

## **Resilience in the Face of COVID-19**

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Was it only a little more than a week ago that few, if any, of us in the United States could have predicted what was to transpire during the next several days as a result of COVID-19? We were aware of the existence of the virus, but its virulence seemed far from our shores. Basically, our everyday routine continued with little noticeable exception such as replacing handshakes with fist or elbow bumps. Then, with incredible rapidity and intensity, everything changed in the United States and other countries. The coronavirus demonstrated it had no borders. It spread with great force.

The anxiety level skyrocketed in ways I had not witnessed since 9/11. People wondered what to do to protect their families and themselves. The amount of time devoted on the news to the growing impact of COVID-19 increased day by day, eclipsing other news stories. As soon as we heard up-dates of actions taken to confront the virus, newer up-dates were released. The measures taken within a few days were unprecedented, affecting almost all of us on a personal, national, and global level.

Since Monday, March 9, I have had approximately 10 speaking engagements scheduled for the next couple of months canceled or postponed. One of these will be offered as a webinar. In the digital age, teleconferencing and webinars have become more frequent, and I assume they will be even more prevalent at least for the foreseeable future.

Within a couple of days almost all conferences were canceled here in the Boston area and throughout the country and world. I read of one story in which a researcher was traveling from Bangkok to Boston and learned from an email while in flight that the conference he had planned to attend had been canceled. He arrived and immediately had to book lengthy flights home.

Next came the suspension of professional sporting events involving the NBA, the NHL, MLB, the PGA, soccer, and other leagues. It was announced that March Madness, the name given to the very popular men and women's college basketball playoffs, was to be played without any fans in attendance, but soon the decision was made to cancel all of these games.

Broadway shows were closed. Movies were poorly attended. Restaurants saw a large drop in customers. The busiest establishments appeared to be supermarkets with hand sanitizers, sanitizer wipes, paper towels, and toilet paper flying off the shelves. Some stores limited how many of these items could be purchased by one customer.

Transportation was especially hard hit with fewer individuals willing to board planes, trains, and buses. Given the daily reports of people who were quarantined on cruise ships for weeks, it was not surprising to hear that government warnings were issued about going on these ships. When possible, companies asked their employees to work from home. Many did, as witnessed here in Boston by far fewer cars on the roads during rush hour.

In terms of the cancellations, including presentations I was to give, I could not help but think of all the individuals and small businesses facing economic hardships. A cancellation of one large conference has an immediate impact on restaurant staff, cab, Uber, and Lyft drivers, hotel workers, and others—monies that would be difficult if not impossible to recoup. It's heartening to learn that individual players and team management are providing financial support for those nonplayers who work on a game by game basis.

Since last Thursday the number of school closings has expanded dramatically. Boston announced all of its schools would be shut until the end of April. Earlier today Governor Charlie Baker of Massachusetts ordered that all public and independent schools in the Commonwealth will be suspended for three weeks. My two granddaughters Maya and Sophie in Scarborough, ME (their school district is closed for at least two weeks) and my grandson Teddy and granddaughter Lyla in Needham, MA (where my wife and I also live) will experience what millions of other students are facing throughout the world.

Colleges and universities, including Harvard and MIT, informed students that after the current spring break all classes would take place via distant learning; students in most colleges were informed that they had to vacate their dorms, a hardship for most but particularly for the many international students who are such a large part of the Boston scene.

School closings are especially challenging for low-income families in which parents do not have the option of working from home and have to scramble to find and

pay for childcare. Also, many students from low income homes rely on school lunches during weekdays. Hopefully, the declaration of a “national emergency” will allow the funneling of funds to those families who are in dire need at the present time.

Most places of worship requested that their congregations not attend services in person but rather watch via live streaming. Libraries were closed. Meetings over a certain size were prohibited.

A week ago few, if any, of us imagined the scenario that was to unfold.

And as we know, adding to all of these disruptions and accompanying worries was what transpired in the financial markets. A large number of people have not only lost current income but have also watched their retirement funds reduced in some instances by at least 20%.

What renders the situation even more anxiety-provoking is the uncertainty of when things will improve, when the “new” normal will return to the “old” normal. Uncertainty and unpredictability are fertile breeding grounds for the escalation of fear, such as demonstrated by panic-buying of certain products.

### **Nurturing Resilience in Children During the COVID-19 Crisis**

I have received several requests to provide resources and insights about how to talk with and help children cope with COVID-19. The remainder of this column is devoted to suggestions about this topic.

I have read a number of valuable articles that parallel key points I address in this column. One was prepared by the [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#), a second posted on [psychologytoday.com authored by Erin and David Walsh](#), and a third posted on [confidentkidsconfidentparents.org written by Pamela McVeagh-Lally](#). I will post links to additional resources on my Facebook page during the next several weeks.

I want to thank my daughter-in-law, Dr. Suzanne Brooks, a clinical and school psychologist in the Weston, MA Public Schools, for providing not only several suggested readings but also information that I have included later in this article detailing what both the Weston and Needham school staffs are doing to stay in touch with and continue to teach and offer support for their students.

The following are a few initial recommendations for parents and other caregivers to consider in interactions to help children become more resilient:

*Remain calm and reassuring.* We know that if children experience us as very anxious, it intensifies their own worries. This does not mean minimizing or denying that the impact of COVID-19 can be upsetting. One could not do that even if one tried. With schools closing, parents working from home, social distancing increasing, kids are aware that these are changing and challenging times.

Honest reassurance has the power to strengthen resilience. One source of reassurance is to communicate to children that steps are being taken to minimize the spread of the virus. We can explain that one of the reasons schools and other sites have closed for several weeks is to contain the virus. If parents feel comfortable doing so, we can emphasize that while the virus can be dangerous, most people, especially children, who contract the virus will recover.

I am aware that the recommendation to remain calm is easier said than done. I know there are many parents and other adults who are feeling overwhelmed and are finding it difficult to convey a message of comfort. For this reason it is essential that caregivers identify ways to lessen their own anxiety by learning all they can about the virus, about preventive steps they can take to deal with it, and about activities in which they can engage that are known to be therapeutic during times of stress, such as exercise and meditation.

If we don't take care of ourselves, it will become a formidable task to take care of our children. Again, I wish to emphasize that this does not mean denying worrisome feelings and thoughts or not validating similar thoughts in our children. Rather, worry must be accompanied by measures that can be initiated to confront the problems associated with the virus. I will add more about this when I describe the concept of "personal control" below.

*Continue to reinforce social relationships.* A key component of resilience for children is the presence in their lives of what the late psychologist Julius Segal called a "charismatic adult," defined as an "adult from whom a child gathers strength." While Segal was referring specifically to an adult-child relationship, I have often stated that even as adults we need charismatic adults in our lives. Throughout the lifespan we require people who are supportive and encouraging.

I have previously written of the harmful effect of loneliness on our physical and emotional well-being. One suggested prescription for dealing with COVID-19 is “social distancing,” limiting one’s contact with others. Such a step, while judicious in reducing the spread of the virus, can result in isolation and feelings of aloneness for some people. The challenge is how can we guard against the possibility of “social distancing” transforming into “social isolation.” I believe there are ways to prevent this from occurring.

In our homes, we must make certain we are available to our children, to provide undivided attention to their concerns and their questions. Given the technology that currently exists we can use FaceTime or Skype to stay in touch with friends and family (of course, we can also rely on the seemingly old-fashioned phone call). I think children will welcome the opportunity to keep in touch with friends and family, including grandparents, to make certain they are safe. In these troublesome times, all of us have a responsibility to ensure that no one is feeling alone and unprotected.

*Adopt an attitude of personal control.* As most of my readers are aware, I have frequently emphasized that a key dimension of resilience is what I label “personal control.” Resilient people focus their time and energy on situations over which they have some influence rather than attempting to change things over which they have little, if any, control.

Translated to the current situation, while we did not have control over the emergence of COVID-19 (this is not to contradict the opinion held by many healthcare and medical experts that we were not as prepared for the outbreak of coronavirus as we might have been), what we have more control over than we may realize is our attitude and response to the virus.

Guided by the tenets of personal control, children, as I noted earlier, will be less anxious if adults identify concrete actions to deal with the virus. One simple action is to wash one’s hands on a regular basis for the recommended time of 20 seconds. There are articles and video clips on-line that demonstrate how to do this effectively. I advised one parent who contacted me that with young children one can make the hand washing into a game by having a timer set for 20 seconds.

It is also important to adhere as much as possible to a regular routine while children are away from school. Most teachers will be sending work home electronically, and it will be helpful to set aside a time each day for schoolwork, for physical activities, for games and relaxation, and even for FaceTime playdates. A set routine brings some order to all of the uncertainty that exists.

Parents might also encourage children to learn relaxation or mediation practices. What makes this task easier to accomplish is the availability of apps for children that teach basic meditation skills. I googled “apps for kids for meditation” and many references appeared based on the age of the child.

I should also note that two of the links provided above (NASP; the Erin and David Walsh article) specify the differences in our communications based on whether our children are in preschool, elementary, middle, or high school.

### **Contact Between Schools and Students (and Parents)**

I know that many schools had been discussing the possible impact of COVID-19 even before it reached a crisis level. As an example, during the first week of March I spent a day with school leadership in the Glastonbury, CT Public Schools. Their superintendent, Dr. Alan Bookman, discussed preliminary plans should schools have to close in the face of the virus. At the time that seemed more of a remote possibility to me, but similar to many schools, Glastonbury is currently closed for a minimum of two weeks.

My daughter-in-law Suzanne just shared with me some of the steps the Weston and Needham school districts are taking during their closure. In both districts, teachers will be providing “office hours,” windows of time when they will have on-line connections and be available for any questions or concerns students and parents may have.

In Weston, the psychology and guidance departments plan to send out weekly email blasts to all families that will offer (a) suggestions regarding ways to create/maintain a home routine and schedule, (b) ideas about helping students stay connected with each other, and (c) social media guidelines given how unstructured each day can be in the absence of attending school. Staff will also provide various on-line resources and messages related to family wellness throughout the school closure. In

addition, school staff have also flagged students who are at greater risk, such as those with high levels of anxiety including school phobia, and plan to reach out to those families to offer additional support.

Suzanne also shared with me a very thoughtful, informative, and reassuring letter emailed to students and families at Needham High School by its principal, Aaron Sicotte. My grandson Teddy is a freshman at the high school. Aaron's letter describes the current plans for what the staff will be doing the next few weeks, including creating assignments that will help students maintain social connections

As Suzanne noted, "There is no template for this, but I think people are doing a great job in supporting our students during this uncertain and challenging time." I surmise the same thing could be said for staffs of school districts throughout the United States and other countries.

I recognize that this article is much lengthier than my usual monthly column. There is so much to say. Things are changing hour by hour. It seems increasingly likely that the "new normal" may be with us for the foreseeable future.

I would appreciate hearing from students, parents, teachers, and other professionals about some of the ways you are coping with the current crisis and what you have found most helpful. The most direct way is via my email address: [contact@drrobertbrooks.com](mailto:contact@drrobertbrooks.com). I would love to share your insights in my next article since I believe we all have ideas that are beneficial to others. If any of you send me your first-hand accounts, please let me know if it's okay to use your name or if you prefer that I not do so.

### **A Concluding Thought for Now**

This is one of, if not the most, challenging, worrisome, disruptive time any of us have ever faced. The ongoing support, encouragement, and love we display towards each other can serve as a vital component of our battle against a virus that shows no preference in terms of where it will attack and who will be its next victim. It is so important at this time to be a charismatic adult, a source of strength for others—and also to ensure that we take care of ourselves as well.

And, as I have ended many of my recent email messages, please stay safe.  
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