



# The Certainty of Uncertainty

**Here's how your family can make the best of the only thing we can count on right now**

**By Christina Elston**

**W**hen Laura Yocum's 12-year-old son is feeling anxious, they'll sometimes sing a doomsday song together. Yocum is a licensed psychotherapist and the clinical director of the [OCD Center of Los Angeles](#), and this is her humorous way of helping him cope with the uncertainty we're all facing during the coronavirus pandemic.

With cases of COVID-19 again surging in L.A. County, questions

loom about our health and safety and what lies ahead. When will the pandemic end? When will vaccines become available? When will we return to daily life? When can we hug someone again? Will life change for good? "That's the one thing that is clear as life continues during the coronavirus pandemic, is that there's so much that we just don't know," says Susan Zinn, a psychotherapist and the mom of two teenagers. "I think that is very much part of people's fears."



Zinn says her [Santa Monica practice](#) has been increasingly busy as school districts have announced they won't be opening for in-person instruction in the fall, and families scramble to figure out what life will look like.

Uncertainty can be difficult, because the unknown is scary, says Elena Fasan, a cognitive behavioral therapist with the OCD Center of L.A. and adjunct professor in the department of child and adolescent development at Cal State Northridge. "It can lead us to make up stories about what could happen or what will happen, and often those stories we make up are worst-case scenarios," Fasan says. "It's almost like contingency planning without the facts."

This is why Yocum and her son play what she calls the "What If" game. When her son asks her questions like, "What if we never go back to normal?" she asks him to tell her about that. What would that look like? She lets him describe all the doom and gloom (never seeing his friends again, etc.) and then says, "Well, that's a really great story. And what if that doesn't happen? I allow him the opportunity to play out the fear, and then challenge it with questions about another possibility," she says.

Therapists call this the "downward arrow" technique, and Yocum likes to finish with something to diffuse any fears that come up – like the doomsday song. "I'll do something silly with him to get him out of that rabbit hole, like, 'Let's sing about the worst-case scenario,'" she says.

### What uncertainty triggers

In our bodies, uncertainty can trigger our fight, flight or freeze response, flooding our brains with chemicals designed for extreme emergencies. "We're only supposed to be staying in that hyperaroused state for 47 seconds in a life-and-death situation – running away from a tiger or lifting a car from a baby underneath,"

says Zinn. "We're not supposed to be walking around in these states all day long, which we are currently."

In the absence of healthy coping strategies to calm that response, uncertainty can do a number on our mental well-being. It can lead to feelings of hopelessness or depression, rigidity and inability to adapt to changing circumstances. "Facing uncertainty builds your distress and stress tolerance," says Fasan. "But avoiding it, isolating, becoming very rigid and inflexible will decrease your distress and stress tolerance."

People respond to this in a variety of unhealthy ways: substance abuse, bingeing on social media, overexercising, oversleeping, overeating or compulsive cleaning. Experts have even noted the pandemic could lead to an increase in suicide attempts.

One side effect of our current situation is that, due to the uncertainty we've been facing, parents have sometimes relaxed routines and expectations at home, which can lead to challenging behavior in kids. "We let a lot of things slide initially, because we weren't sure what was going to happen," says Mariko Fairly, a behavior consultant, mother of two and founder of [Parenting Fairly](#). "We weren't sure how we were going to manage being a full-time employee, a full-time parent, a full-time teacher. It's a lot."

Fairly has consulted with parents of kids ages 7-9 who relaxed bedtime boundaries when their children started having trouble sleeping. These parents started letting the kids sleep with them, or coming to sleep in their children's rooms. "Over the course of several months or a year, however long we're doing this, it really becomes habit and it's then very difficult to break," she says.

To gently reinstate boundaries, Fairly recommends the "bedtime pass" for ages 3-10. Each night, kids are given one to three of these passes, which can be exchanged for an extra hug or drink of water or bathroom trip. "So, if they get out of bed, they exchange a pass, but





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then they go right back to bed," she says.

If the child gets out of bed again, parents walk them silently back. Fairly says the passes have had a 90% success rate with clients' families.

## Strategies for parents

In many aspects of parenting, experts like to use an airplane metaphor, taken from preflight safety instructions. In the event of an emergency, parents must secure their own oxygen masks before assisting their child, since an unconscious parent will be no help at all. It holds true for COVID-19 uncertainty as well, so here are some self-care strategies for parents.

**Remember the basics.** Fasan says she thinks of self-care like a three-legged stool: diet, exercise and sleep. "If one of those legs gets knocked out, the stool falls," she says. "You can make the stool prettier and decorate it with nurturing, fun activities and all kinds of other things, but those three basics are really important."

**Limit news consumption.** It's good to keep up to date, but set limits. "If you're checking the news all the time, you're giving yourself an IV drip of anxiety throughout the day," says Dr. Jenny Yip, board-certified clinical psychologist and founder of [Renewed Freedom Center](#), Los Angeles. She suggests checking news midday, so that you can do some self-care or refocus onto something more positive afterward.

**Suspend expectations.** During this time, specific expectations about what should happen might not be realistic. "When people expect a certain outcome, they're really setting themselves up for being frustrated, overwhelmed or disappointed when things don't work out as they'd hoped," says Zinn. Allow for the idea of lots of possibilities to happen, or just sit with the unknown.

**Practice radical acceptance.** "Turn off the struggle switch," urges

Yocum, and instead adopt the attitude that, "I don't like where this is at. However, I don't have a choice." Just take it one day at a time.

For the whole family, building some sort of structured routine can also help. One of Zinn's two children has asthma, placing her at high risk and making the whole family more anxious. To help establish a daily routine, she created three-foot dry-erase calendars. "They're up in everyone's rooms, because our schedules are not the same rhythms that they used to be," she says. "We're creating as much routine and structure as possible, because we want to offset the uncertainty."

The family calendars include meal times, wake-up and bed times, seeing friends on socially distanced walks and walking the dogs. "The more things that we can do with structure and routine, the more our brains are going to be able to calm down," says Zinn, adding that being able to physically see a big calendar really helps.

## Guiding your kids

Yip, who has twin 4-year-olds, advocates talking things out with children rather than just reassuring them. From the very beginning, she told her children that there is a "super germ" out there, and it is important for them to wash their hands and not put things in their mouths so that they don't get it, because it will make them very sick.

Following safety guidelines is something within our control. "Even if they have no control over what's outside of them, they do have control over what they choose to do," Yip explains. And Yip's children seem to understand. When the family ran out of orange juice recently, Yip reminded them that she's only going to the grocery store every other week these days. "One of my kids said, 'Why not? Just put a mask on and go.'"

Yocum's younger son is 7 and approaches the pandemic with a less fear-based and more curious attitude than his older brother

does. She tries to be honest with him in an age-appropriate way. "If they're asking the questions, they can probably tolerate a gentle, honest response," she says.

It's important to offer some information, because kids of all ages are going to notice something is going on, and they'll make up their own story about it if you don't tell them. "Young children, who are egocentric, might create a story about them," Fasan says. They might think it is their fault. Present age-appropriate facts in a calm, matter-of-fact way. Bookend the information with the fact that you are here to answer their questions and that though it is uncertain and scary, you are working to keep them safe.

Older kids will need a bit more information, and you should be mindful of how they receive it. With a science-minded teen who has asthma, Zinn has been limiting news consumption and talking with her daughter about what they do see in the news. "It was a really important lesson in teaching her about critical thinking," she says. "What is the difference between fact and fiction? Is this coming from a credible source?"

If your children have questions you can't answer, tell them so but reassure them that you are here to take care of them. "I think it's really important for parents to understand that it's OK if you don't know the answers to their questions," Fasan says.

Eventually, your child will be old enough to realize that you can't protect them from everything, and that is OK, too. Acknowledge this, remind them of all the ways you are teaching them to protect themselves, and that if something happens that's beyond your control, you will deal with that when it comes.

## Ways to connect

People of all ages can also benefit from connection during this time. Yocum says subscription programs such as [BetterHelp](#) can be an affordable way to connect with a therapist, but that fellow parents can also help. "Get four or five friends together and just sort of vent," she suggests. "There's a lot of laughter that happens when I'm on these groups with the kids' friends' parents. You find that something doom-and-gloom is really sort of hysterical when everyone's telling their stories." The laughter also counteracts those nasty stress chemicals in the brain.

In a family Fasan worked with for 11 years as a nanny, the 18-year-old son has been accepted to his dream school in New York City but is facing the uncertainty of what the school year will hold. "They've handled it really well in terms of listening to his fears, allowing him to have some agency in terms of decision making, but also making sure that they're seeking support, that he's still connecting with friends," she says.

Fairly's children, who are 3½ and 6, have been helping her with "ding-dong drops," where they deliver packages to a friend's doorstep and the kids get to say hi through the window. "The kids are just so excited to see each other, even though they can't touch or get too close," she says. The packages include things like snacks, a photo or card, and maybe a bottle of wine for the parents. This gives everyone a fun project and gets them out of the house. Fairly's 6-year-old has also been having pen-pal exchanges with friends, which gives her a



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chance to practice her writing.

Expressive arts can also help calm anxiety around uncertainty, especially for really young kids. Yocum lets kids draw in a sand tray, and suggests an open prompt such as, "Let's draw what's going on in the world today" to give you a sense of what's on your child's mind. You could use other art materials or even create a scene with toys. At the end, let your child explain what they've created.

If you or your child are feeling anxious or uncertain at a level that disrupts your normal daily life – eating, sleeping and ability to function – it's time to reach out for professional help. But keep in mind that, as we navigate these difficult times, we're building what Yocum calls "the tolerance muscle."

"In general, we are all learning how to operate outside our comfort zone, which is a really important skill in all aspects of life," she says. Throughout our lives and our children's, we will all face uncertainty and discomfort. Looking back, we'll have these times as evidence of what we can overcome. ♦

*Christina Elston is Editor of L.A. Parent.*