



# EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

MOVING LIVES FORWARD

## WHEN MAMA AIN'T HAPPY, AIN'T NOBODY HAPPY

I have seen this plaque all over the country. It makes me laugh. (I have discovered over the years that laughing at yourself is a good thing.) But, on those days when I am having a "terrible, horrible, no good, bad day" like Alexander in Judith Viorst book, I too can set the mood for the household. I envy those who wake up all 'Pollyanna-like' because I don't.

Some of us are more like Oscar the Grouch in those early hours of the day. I admit I want Cookie Monster to bring me cookies with my coffee. After that first cup of coffee I need some quiet space then I am quite pleasant; second cup and I am ready to take on the world.

When mama wakes up grouchy, and has children to dress, feed, and transport she does not have the energy to be a positive role model, let alone be 'happy.' So, how do all caretakers find ways to lighten the pressure? We all know what it feels like to be functional when our tanks are empty. In this new abnormal world, we are living in, it seems even harder to be a good role model - and this is true for everyone. The best thing we can do, is to take care of ourselves. We all feel like coming unraveled some days because we are dealing with the anxieties that COVID has caused. Saying, "Keep calm and carry on." only works for a while.

For International Mental Health Day, let's look at why our own mental health is so crucial to children's health. In today's world people are struggling with higher levels of anxiety. Experts say that this reaction is a normal response to an abnormal time. Life

has always been full of challenging times, but the difference with COVID is that it's hard to believe, "This too shall pass." because there are many unknown factors. As parents, caregivers, and providers it is so important that we respond (not react) to this stressful time. I think Lebowitz says it best, "Children look to parents to understand their reality and to understand their world."

So again, how can we be a mirror to reflect to our children so they feel safe and not sense our anxieties. First and foremost, denying or ignoring the reality does not work because when we keep our feelings in our bodies we get sick mentally and/or physically. Mentally we can experience all the same feelings we do with a loss: denial, fear,



### Cheryl's Corner of Caring

"As I began to love myself...I freed myself of anything that is no good for my health - food, people, things, situations and everything that drew me down and away from myself. At first I called this attitude a healthy egoism.

Today I know it is LOVE OF ONESELF."  
(Charlie Chaplin)

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anger, depression, and finally acceptance. When we finally accept that this virus is a loss then we can move forward to find ways to respond to it for the sake of our children.

First, we cannot eliminate anxiety, yet we can find ways to help ourselves (and our children) manage it. Also, there are many websites with strategies. Here are a few simple strategies:

1. Know and name your stressor.
2. Do deep breathing several times a day (or night when that child won't sleep.)
3. Take time to do something meaningful, relaxing, or fun.
4. Get enough sleep. (Naps are VERY OK!)
5. Conserve your energy for those things that you can control.

Lastly, remember as caregivers we are often prone to attempt to remove stressors that trigger our children's ability to self-regulate. A more beneficial way is to help them learn ways to tolerate or deal with the stressors themselves. The by-product of this is that their anxiety will decrease over time.

And as always the best way that children learn is watching us. Role modeling is not always easy nor perfect, but in today's world – just do your best you can for that day. This includes putting your oxygen mask on FIRST. Take care and know that we are all in this together.

## References:

Brazeleton@childrens.edu  
Centerforresilientchildren.org  
Ron Hall (Country Music writer)



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