

COOLMINDS

TALK IT OUT!

A GUIDE FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE

Returning to School Part 3

we
will

ACADEMIC STRESS, ANXIETY,
AND YOUTH SHARING

Advice from a Clinician

Answered by Coolminds clinical advisors Dr. Amelia Walter, Odile Thiang & Teresa Chan

Q: My parents want me to come straight home as soon as school ends, but all my friends get to hang out together after school. They don't understand when I tell them. I feel really left out.

A: Ask your parents if you could sit down together to chat about this at a time when everyone is reasonably calm. DEAR skills can be used to help you communicate what you want:

Describe the situation as clearly as possible.

Express your feelings and opinions using "I" statements. Instead of "You don't understand", try "I feel left out when my friends spend time together without me".

Assert/ask for what you want e.g., "I'd like to be able to hang out with my friends after school sometimes".

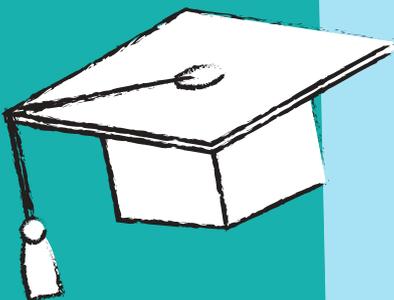
Reinforce - think about what's in it for your parents e.g., "I feel like I'd be more present and productive at home if I had this time with them".

Try to acknowledge your parents' position and be prepared to negotiate/start small. At the end of the day, it is their job to set limits, even if these sometimes feel unfair. Hopefully, with some further conversations, you can find a middle-ground that you and your parents all feel comfortable with.



Q: I'm graduating this year, but I won't have a graduation ceremony. My travel plans have all been cancelled, and I'm not even sure I can start university overseas in September. What are some ways I can cope with this?

A: Firstly, make sure that you allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up for you. Given the circumstances, it makes sense that you might be feeling disappointed, upset, angry or a whole range of other emotions. Uncertainty is an inevitable part of life, but it feels particularly pronounced at the moment. Rather than worrying about the future, try to focus on the present and the things you can control. Just like other emotions, it's also important to allow yourself to experience uncertainty and the discomfort it comes with. Practise sitting with it - noticing where you feel it in your body and the focus of your thoughts. Remind yourself that you've been dealing with uncertainty your whole life. Like all emotions, if you allow yourself to experience discomfort, it will eventually pass.



Q: I'm worried about getting sick when I go back to school. There could still be cases coming from overseas. My parents keep talking about it and it's very stressful.

A: It's natural to feel a bit nervous and uncertain about going back to school. If you're finding yourself feeling very stressed about the possibility of getting sick, try to challenge some of your worried thoughts by focusing on the facts (e.g., low numbers of new infections recently, mandatory quarantine for everyone coming from overseas, high recovery rates for young people) and the basic steps you can take to maximise your chances of staying well (e.g., hand hygiene, maintaining a healthy diet and good sleep patterns). It may also be worth talking to your parents about how you're feeling and asking them to have conversations about COVID-19 away from you.



Q: My body looks different now compared to when I last saw my friends. I find it really noticeable and it's bothering me a lot because I think I'll be judged. What can I do?

A: During this time of social distancing, many of our daily activities have been impacted; this includes our physical activities and our eating habits. We have found ourselves with fewer opportunities to exercise and more opportunities to eat. Now that we are ready to rejoin our peers at school, you find yourself wondering 'how has the quarantine impacted the way I look?' Well, you are not alone. Feeling unhappy with one's appearance is actually very common. However, when we focus on what we don't like it can negatively impact the way we see ourselves and our self-esteem. A positive body image is not about having a "perfect" body (whatever that means). When we like and accept our body as it is, it helps us improve our body image, and in turn our self-esteem.

**Here are
some helpful
tips to
positive body
image:**

- No one is perfect – Be kind to yourself.
- Stop Body Shaming Yourself – When we criticize ourselves, it is as hurtful as when others do it, and this can really affect our self-esteem. Be respectful to yourself, even if there are things that you can work on.
- Build Good Habits – Do you often criticize your body? If so it is important for you to build new, helpful habits. Instead of focusing on what you don't like, focus on what you like instead. Remind yourself to do this every day until it becomes a habit. If you are ever stuck, think of what your good friends like about the way you look.
- Focus on what your body can DO – We often focus on how our body looks and completely forget about all of the things it can do! When you play sports, dance, run, walk, or swim – that is our body in action. And it is not just for physical activity but when we clean our room, build something, cook or give someone a hug. Maintain a sense of wonder with all that your body allows you to do, and be grateful.

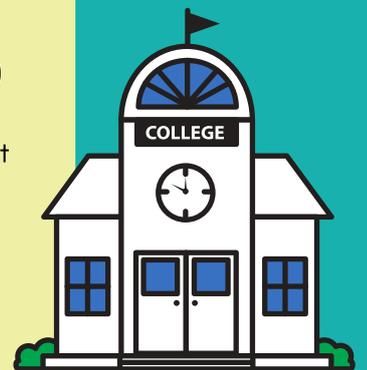


- Connect with your body – Pay attention to the signals your body is sending you. Listen to when it is hungry, or tired. Notice how nice it feels when you are running, walking or stretching.
- Take Care of Your Body
 - Eating Healthy – Learn what foods and portions are good for you. Enjoy the act of eating and tasting your food. Eating a healthy balanced diet helps fuel our energy stores and helps us feel good about ourselves. And it's ok to indulge once in a while so don't deprive yourself, remember it's about balance.
 - Sleep! Get to bed on time. Turn off the screens before bedtime to give yourself time to relax.
 - Be active every day – Your body needs to move to stay healthy. There are so many ways to stay active – dancing, yoga, hiking, running, playing sports. Pick activities that you enjoy and that motivate you.



Q: I'm worried about how this period of staying at home (and a lack of school and extracurricular activities) will impact my college applications.

A: Try to remember, everyone is in the same boat. The events over the past few months have unfolded at an unprecedented rate, and consequently we have all had to adapt and endure change in some form or another (both students and teachers!) Most schools, colleges and universities will undoubtedly be taking into account the impact the last few months has had on students, and will be very aware that for most people, overall activities (both academic and extracurricular) will have been significantly reduced. Therefore, the best approach is just to remind yourself that everyone is going through the same thing, and to try your best to resume activities once you are able to. Perhaps during the lockdown you picked up a new hobby? Or learnt a new skill? Demonstrating how you perhaps used your time productively to build on your creative or communication skills or how you developed personally in some way – can all be added strengths that you may want to highlight within your application process.



Q: I'm scared something like COVID-19 will happen again. How can I plan for the future when there could be unexpected crises?

A: Facing uncertainty is an unavoidable part of life. The truth is, no one truly knows what might happen in the future. Because we cannot see the future, we can never be certain about what exactly is going to happen.

But how helpful is it going to be to dwell and worry about this inevitable fact of life?

Studies have found that people who tend to worry more, particularly about things they can't control, tend to be more anxious and tend to be more intolerant to uncertainty. These people will often over plan and over prepare at every single opportunity, in an attempt to eliminate any uncertainty (with the hope of making their life more certain)!





But having to do this constantly as you can imagine, is exhausting! And sometimes no matter how much we prepare or plan, things still don't turn out the way we expect anyway, as life seems to always throw curveballs at us.

For this reason, it's therefore in our best interests to try to notice when we are worrying too much about something we essentially don't have control over.

We can obviously still continue to take necessary precautions and action the things that are in our control (e.g. taking care of ourselves, looking after both our physical and mental health), but then learning to recognise when our worry is turning into 'wasted energy' is going to be much more worthwhile.

Live each day as it comes! And if and when something unexpected does hit you, you will probably be much more able to deal with it than you expect.

Q: What if someone comes up to me and talks about a topic I don't agree with? How do I navigate conflict and differences in opinion?

A: Situations that provoke differences in opinions can lead to difficult conversations and feelings of frustration. When any type of disagreement or difficult conversation occurs it's really important to recognise and accept your feelings. It's normal to feel frustrated, helpless, angry or annoyed when we get into a difficult conversation.

Having differences in opinion doesn't have to always end badly, as **how** you deal with the situation can govern this:

1. Try to see the other person's angle or point of view

You may be able to understand the other person's views better if you try to understand the reasons behind it. Perhaps they grew up in a very different environment or received a different kind of education to you. Perhaps they've been influenced by family members or friends. And it may be worth doing the same for your own views – do you hold your beliefs because they simply make the most sense, or could other factors be at play too?



2. Try to find common ground

Even if your opinions and views are different, it's likely that there are still certain things you agree on too. Try not to over-focus on the differences at play: as you may find that there are quite a few areas for which you have common ground too.

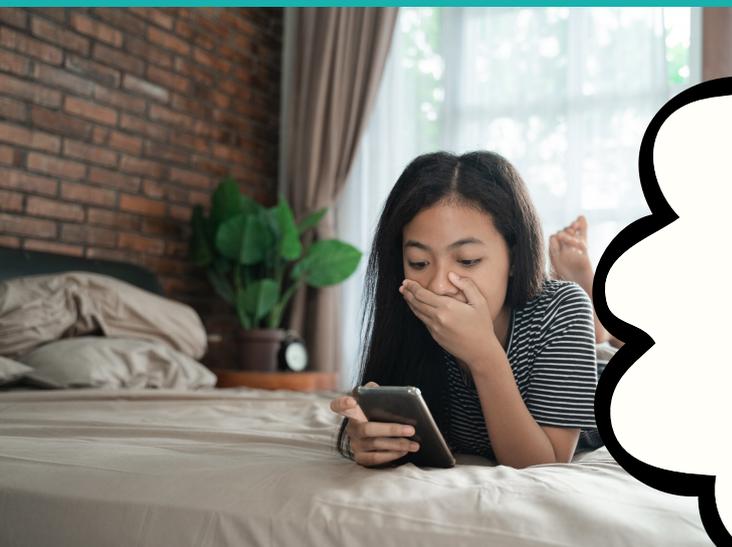


3. Don't force things

Trying to impose your beliefs on another person isn't usually the most productive or healthy thing to do. In fact, having different opinions can actually be more interesting and potentially adds value to a discussion. You may want to think in terms of embracing your differences – seeing them as positives rather than potential sources of friction. After all, the world would be a boring place if we all agreed 100% of the time!

4. Talk things over & take time to listen

Give the other person an opportunity to speak and listen to what each other has to say. Take time to really listen, not just waiting for your turn to speak. When it comes to explaining your own opinions, try to express your points of view calmly, openly and honestly. Don't attack the other person's ideas, simply stick to what it is that you think e.g. using "I think/I feel ...". It may be that, after talking things through together, you realise you aren't quite as conflicted with the other person as you thought, or if either side truly has strong opinions, maybe you can agree to disagree.

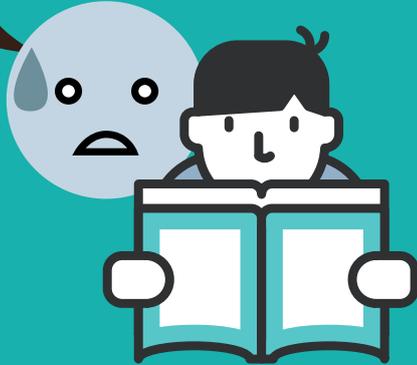


Q: I don't want to go back to school because I'm worried I'll have to face bullies again. I would much rather stay at home where I'm less anxious.

A: I'm really sorry to hear that you've been getting bullied at school. You are not alone – bullying is something a lot of young people experience, but I know that doesn't make it any easier.

While it's natural to want to avoid situations that make us feel worried, this unfortunately maintains anxiety in the long-term. Staying at home also means you miss out on positive learning and social experiences at school, which wouldn't be fair. Without knowing the details, it's tricky to provide specific advice but know that it is not your fault and you shouldn't feel that you have to manage it on your own. Although it might feel difficult initially, it can be helpful to speak to a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher or school support staff. This is particularly important if you're feeling unsafe in any way. In the meantime, try to focus on doing things that make you feel good about yourself such as spending time on activities you enjoy and with people who make you feel happy and safe.

Q: I'm scared I won't be able to cope with the workload. What if my teachers cram tons of content really quickly to make up for things that we've missed?



A: Schools and teachers are aware of all the pressures and stressors on students, as we go through these unprecedented times, and in most cases, adjustments are being made to reflect that.

While you will not be able to control what happens with the academic curriculum there are strategies you can use to tackle your workload. Here are some strategies and tips:

1. **Set a routine.** A routine helps you to put structure to a chaotic situation. It will allow you to carve out time for both academic work as well as some down time to allow you to recharge. You can use scheduling apps to get your day organized but remember that it is ok to have flexibility as things will come up.
2. **Set priorities.** Organize your work based on due dates, workload and your strengths. Map out all your projects/papers due dates and your test dates, then consider how much time you will need to spend to prepare. Prioritize items that are due soon, or items that will take more time to work on. Prioritizing will help you focus on what is most important first, and then tackling smaller items later. Knowing that you are taking care of big or more difficult items first will help you feel more at ease.
3. **A daily to-do list.** A daily to-do list can help you to breakdown tasks to manageable portions, and help you visualize what you will be focusing on for the day. It also feels really nice to cross items off the list as you progress, it can give you a great sense of accomplishment seeing the list get smaller.
4. **Try not to procrastinate.** Procrastinating only causes our to-do list to grow, which can make it harder to catch up, and can make you feel overwhelmed. It is ok, and necessary to take breaks, but try your best to stay on track with the routine you have set for yourself.
5. **Get your sleep!** Often times when we are busy we compromise the amount of sleep we get but this only causes us to be more tired and less efficient. Being tired affects our ability to think, focus and our memory. A restful night's sleep needs to be part of your routine.
6. **Me time.** Whether it is spending time with friends and family, or just taking a moment to do something fun, it is important to set aside non-academic time. This will help you get recharged. This is also a great way to reward yourself after finishing important tasks.

While these strategies are not going to take away all the stress of returning back to school it will help to make the return more manageable. Remember your teachers are there to support you so if you ever feel overwhelmed reach out and ask for help.



EMERGENCY SUPPORT

If you are experiencing strong levels of distress or trauma which are interfering with your life, remember that you do not have to face it alone, and that **help is available**.

For emergency support, please contact the hotlines below:

Emergency hotline: 999

The Samaritans 24-hour hotline (Multilingual): (852) 2896 0000

Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong 24-hour hotline (Cantonese only): (852) 2389 2222

Suicide Prevention Services 24-hour hotline (Cantonese only): (852) 2382 0000

OpenUp 24/7 online emotional support service (English/Chinese): www.openup.hk

More support services can be found [here](https://www.coolmindshk.com/en/emergency-hotlines/): <https://www.coolmindshk.com/en/emergency-hotlines/>

More non-urgent support services can be found [here](https://www.coolmindshk.com/en/communitydirectory/): <https://www.coolmindshk.com/en/communitydirectory/>



RESOURCES

www.coolmindshk.com

IG: [@coolminds.hk](https://www.instagram.com/coolminds.hk)

FB: [@coolmindshongkong](https://www.facebook.com/coolmindshongkong)

For more youth mental health information and resources, check out our Coolminds website. You can learn more about our upcoming events and trainings for parents, teachers and students, and read blog articles and stories written by young people in Hong Kong.



CONTACT US

Got a question?

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