Keeping your Calm in COVID 19

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To say that this is a stressful time is an understatement. Our lives feel upside down and twisted sideways. What was the norm…. going to work, sending the kids off to school, getting together with friends and family, finding what you need at the grocery store….and on and on, has drastically changed.

Perhaps it’s time that we all take a break, breathe deeply, count to ten and do something nice for ourselves….and do it more than usual!

A while back, I watched the PBS program The Secret Life of the Brain and was reminded that we are “emotional machines that think”. Our emotions have a physical place in the brain and each emotion has a neuron circuitry that has evolved over millions of years. And could it be that when life gets stressful this emotional machine of ours takes over the thinking rational part of us? Perhaps it does. In their book, Parenting from the Inside Out, (Penguin, 2003) authors Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell help explain what goes on in our brain when our emotions take over and we “lose it”.

Their model is called “Brain in the Palm of the Hand”. To imitate this model, make a fist with your hand. Put your thumb inside your four fingers and pretend that this is your brain. Your four fingers represent the prefrontal cortex of your brain, the thinking, rational part of your brain. Underneath your fingers is your thumb. This is the amygdala, or the threat and fear part of the brain also known as fight or flight. Now pretend that your brain has “flipped its lid”. Throwback your fingers and there is the fight or flight part of our brain, right where your thumb is. When we have flipped our lid, we can no longer access the rational, thinking part of our brain. We want to yell, dominate and have power over, or we want to retreat and run away from what is going on. In this state, we cannot rationally discuss with another, hear another person’s reasoning or find cognitive solutions to the problem. When teaching children “Brain in the Palm of the Hand”, I often refer to this as “dinosaur brain”, a descriptive metaphor…Can you relate? (You can see Dr. Siegel demonstrate this model at <http://youtu.be/DD-lfP1FBFk> )

Ever notice that when you flip your lid, others around you flip their lid too? First, it’s you, then it’s your child and then it’s your spouse who just walked in the door. Now we have a whole family of flipped lids with no rational cognitive thinking going on. This imitation and reaction to flipped lids is partly due to the mirror neurons in our brain. If I yawn, someone else may unconsciously yawn. If I stick out my tongue at an infant, he or she will do the same. If I flip my lid, my kids might do the same.

Flipping our lid is uncomfortable. It is often followed up by feelings of guilt and remorse. As parents we don’t want to lose it with our children. We would certainly prefer to remain calm and maintain our rational, thinking part of our brain. Following are some ideas that might help you have fewer moments of losing it, and more opportunities to find your calm in parenting.

**Share the “Brain in the Palm of your Hand” with your children**. Have them make a fist and tell them about what their brain is doing when they “lose it”. Let the “flipped lid” be a hand signal you each can use to warn others that you’re about to flip your lid, or to give a respectful silent signal to each other that it might be time to take a break. Many students have learned this phrase and signal in their classroom lessons with their School Counselor.

**Take a break!** When you feel your emotional temperature rising, take a break. Count to ten, breathe deeply, or call a friend. Give your kids the “flipped lid signal”, tell them you need to take a break and remove yourself from the situation. If you learn to take a break when feeling upset, guess what your kids will learn to do when they are upset? Modeling is very powerful when it comes to flipping your lid or keeping your cool.

**Be gentle on yourself**. We are human, we are emotional machines. Allow for mistakes and moments of losing it. Afterwards ask yourself what you learned and make amends where necessary. Allow your children to make mistakes too…and when everyone has cooled down, ask them what they learned and what kind of repair or amends they need to make. Don’t force apologies. Forced apologies become insincere and can lead to further resentment.

**Remember the three “R’s” of making a mistake**. Do this after everyone has cooled down. Recognize: “Whoops I made a mistake, I yelled at you.” Reconcile: “I apologize, this is not how I want to handle conflicts”. Resolve: “Let’s work on a solution together for the next time we disagree”.

**Keep it simple, make mistakes, be flexible:** This is not the time to be super parent! Replace perfection with a sense of humor!

**Respond rather than react:** Make this your goal. To move to a place where you can emotionally detach and respond to the situation, with your rational thinking brain instead of reacting with your flight or fight brain. Use emotional honesty. When upset share your feelings. “I feel very discouraged and challenged when I ask you to help clear the table and you leave to watch TV.”

**Practice good self-care:** Schedule breaks in your day where you call a friend, take a walk, do yoga or enjoy a cup of tea. Just like on the airplane, put on your own oxygen mask before putting on your child’s. And if we want our kids to have good self-care…. who are they going to learn it from? There’s that modeling piece again!

**When life gets unusually stressful**, practice increased self-care. If life is getting too unmanageable and you and your family are stressed by your increasing reactions, seek the help of a professional.

Be sure to seek out the lessons that your School Counselors are providing for your children. They are lessons to support your child’s social emotional well being and may be very helpful to supporting the social emotional well being of your entire family.