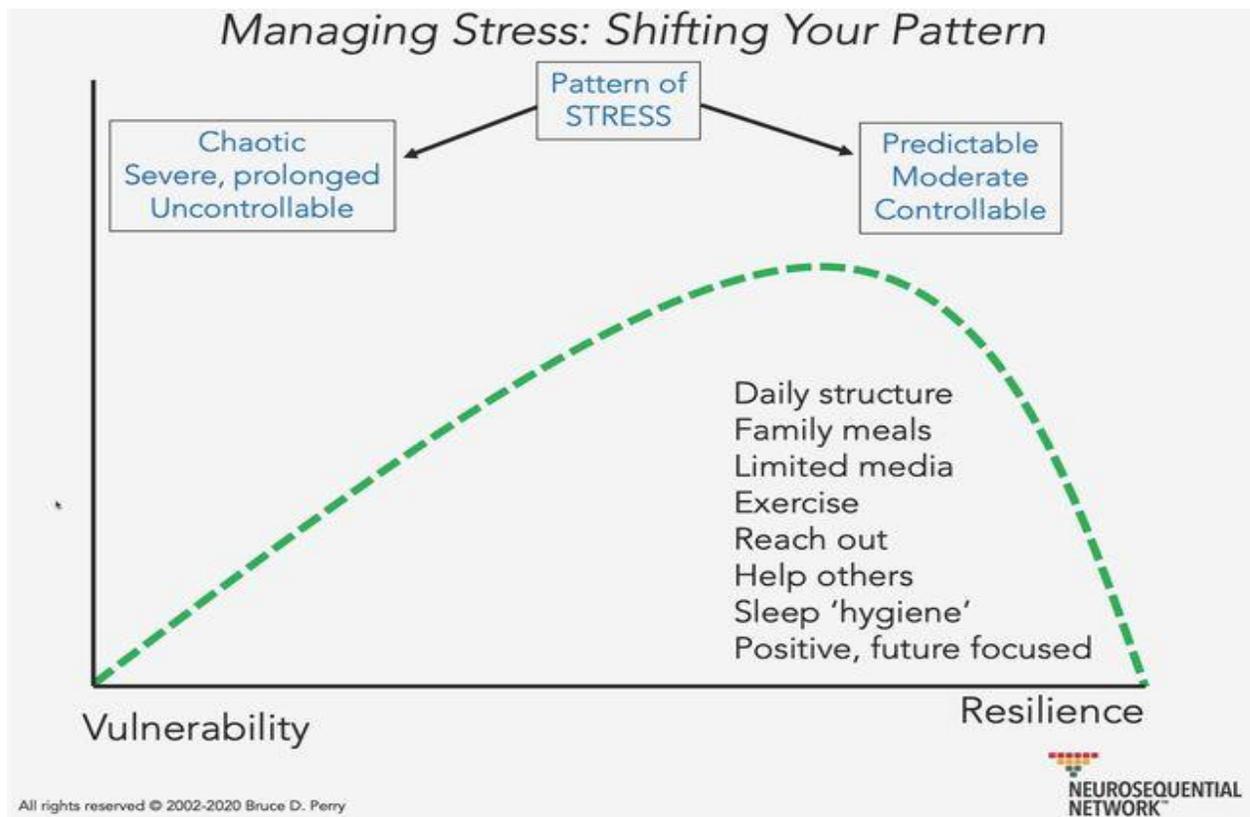


6. Help others. Many people who have experienced adversity in the past, are in a state of toxic stress and vulnerability. They may have experienced poverty, racism, violence, trauma, etc., increasing their risk for behaviors such as 'comfort' eating, emotional isolation, sleep disruptions, agitation and so on. Reach out to these individuals who are already prone to an overactive stress response. Individuals with a more privileged background, who have learned resilience, coping strategies and have strong support systems can help those who have experienced more long term chronic distress and marginalization.

7. Practice good sleep hygiene. It is not unusual for us to be in a heightened state of alarm during this pandemic, feeling the need to always be ready for a threat. We may find ourselves growing physically and emotionally exhausted at a faster pace than normal. Sleeping longer is normal while our bodies are in a heightened state of alertness. We can get more restful sleep if we exercise in the morning or afternoon, wind down with calming activities, and avoid late eating and screen watching.

8. Stay positive and future-focused. Emotions are contagious. Anxiety and panic is contagious, and so is calm. Don't underestimate your ability to bring calm to others and don't underestimate the impact of dysregulated people on you. When we stay calm and regulated, those around us will feel less distressed. Everybody will be socially, emotionally, and physically healthier if we help each other model positive responses to stress. When we interact with things that deregulate us such as negative news stories or relationships with anxious individuals, we can pro-actively do things to emotionally refuel and regulate; using music, movement, social connections, yoga, walking, journal writing, etc.

This is a difficult and unprecedented time. Let us be kind to ourselves and practice self-compassion. Let's allow ourselves to grieve missed time with loved ones, celebrations, and the loss of routines and stability. Feelings are a part of our human experience. Listening to, expressing and managing our BIG feelings during these times of crisis is an opportunity to experience increased self-awareness and growth.



Our families will come out of this with greater personal strength and resilience as we practice self-care, rely on others, and deepen our connections. In the midst of crisis, there are always opportunities for growth and change.

Allison Davis Maxon, LMFT
www.allisondavismaxon.com

Reference Resources

<https://www.neurosequential.com/covid-19-resources>