



Celebrating the human potential for change!

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Keeping Calm During Anxious Times

The devastation caused by the Great Tohoku Kanto Earthquake is absolutely heartbreaking and goes beyond the reaches of both our imagination and experience. My thoughts and prayers are with those whose lives have been cut short or forever changed by this disaster.

As PTA president and a long-term resident of Japan, I am concerned about our school community and the challenges we are presently facing. Many of us are overwhelmed by sadness, and the uncertainty and fear caused by the disaster. Even though we are about 600 kilometers (375 miles) away from the affected region and only felt a shudder from the earthquake, many of us are experiencing high levels of anxiety as this tragedy unfolds.

Within the expatriate part of our community, alongside the uncertainty brought on by the disaster itself, our anxiety is compounded by the combination of language barriers, corporate repatriation directives or options, embassy instructions to leave Japan, and our family's plea to come home. Within the larger NIS family, the Japanese, alongside the long-term and short-term residents who don't consider leaving Japan to be a viable option, are feeling the pull from the rising tide of fear developing in our community. Many of us are left wondering, "Is there something I should be worried about?" Even if we are not overly concerned about continuing our lives in Nagoya, we are getting worried about not being worried!

I'm not sure about you, but for me excess free time and a worrying event is a combination likely to grab hold of my monkey mind. If I am not mindful, I am likely to be seen scurrying about accomplishing nothing other than further fueling my anxiety. If your head is beginning to swirl, or if you are concerned about your children becoming anxious, you might find the following tips on mastering anxiety to be beneficial.

Anxiety basically means feeling worried and nervous. It is a normal human reaction to stressful situations or even new situations. Increased anxiety is also a normal response to a crisis. A crisis is typically defined as a time-limited, high-energy state (usually contained in no more than six weeks) that cannot be tolerated indefinitely. Although normal habits and coping patterns are suspended during a crisis, this suspension leaves us open to learning new, different coping methods. The increased energy state, if refocused, can be directed toward seeking an effective resolution. With these working definitions of anxiety and crisis, I humbly offer the following approach to any anxiety you or your loved ones might be experiencing at this time*.

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1. Anxiety is both psychological and physical and must be addressed at both levels:

Psychological symptoms include worried thoughts, being unable to concentrate, being irritable, thinking the worst, and feeling afraid. Thinking becomes distorted. People exaggerate the size and nature of the demands they are facing, put down their ability to handle those demands, and dwell on the negative aspects of the situation and their believed inability to cope with it.

Physical symptoms of anxiety include racing heart, fast breathing, stomachaches or “butterflies”, headache, muscle tension, sweating, increased blood pressure, cooler hands (because blood is shunted away from the extremities and towards the large muscle groups to prepare for fight or flight), and constantly feeling tired and “on edge”. Blood to the brain is channeled away from the rational, creative, problem-solving centers of the brain and towards the parts of the brain that control muscle movement. Thus, people end up thinking less clearly than they normally would and their muscle activity increases.

Common symptoms of anxiety for children include worries about harm coming to loved ones, separation due to a bad event, dying, illness of others and about health; younger children become prone to tearfulness, clinging, avoidance, and separation fears; and many children of all ages have sleep problems, physical complaints, and constant fatigue.

Caution: Children tend to underreport symptoms of anxiety. Teachers are more likely than parents to identify internalized symptoms.

2. The following tips address both the psychological and physiological symptoms of anxiety in both children and adults.

Look after the basics: No one copes well when they are tired or hungry. Make certain you and your children are fed nutritious food and get enough sleep.

Establish routines: Routines reduce anxiety for children as well as adults. But crisis and anxiety tend to disrupt routines. Try to stick to routine as best as possible. As a parent, you need to work hard to build regular patterns so life remains predictable. Have your child help plan the routine for the day. This exercise will help to give them a sense of control and order. A disorganized or spontaneous lifestyle will not help reduce your child’s anxiety. Try as best you can to prepare your child in advance for changes that are going to be made. Try not to watch the news on TV in the presence of younger children. Critically evaluate the content of the news with older children.

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Maintain bedtime routines: Start at least an hour before the planned bedtime. Enjoy a warm bath, build in a story, a chat time, some warm milk or a cup of chamomile tea and a soporific snack like a banana. Don't talk about the disaster or watch the news in the evenings.

Plan time for schoolwork, homework and projects: Try to stick to the regular school schedule as best as possible. Anxious children tend to procrastinate and become further overwhelmed if they fall behind. Break up the school day into small chunks setting a specific time to work and reward your child for each bit of work done. I bought my kids a ¥900 Meiji Milk Chocolate House to make at the end of virtual school yesterday. Firm, consistent parenting: Anxious children feel calmer when life is predictable and they know what is expected of them, and what the consequences will be. Setting limits can be a challenge for parents, especially in a crisis. However, children will feel more secure and relieved knowing the adults are in charge. Fake it 'til you make it!

Physical exercise: This is helpful not only in relieving stress, but also in triggering the "relaxation response". Anxious children and parents often feel "tired all the time" because they are exhausting themselves with worry, so they don't feel like exercising. But exercise will improve energy and reduce worry. Try to find something fun to do together rather than making this a chore. Go for a bike ride, do some sit ups, or enjoy a run together for PE.

Tools to relax: Now is the time to think of what tools you have used in the past with your child to help them relax. This could be doing a jigsaw puzzle, taking a bath, playing cards, or reading a story.

Belly breathing: When we feel anxious we are prone to shallow breathing which only serves to increase our anxiety. Remember to do belly breathing or diaphragmic breathing.

How to do it:

- > Place one hand flat against the abdomen. Your thumb should be around your navel.
- > Breathe in through your nose at an even rate.
- > Allow your abdomen to expand, rather than your upper chest. You should feel the hand on your abdomen being pushed away from your body as your abdomen rises.
- > Count silently starting from "one". *
- > Breathe out slowly and evenly through your mouth.
- > Again, count silently. Exhalation should take about twice as long as inhalation. So if you counted to three when you inhaled, strive to count to six when you exhale, but don't force it.

Repeat this sequence 10 times and you're guaranteed to have induced your relaxation response.

* If you feel light-headed at any time, you may be breathing too quickly.

If you are standing, try practicing while sitting down.

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Tools to cope with worry: Let your child know your family’s plan if there is an earthquake in our area. Tell them about the school’s Emergency Parent Reunion Plan. Another way of coping with worry is to externalize the problem. I like to stop and ask, “Anxiety, what do you want for me?” Knowing the answer to this question helps me to respond more mindfully and proactively. While I can’t answer this question for you, my answer to the question is, “To feel safe and have some sense of control in my life.” Knowing that answer leads me to ask, “What can I do to help me, and my loved ones, feel safe and to gain a sense of control in my life.” From this focused point you can draw on your coping resources.

Coping mechanisms: Encourage your child to describe previous effective efforts of coping. Ask them about what has helped them in the past when they have felt anxious. Explore new coping styles if appropriate.

Social support: Get your child together with friends so they don’t feel isolated. Isolation increases the opportunity for unproductive worry. For parents, remember, the focus of your support network must be positive. Groups that spend time complaining, focusing on problems, or offering unsubstantiated advice do not reduce stress but only serve to amplify it.

Model calm behaviour: Lastly, as a parent, you are a very strong influence on your child. Verbalize your concerns about the disaster and discuss aloud how you are managing to cope with this fearful experience. Empathize with your child, accept tension areas, comfort, help the child to share themselves, focus on what is rather than what should/could be, and listen attentively. Once again “Fake it ‘til you make it!”

I wish you and your family the best during these stressful and uncertain times.

Warmest regards,

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