

NYC-CBT Winter 2022 Newsletter

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Feeling Powerless: Melting Away the Omicron Winter Weather Blues (CBT Tips for the Whole Family)

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The “Winter Blues” affect us all. Short, chilly days, early sunsets, and dark, blistery cold nights offer limited opportunities for warmth, sunlight, routine outdoor activity, and Vitamin D. This year’s Winter Storm Watch is compounded once again by COVID, with surges in the highly contagious Omicron variant bringing renewed city and statewide mask mandates, social distancing, and safety precautions, that may derail our long-awaited path toward “normalcy” and re-connectedness. As we begin the new year, our work, travel, exercise, and social routines continue to be inconvenienced, and in some cases, postponed indefinitely, leaving us feeling helpless and not in control of our own lives.

Uncertainty is the root of anxiety; it's human nature. We naturally feel anxious and unbalanced in the face of uncertainty, whether it's applying to college, financial instability,

caring for a sick family member, relationship woes, or having our plans - and in many cases, our livelihood - cast aside by inclement weather, and yes, a global pandemic. The key to mental equilibrium is psychological flexibility and acceptance of the things we cannot control, and the ability to slow down our thoughts and emotions by problem-solving where we can, weighing the evidence for and against our worried thoughts, and living a life that is consistent with our core values, even amidst disruption and uncertainty.

During this seasonal period of angst, supercharged by an allusive, evolving pandemic, it is important that we all take care of ourselves... and each other... the STOP AND COPE tips below are a good place to start. And a good family-friendly CBT refresher for clinicians and clients alike.

1. **Shift Your Focus** - When you're feeling tense or stressed out, you may find yourself mentally replaying your worries over and over in your mind. Shift your focus to something more positive. Remind yourself of something that makes you feel good. This can be a place you find relaxing and peaceful (e.g., a favorite beach or park) or maybe for your kids, a place where they had fun recently (e.g., an amusement park or baseball game).
2. **Take Deep Breaths** - You can also shift your focus to your body. Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit or lie down, and concentrate on your bodily sensations and on your breath. Take long, deep breaths from your diaphragm; try inhaling slowly through your nose for five seconds, and then exhaling through your mouth for seven. Exhaling longer than you inhale deepens your breathing, which helps calm your nervous system. To enhance your mindful breathing, you can say a mantra as you focus on your breath (e.g., "one... relax, two... relax"; "breath in calm, breath out stress")
3. **Open the Door and Get Some Fresh Air** - You may have been cooped up for hours, even days... of course you're feeling on edge! Go outside, take a short walk, and get some fresh air. Most importantly, get back into your routine in a safe, practical way, as soon as you can. Don't allow your stress or fear derail you from the parts of your life that are most valued, enjoyable, and fulfilling, even if it means adding some creative twists to your daily activities, social interactions, and exercise/mental wellness routines.
4. **Play a Game or Do Something Fun with Your Family** - Weather-related school closures and the holiday breaks provide a unique opportunity for family bonding time. How often are we stuck at home, all together, sometimes with loss of power? (e.g., no phone, TV, Facebook/Instagram!) Spend time together as a family, talking, playing board games, building that fort in the living room the kids have been asking about for weeks! Or watch a funny or holiday-themed movie together if you do have power. When we're doing something fun - smiling and laughing, it's pretty hard to feel anxious. Find the silver lining and turn this stressful event into a fun and positive family bonding experience that the kids will remember for years to come.

5. **Anxious Thought Busters** – When we're feeling stressed out, we have anxious, exaggerated thoughts; we tend to overestimate the likelihood of something bad happening and underestimate our own abilities to cope. Give yourself (and your kids) a pep talk. Identify your anxious thoughts and "talk back" to your "Worry Bully" (we all have one!) by coming up with more helpful, realistic coping thoughts (e.g., "I have been in worse situations than this before and have been able to manage just fine", "This too shall pass", "What would I tell a friend in this situation?", "I can rely on my friends and family if I need help")
6. **New Adventures** – Sometimes we can get stuck in our daily routine and not take the time to stop and think about our overall stress level, how we are balancing our lives, and perhaps scheduling some time for fun. Think of this "down time" as an opportunity to break free from your weekly routine. Start planning ideas (e.g., make a list together) for your next family vacation, for when it feels safe for travel to resume--or perhaps a romantic weekend getaway!
7. **Draw or Write** – Writing down your anxious thoughts can help relieve some of the stress caused by repetitive worry, especially at night before bed when our "Worry Bully" tends to rear its ugly head and disrupt our sleep. Write down your anxious thoughts or fears on a piece of paper, put the paper aside, and re-visit your list in a few hours. Your worried thoughts may not seem so bad in the morning. Coach your kids to write down their worries, as well, or express themselves through drawing. Check back on your worry list in a few days and after a week, month, etc. Watch your ratings go down over time.
8. **Close Your Eyes and Imagine Your Peaceful Place** – Create your own utopia or relaxing place in your mind and go through each sensory experience – what you see, hear, smell, feel, and taste. Perhaps make a special soothing playlist for your iPod and play some relaxing music in the background.
9. **Open Up to a Parent or Friend** – Share your feelings and don't be afraid to ask for help. Encourage your kids to talk about their feelings, as well, and to ask questions if they are feeling scared. Help each other, and your neighbors. Stay connected.
10. **Problem-Solve** – Write down (or say out loud) the steps you are prepared to take to manage stressful situations that may arise during a storm or an escalation in pandemic conditions (e.g., power outage, running low on food or supplies, limited access to COVID testing, no public transportation, road block, house or car damage). We are generally better problem-solvers than we give ourselves credit for, especially when we are feeling stressed out. Slow down your thoughts and emotions by following the 5 problem-solving STEPS below:

Say the Problem

Think of Solutions

Examine Each Solution (pros and cons)

Pick a Solution
See if it worked

11. **Exercise** – Maybe you’ve stopped going to your public gym, have lost your workout mojo, and have some pent-up energy. Take a break, walk up and down a few flights of stairs, do some push-ups at home, or sign up for that Zoomba or online kickboxing class you've been dying to try. No matter what's going on in your life, exercise will always make you feel better. Try it out, and rate your stress level and mood level before and after on a scale of 0-10!

PROGRAM PROFILES

Camp Erin, NYC

www.copefoundation.org/camp-erin-new-york-city



Camp Erin NYC, is a free, weekend long, grief support camp designed to help children ages 7-17 who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or someone close to them. Camp Erin combines grief education, emotional support, and coping skill building with traditional fun camp activities, facilitated by mental health professionals and trained volunteers. Children often feel isolated in their grief, but rarely receive formal grief counseling. For some, this experience may be the first opportunity where they are able to confront their grief, receive support, and realize they are not alone.

Unique to Camp Erin NYC, we offer a separate retreat for parents whose children attend camp. This opportunity allows parents to experience their own grief work, and offers an added insight to their child’s experience.

Many of you in the NYC-CBT community work with families or children who have suffered a significant loss. Please refer any children who may benefit from this invaluable weekend experience. Camp will be held this year from August 26-28, 2022. Please feel free to contact the Clinical Director, Jamie Greene, Ph.D. if you would like to discuss a referral, or have the family contact Ann Fuchs, Camp Director.

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