

Expert advice for coping when a loved one is diagnosed with COVID-19

2 April 2020, by Margaret Crable



Managing stress, practicing resilience and staying virtually connected to relatives quarantined or hospitalized due to coronavirus are key to weathering a diagnosis in the family. Credit: iStock/fairywong

As COVID-19 continues its spread across the country, more and more Americans will soon grapple with a diagnosis within the family. Isolating infected individuals, frequently washing hands, and covering coughs and sneezes can help cut down on transmission in the home. Reducing the emotional strain a family feels when a loved one comes down with the disease takes an entirely different set of skills. Experts from the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences Center for the Changing Family weigh in on how families can maintain their mental health and stay strong as a unit.

Cool, calm, collected

A [coronavirus](#) diagnosis may alarm [parents](#) and partners, but they should be mindful of the ripple effects. Research by Darby Saxbe, associate professor of psychology, found that the levels of the stress hormone cortisol rise and fall in sync for couples and for parent-child pairs. For families that

report more conflict or more relationship dissatisfaction, the link in cortisol levels is stronger.

"In other words, stress can actually make us more reactive to each other and erode the quality of our relationships over time," says Saxbe.

Reducing personal stress can therefore reduce the chance of corrosive conflict for the whole family as they cope with the ill person. Finding time for stress-busting activities may be difficult, but it doesn't need to be too demanding. As little as 15 minutes of daily meditation [boosts positive emotions](#) and a regular 20-minute walk around the block [reduces cortisol levels](#). Or, singing along to songs can [release endorphins](#), the natural calming agents our brain can produce.

Lead with resilience

Children are particularly susceptible to the feelings of their parents, says Gayla Margolin professor of psychology and pediatrics.

"Children take their cues from parents, so the more that parents can convey the spirit of being able to get through unsettling and scary times, the better for children," she advises.

Parents who demonstrate resilience and preparedness can help soothe the anxiety of a child concerned for an ill relative.

"Parents should not undermine the reality of the situation or be dismissive of children's fears. However, conveying specific information about how the family will cope can be reassuring," adds Margolin.

Phone a friend

Maintaining virtual connections to those quarantined or hospitalized is key to uplifting spirits and improving mental health. Group video chats,

texts and emails help the family all stay in the loop. Games like Words with Friends or a Netflix Party, where many people watch the same movie from different locations, can entertain and console those staying home in bed.

"Those with a family member hospitalized with COVID-19 will simultaneously be coping with concerns about a loved one's health while they navigate a new reality of being distanced from society," explains Emily Smith-Greenaway, assistant professor of sociology. "So, it's important that that we make an effort to check-in on one another, especially those living alone, and help [family members](#) and friends feel emotionally close even while physically separated."

Maintaining social interactions is especially important for children, says Dorian Traube, associate professor of social work. "Without [social interaction](#), children do not get to tap into the social modeling that is vital for their growth. Virtual connection can bridge this gap." A daily FaceTime or phone call with an ill family member can help keep children socialized and also cheer the patient up.

"The caring and concern that parents show for those around, particularly vulnerable persons, provides invaluable lessons for children," says Margolin. A family that delivers groceries and medication for a [family](#) member with COVID-19, models kindness and compassion for [children](#).

"Children are always eager consumers of the lessons that parents show their own actions. As has been observed by others, 'We are all first responders during this health crisis,'" she adds.

Provided by University of Southern California

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