

SANITY

DURING

SICK

SEASON

We're all parenting in the age of industrial-size hand sanitizer and all-caps notices from the day care. No wonder anxiety is skyrocketing. Our advice will calm your nerves, quiet your mind, and let you take care of your kids like the supermom you are.

by CATHERINE NEWMAN / illustrations by BIJOU KARMAN

I'VE BEEN BLESSED with healthy kids, the kind who get sick but then get better a day or two later. Still, when they were little, it felt like they were sick constantly. Night after night, someone or other would crawl into my bed and press their feverish little baked-dinner-roll feet up against me. Morning after morning, my husband and I struggled through the impossible algorithms of work and child care ("If *x* equals your getting fired...").

I forced myself to take deep breaths while I combed lice from the children's hair, scrubbed barf from my own, and Googled "Coxsackie virus" and such imaginary catastrophes as "fatal headache." I bought hand sanitizer, replaced toothbrushes after bouts of strep, and fed everyone optimistic probiotics and fish oil. And I sat and sat in the pediatrician's office under an unwell little somebody, whose weight

grounded me there, because where else could I be? Nowhere.

However, I am speaking to you from across the great divide, because my kids are teenagers now and almost never get sick (knock on wood)—and even when they do, they require so little of me that I could cry. But when I asked my young parent friends about their sick-season worries, they shared fears about germey shopping carts, escalators, airplanes,



and those “Mucus Together” classes where everyone blows into the same instruments. And with all those daily CNN alerts, it’s easy to panic that your child’s fever and cough could turn into that polio-like paralyzing illness everyone is talking about.

Of course, our baseline stress level is also higher than it used to be. A recent poll by the American Psychiatric Association confirmed that anxiety is on the rise—and millennials are the most anxious generation, with more women suffering than men. Tell you about it, right? If we’re worried anyway, then we’re definitely going to worry about the health of our children, says Beth Salcedo, M.D., medical director of the Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, in Washington, D.C.

Here’s some help for keeping things in perspective and not falling down that rabbit hole during sick season.

→ Worry Gets You Nowhere

A mom’s stress can range from a mild twinge of concern to heart-thudding panic. You might feel like your kids are always sick, that they’ll never get better, and that you’ll be eternally passing germs back and forth like a baton in some kind of nightmarish relay. Some folks carry plastic puke bags in their purse at all times, having learned the hard way about projectile vomiting in public.

Google and social media can fan the flames of your anxiety inferno. In my informal polling, I found that zero percent of parents felt less anxious after going online. That’s one reason why you should stick to reliable sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), rather than the “Deadly Rashes” Tumblr.

The truth is, doing research online makes us feel like we’re doing something productive—when we’re really just fretting. As Susan Orsillo, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and coauthor of *The Mindful Way Through Anxiety*, says, “One of the most challenging things about worry is that we can get pretty far in the process and still feel like we’re problem-solving.”

Having a family member with a chronic condition such as asthma or an

immune-system disorder can make you even more nervous about sickness coming into your home. And for moms who are already struggling with an anxiety disorder, worries about their child getting sick can be debilitating, says Dr. Salcedo. “They might not let their kids go to friends’ houses or on any outing that would require using public facilities.” If you’re so anxious about your kids getting sick that you’re keeping them at home, you’re likely missing out on the company of the very friends who could pour you a glass of wine (or Emergen-C), lend you an ear, and talk you down.

→ Plan the Logistics

Beyond close-to-the-heart fears about our children’s well-being, we also have more practical worries. One mother told me, “As a single mom of three, I worry that once one kid gets sick, we’re all going down. Which means missing work and losing pay while I stay home with them.” Another friend explained, “A sick kid I can take care of, but who does all my mothering work when I’m laid up? And who takes care of me?” Young parents often live far away from

extended family who would have been able to pitch in.

Even when your kid is feeling better, school rules may mean he has to stay home for 24 hours after his fever drops. A survey from C. S. Mott Children’s Hospital, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, found that more than a quarter of the parents had to miss work three or more times to care for a sick child, and one third worried about not getting paid or losing their job because of staying home with a sick kid. After all, only 13 percent of private-industry workers have access to paid family leave, according to a Pew Research Center survey, and no federal law requires it. Combine that with the fact that center-based child care for two kids costs young parents more than half of their median annual salary on average and you’re looking at a perfect financial storm. Many of us can’t afford day care as it is, our kids can’t go to day care if they’re sick, and we can’t afford to miss work when our kids are home.

Putting a plan in place can help set your mind at ease—even if it’s just having a candid talk with your boss now, when everyone is healthy. Consider friends you could call for backup if necessary.



Whenever you have a hunch that your kid might be getting sick, Dr. Orsillo suggests saying to your partner, “Hey, what’s your week like?” so you can strategize about staying home from work.

→ Find Your Calm

Karen Kleiman, author of *Good Moms Have Scary Thoughts*, reminded me that anxiety is “adaptive and instinctive.” That means you can’t help it, and that over generations and generations, it has helped protect our kids. We are genetically predisposed to be anxious because it keeps the species alive.

As with many situations in life, you have to remind yourself to look at the big picture: Pinkeye and lice may be inconveniences, but they’re surely not disasters. If you feel anxious thoughts brewing, Kleiman recommends repeating these four soothing mantras to yourself:

1. Germs are unavoidable. Just because my child is exposed to germs, it doesn’t mean she will get sick.
2. My child is exposed to germs all the time, even when I don’t think about it, and he has not gotten sick—or, if he has gotten sick, he has recovered.
3. My child is healthy and has a strong immune system that will protect her.
4. Even if my child does get sick, he can go to the doctor and nothing terrible will happen.

Also consider what you’re teaching your child about the world when he sees you reacting to the news that a friend is sick—and that you seem more worried about catching her germs than about how she’s feeling, says Dr. Orsillo. He might not learn, for example, that compassion is the proper reaction to someone else’s suffering. “We can’t actually help our first response—it’s automatic,” says Dr. Orsillo. “But we can stop and say to ourselves, ‘That’s not the person I want to be.’ We can practice mindfulness by noticing a worrisome thought and just letting it be.”

You can also consider the silver linings of sickness. For one, your child’s immune system needs to encounter these illnesses in order to learn how to protect her from them. As my brother, a pediatric infectious-disease specialist, used to tell me, “Kids who are sick a lot



STAY-HEALTHY TIPS FROM DOCTOR-MOMS

Most of the pediatricians on the *Parents* panel of AAP moms admitted they worry about bringing home germs and getting their kids sick. Steal their top sanitizing strategies to keep everyone in your house feeling well.

1

Clean your hands with gusto.

“Long washing sessions with soap and water are a must for adults and kids—as soon as they enter our house,” says Priya Patel, M.D., a pediatrician in Philadelphia. “Even my 2-year-old knows the routine now and will go right to the sink after coming home.” Pediatrician-moms rely on hand sanitizer, too, but don’t get carried away. Everyone should wash their hands or squirt on sanitizer before and after eating, after using the bathroom (obviously!), and after touching another person, says Elizabeth Murray, D.O., a pediatrician at the University of Rochester Golisano Children’s Hospital. Also give your own hands a good scrub before you leave work and after you get home.

2

Up the ante (just a little!) on your cleaning routine.

During cold and flu season, our panelists focus more attention on the kitchen and bathroom—two rooms that see a lot of action. “I also sanitize or use disinfecting wipes on doorknobs and faucets, especially if one of us or a recent visitor has signs or symptoms of illness,” says Tamar Nazerian Chorbadian, D.O., a developmental-behavioral pediatrician in Los Angeles.

3

Give sick kids their own spot.

Once they’ve claimed it, that’s where they sit when they’re out of bed, says Dr. Murray. “One child can have the comfy chair, one takes the couch in the den.” And healthy family members shouldn’t sit in infected areas.

—Hattie Hayes

when they’re young are less sick when they’re older.” Although this felt very pie-in-the-sky at the time, it turned out to be true.

For another, if you’re stuck at home with a sick child, well then, that’s time you can spend with your child. Because even though you’re freaking out and calling HR and the pediatrician and the pharmacy and cursing the childproof caps and mopping up spilled cough medicine, there’s a sweet little sick person who needs comfort. This is still your real, precious life, even if you have to spend it waiting for an X-ray technician to diagnose pneumonia. This is still your child’s life.

So go ahead and mother him, because it will soothe both of you. Make him a warm drink, read to him, give him placebo cures like cinnamon toast or a drop of lavender oil on a warm washcloth. Enjoy the fact that you’re not having to pack a lunch or be at work. Love the warm body in your lap at the pediatrician’s office, turning pages for you while you read him a book with your chin pressed against his sweaty, beautiful head. Appreciate the phenomenon of the sick kid who gets better. Honestly? This is the only thing that ever really helped me. Remembering that you can’t control their health or the future. You can only be here now. ☺