

# The new normal: Advice for parents on how to wear many hats in the face of COVID-19

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PORTSMOUTH – The emergence of the COVID-19 has changed life for everyone and what was once taken for granted now offers more challenges, but has also become the new normal for every family.

Kids cannot go to school. Many people have either lost their job or are now doing it from home as everyone self-quarantines in an effort to stop the virus in its tracks.

People are wearing multiple hats, as a spouse, a home-worker, a parent and a teacher. The pressure is on and mental health experts are offering tips and advice on how to keep the family from imploding.

Jodie Lubarsky, director of Child Adolescent and Family Services at Seacoast Mental Health Center and a clinical mental health counselor, said the first thing

to recognize is that not all families are structured the same way, so there is no one answer that will work for a family.



“Some families are two-parent units,” said Lubarsky. “There are single caregivers who may be managing one or more children. Everyone is waking up with those multiple hats. A key to everything here is going to be patience, patience as we learn to navigate our new normal. You are going to make mistakes and understand that it will be OK as long as you keep moving forward. We are being thrust into roles we did not expect to find ourselves in.”

“We are all COVID, all the time now,” said Justin Looser, administrative director of the Behavioral Health Unit at Portsmouth Regional Hospital. “The first thing people need to understand is that they are not alone. Everyone is going through this. That might offer people some peace in this very uncertain time.”

Most important as a coping mechanism is to establish and maintain a routine.

“It might not be the routine you had before and in fact probably won’t be,” Looser said. “But routine is important. Establish a time for schoolwork, for dinner, for washing the dishes. We do better when there is structure in our lives. It’s easy to get away from that right now because things are so different and there may be no set times for things. We need a shared sense of our life as it is now in this different world.”

Lubarsky said she still gets up at 5:15 a.m., even though she doesn’t have to because most of her work is now done at home through telemedicine.

“I am encouraging my family to stick to their routines,” she said. “We have the same bedtimes. We wake up for breakfast at the same time we used to. We get prepared for the day. We get dressed. We keep structure and we look for ways to not feel stuck in the house.”

Naps are tempting, but not necessarily a good idea. Lubarsky said it can throw off good sleep hygiene, making it harder to get restful sleep at night.

“Have everyone stop using devices at least 30 minutes before bed, too,” said Lubarsky. “That will also encourage better sleep.”

Looser said he thinks this situation might be easier for kids.

“Kids are always on their phone, their computer,” said Looser. “They are always connected. It is the adults, who are now figuring out how to do Zoom meetings who are struggling. The unintended consequence here is that we may actually be connecting more than we ever did before.”

Looser said people who already struggled with depression might be having a harder time with the new isolation.

“This self-quarantine can definitely exacerbate depression,” said Looser. “It will be helpful to make use of technology to stay connected with family and friends. There are also virtual AA meetings, support groups and hotlines to help anyone who is struggling. Family and friends can be great, but these support avenues can be crucial. We are all in a general state of uncertainty now. What will be important is how we stay connected with others.”

Lubarsky said people are all going through a kind of grief process right now.

“We had a life where we’d get up, get ready, drop the kids off and go to work,” said Lubarsky. “We could see our friends, go out for dinner, go to the dog park, get our hair done and generally do self-care. That is all gone, at least for now, taken away from us by this virus.”

Lubarsky said grief isn’t linear and we all handle it differently, on our own timeline.

“That will happen within families,” said Lubarsky. “I might be OK and have reached some level of acceptance. My daughter might be sad, missing her friends and not understanding why everything has changed. We need to recognize where we are all at and have some patience with each other’s grief process.”

Introverts, people who choose a more solitary life, will likely do better at self-isolation than a gregarious, outgoing person, said Lubarsky.

“We need to find new ways of self-care,” said Lubarsky. “Go out for a walk. Pull out a good book, take photos or take up a hobby or learn something you always wanted to, but felt there was no time for. There is time now. Do these things while still practicing safe social distancing. Take breaks, have a Zoom coffee

break with your other people. Reflect at the end of the day. What did I do well? What can I do better?"

Most important, said Lubarsky, is to cut yourself some slack.

"You will make mistakes, even with the kids' schoolwork," she said. "Kids are resilient, and they will be OK. They will know you are working with them just by you being a good adult role model. Teachers are trained to manage 20 kids in a classroom. I am a nurturer by nature, but if I am asked to manage an elementary student, a middle school student and a high school student; I am going to be challenged. Do the best you can with the schoolwork, but also decide when the day is done."