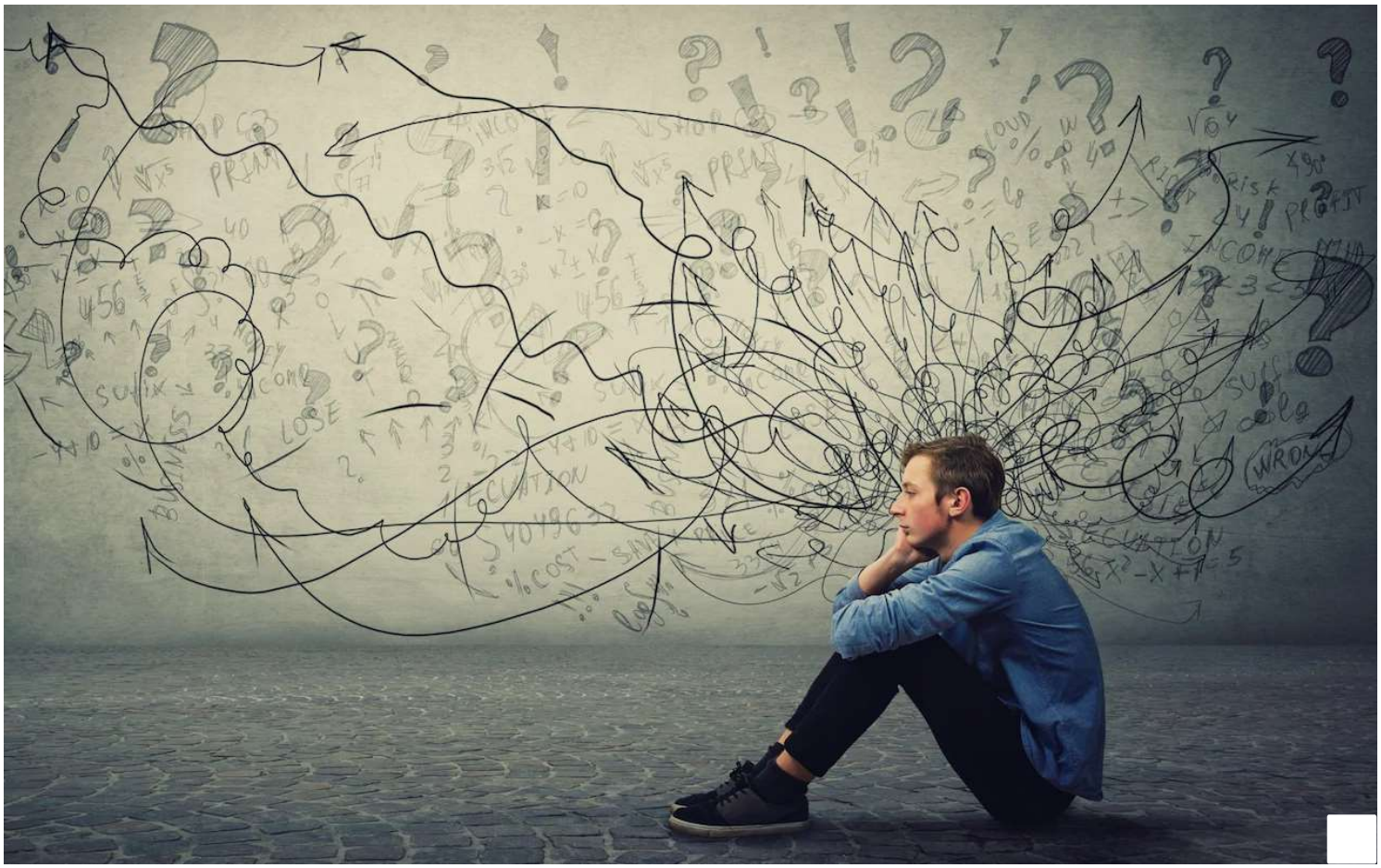

# How you can help your children navigate the mental turmoil of lockdown

The pandemic is taking a huge toll on young people's minds, but there are ways that you can support them

*By* Rosa Silverman
18 January 2021 • 6:00am

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## Mental Health Emergency

*Highlighting the impact of lockdown on the nation's minds*

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Katie* was a sporty and laid-back 12-year-old. At the start of the academic year, she moved from her old prep school in the south of England to a new senior school, but without all the usual events and markers around this transition: no exams, no leavers' trip, no proper send-off – and no taster days at her new school, because of Covid-19.

"She suffered with increasing anxiety over the summer," says her mother, Fiona*. "Having to deal with all the newness, and all of the weirdness of going back to school in bubbles was challenging and she really struggled to feel at home, and still does."

Her usual team sports cancelled, Katie, now 13, has been unable to burn off the frustrations with physical exertion as she usually would and, says her mother, "her mental health has declined very significantly."

She says: "I started to find hair balls everywhere in the house, and asked her why this was, and she admitted she was pulling out her hair. She doesn't know why she is doing it, and cannot stop.

"She has been very glum and pretty inconsolable at times about it all, and is suffering regularly with headaches, which she'd never had before lockdown. I have watched my very bubbly, happy, clever, sporty, engaged, relaxed daughter turn into a nervous wreck."

The sad truth is that Katie's story is far from unusual. Ten months into the most discombobulating and frightening period most of us have ever lived through, the toll it is taking on child and adolescent mental health cannot be ignored. Blue Monday, a date that in any other year is associated with the routine low mood brought about by bad weather, Christmas debt and the failure of New Year's resolutions, today holds a new resonance. With schools closed once again and a seemingly indefinite new lockdown upon us, it's clear that children of all ages are suffering.

## Five ways children's lives have been made worse by the pandemic

- One in six children now have a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine in 2017
- Fewer than one in five children have been meeting recommendations for minimum daily activity levels since schools closed in March
- The education gap in England between some pupils and their wealthier peers widened by 46 per cent in the last school year
- Calls to Childline from children reporting domestic violence rose by 50 per cent during this year's lockdown
- Schools are reporting that children who were previously potty trained have regressed back into nappies or forgotten how to use knives and forks

*Sources: NHS Digital. Sport England, National Foundation for Educational Research. NSPCC, Ofsted*

"In the past few weeks, I have frequently found myself at my wits' end as my seven-year-old's behaviour has become increasingly challenging," says Bea*, 38, from North London. "He's throwing toddler-style tantrums over the tiniest grievances during the day, then struggling to sleep at night. He's often still awake at midnight and I don't know how I can help him."

Other parents report their young children suffering from night terrors, waking in the night screaming, developing Tourette syndrome, gaining weight and losing motivation.

Mental health professionals paint a bleak picture. "I don't think I've ever seen it this bad for adolescents in my 40-year career," says clinical psychologist Linda Blair.

Youngsters are suffering from anxiety and panic attacks, feeling isolated "and as if no one likes or knows them any more", she says. They're wondering, in despair, "when will it ever be normal again?"

Dr Jon Goldin, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Great Ormond Street Hospital, says there has been a wave of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in recent months. Eating disorders, anxiety and depression all appear to be becoming more prevalent in under-18s.

The deterioration in our children's mental health in the past year is not merely anecdotal. Various studies also shed light on the effects of the current situation on young people's minds. A survey on the mental health of children and young people, released by NHS Digital in October, found that in 2020 one in six children aged five to 16 were identified as having a probable mental disorder, compared with one in nine in 2017. The increase was evident in both boys and girls.

Separate research conducted by YouGov in October on behalf of Fennies Nurseries, and revealed exclusively in *The Telegraph*, found that even children aged five and under weren't immune from the stresses engendered by the pandemic. One in 10 parents reported their children were having more trouble falling asleep or staying asleep since March. In the same survey, 15 per cent said their under-sixes had shown signs of anxiety during lockdown. Almost a quarter said their little one had misbehaved more than usual.

"If their carers are not feeling good and confident, then [young children] are terrified and they show that by having tantrums and being aggressive and not complying, because anger covers fear," says Blair.

Dr Goldin is optimistic that with the right support, children can come through this difficult time and thrive again on the other side. So how can we improve our children's mental health in the meantime?



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### Empathise

It's important your children feel they have permission to experience negative feelings, and that these are normal. "Listen to them, and allow them to express their feelings of anxiety and depression," says Dr Goldin. "But then one can also problem-solve and reassure them. Say: 'it is very tough, lots of people are worried and you're right to be anxious in a way, but we will get through this and will emerge perhaps stronger and wiser because of what we've been through.' "

Laura House, an early years expert and education lead at childcare company Tiney suggests giving young children a vocabulary for sharing their feelings by sharing your own. "Narrating how you are feeling is the first step," she says. "[For instance] 'I'm feeling a bit upset now because we haven't been able to see Grandpa for a long time and I miss him. Shall we video call him to say hello?' All feelings are valid, and we can use this as a time to teach children this important lesson."

### Create a schedule for your children

The loss of structure usually provided by the school day can leave youngsters adrift. But don't expect them to spend the hours of 9am to 3pm doing school work. Linda Blair says: "[Parents of adolescents] need to let them get up late: 10am or 11am is fine, because their circadian rhythm means they'll be more alert. Ask them what's the best time for them each day to do their two to three hours of schoolwork. Two to three hours is enough. Ask to look at it afterwards. You don't have to judge it, just see it."

### Allow teenagers plenty of access to their mobile devices

We may assume screen time is bad, but right now it's the only way adolescents can maintain their bonds with their friends, who help them understand who they are. The only time you should separate them from their phones is at night, advises Blair. "It's the best of bad choices," she says. "They really need to connect with their friends desperately."

### Give them a sense of agency

Feeling like they have no control over their lives any more could be affecting your children's mood. So help them find ways to be proactive and useful. Dr Goldin suggests they could do this by being tasked with keeping an eye on elderly neighbours or relatives, keeping in contact with them via social media and checking they are OK. They could also leave food parcels outside the door of someone who needs them.

### Limit exposure to rolling news...

"Children get very worried by seeing lots of people in intensive care," says Dr Goldin. "That's not to say you should hide it from them, but the 24/7 [news]... increases anxiety."

### ...But reassure them with the facts

It can be hard for children to keep the threat level in perspective. "We should be reassuring them, for example, that children get a milder illness [with Covid-19]," advises Dr Goldin. "Talk honestly with them, be willing to listen, be clear, be empathic in your communication, encourage questions and answer them really openly. If you don't know, say you can check something out, don't give spurious facts."

**Names have been changed*

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## Mental Health Emergency

The Telegraph launched the Mental Health Emergency campaign to shine a light on Britain's growing crisis. Here are some of the highlights:

- We're living through a crisis that can't be ignored
- What lockdown is really doing to our minds
- Experts warn the fallout will last for years
- *Telegraph* readers share their experiences in lockdown

For more from the campaign, click here

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