

## Transcription

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### Episode Four Part One

Welcome to Conversations COVID-19 – Parenting in the Pandemic. If you're the parent of a young family, this episode's definitely for you. What we're looking at doing is supporting and empowering you to come up with ways to deal with your family under these difficult circumstances. As is often the case with medicine, the side effects can be as grueling as the actual issue itself. In this case, it's more of an emotional issue but nonetheless it's significant. Here to discuss this with me are Jennifer Sass-Walton and Elizabeth Cooksey.

So Jennifer and Liz, welcome. Thanks a lot.

Firstly, Liz, can I just ask you what parents can do in these times? It really is a crazy time.

#### Liz

Absolutely, yeah this is a crazy time, and parenting is stressful even on a normal day and right now we have the pile up effect of just the addition of all this extra chaos in the world and it's impacting families and impacting the families that we work with right now. Almost every family I've talked to has just reported some increase in anxiety. And that's for them and also for their children. So first of all I just want to remind us that stress is normal, it's a normal biological response to threat. And there's actually some positive things about stress. It mobilizes us and it allows us to take care of things that we need to take care of. But I think what we're seeing right now is that there's a buildup of stress that isn't helpful – what we could call toxic stress. And that's really impacting our children and impacting our families. So what can we do? And I think one of the main things that I want to just start off with today as we talk is just to say that really as parents we have to put our own oxygen masks on first. This requires us to think about what we need to stay calm and regulated so that we can support our children right now as parents. One of the things that I think is challenging about this is it's easy to focus on what our kids need at the expense of ourselves as the parent, and really the primary thing is to start with thinking about what you need in the moment.

#### John

Thanks. And Jennifer, are there any specific strategies that you recommend for Skagit parents to deal with stress?

#### Jennifer

Well, you know as human beings we have basic physiological needs and when these things are off balance it can really make us more vulnerable to the effects of stress. So let's talk about some strategies that may be helpful to take care of our bodies, our minds, and our spirits. I'm going to start off a little bit with our bodies, 'cause that's what we live in, and it turns out that breathing is kind of an important thing. When we're anxious we tend to breathe faster and more shallowly, and when that happens then we get less oxygen to our brain and it in turn can make us more anxious and can create a really vicious cycle. So it's really important to practice deeper breathing so that we get oxygen deep into our lungs so that it travels to our brain and our body organs so that it can really serve us well. We have a tip of making a glitter jar. You can find the instructions to do something like that online and then when you shake it up, kind of like a snow globe or glittery thing, you have a glitter storm that happens. And that kind of represents what's going on with our emotions at times. It clouds our brains and it makes it a little bit hard to think. So if you do that you can visualize that and you can also just take that time while the glitter is settling to the bottom of the jar and just breathe and practice some deep breathing. The whole point of that is that we don't want our feelings to disappear, but we just don't want them to block our view of what's really going on. Moving is another thing that's really important. Just to move our bodies, that's what they were made for. And when we do good physical activity it releases chemicals into our brain that make us happier and more functional. You don't have to be preparing for a triathlon or anything extreme sports like, just moving. Any little bit can do, walking around the block, doing some jumping jacks at home, stretching, all kinds of things like that are really helpful for your body and puts you back into balance. So something is better than nothing there. Another thing that we need to pay attention to in times of stress is what we put into our bodies in terms of eating and drinking. Almost all of us resort to some sort of comfort foods. I know it's really easy for me to grab for cookies and brownies and drinking more coffee to get through the day and stuff like that. But that sends our already stressed systems into a tailspin if we do too much of that. Especially if we're eating foods that are high in unhealthy fats, in salts, in sugars. So being careful with those things is really important just to keep everything in balance too. That doesn't mean you can't have a cookie every now and then or an extra cup of coffee if you really need it to get through the day, but just being careful with those things. And then, another thing that's really important is sleep. And I know that that can be really hard especially when our minds are reeling but we need to aim for about 7 or 8 hours of sleep a night. It's super hard if you have a new baby in your home to make that happen so you might have to do that in different chunks or take naps with a stretch of about 20 to 30 minutes, if you nap for longer than that it can make you kind of groggy. But if you can do that it helps strengthen your immune system, it may cut your appetite a little bit so you don't keep grabbing for those cookies and all those things just help us to be in balance. And remembering that we need a good sleep environment. We want to make sure that we have a comfortable temperature in our room, minimize noise, and it's really tempting to bring our screens into the bedroom with us, but the light from the screen can interfere with our sleep and sometimes the things that we're watching can really also keep our brains a little bit too active.

### John

Great, okay. Liz, as far as comfort zones for parents are concerned, one of the biggest comfort zones is the idea that you're in control, and with COVID-19, there really is a sense of not being in control. What advice do you have for that?

### Liz

Yeah. This is really a challenge right now, there is so much beyond our control. Some simple things that come to mind right now is just really acknowledging what is out of your control, and what is one simple thing maybe that is in your control in the day. We know that providing some structure is really important to help with this managing of overwhelm. Creating space for our children also to express some of these feelings that might be coming up for them, when things feel out of control as well, is really helpful, as well as just encouraging – just like Jennifer talked about with movement - it's so important for our children to have spaces to move in the day, to help metabolize some of that stress as well. A lot of parents right now I think are doing so much extra in the home right now and in the midst of that there is a lot of messaging out there that is encouraging them to do more especially as parents have now also become teachers. And I think we really want to focus right now on those feelings of not feeling like you're enough. We just want to communicate that you are enough and that really right now is maybe not the time to think about what more you can do, but really to focus on being with those that you are with and right now, really focusing on our children, really being present. And some of that means watching our children to see they can be our teachers as well. They're incredibly natural in ways sometimes that as adults we've forgotten. So really one of the things we love to say is to really follow our children's lead, and that means watching what is interesting to them. And what this creates is a moment for you to be really present which in turn really helps you bring in to focus what's within your control.

### John

And Jennifer, the Governor's "Stay home, stay safe" order's been in place for a while now and there's every chance it's going to be extended. What does this mean for families?

### Jennifer

Well remember that although it might feel like it, this isn't going to be happening forever. But nonetheless the stress is real. I know people were really thrown this week when they extended the school year closure to the end of the school year, and that just stretches things out in our minds. But remember our families and our communities are stronger, safer, and healthier when we come together. And we can still find ways to be connected even though we're physically apart. The antidote to fear is love and connection, even when these things can't occur with physical presence. I think the most important thing that Liz and I want to stress is that people need each other, and we really want people to reach out for connection and support when they need it. This is true for now, and it's going to be true when the pandemic is over and hopefully we'll come out stronger for this if we find ways to really put our values in our relationships. So we want people to stay connected where you can with the people that you need the most, that matter to you the most. Maybe make some

new friends through some virtual parent groups. There's some really cool things going on right now that people can connect from their homes with other peers and others that have common interests. If you need to hear another adult voice there are places you can call like the Parent Trust of Washington Line, or Brigid Collins, a local organization has parent coaching, and they've made that available for free now that you can just call and set up a time with parent coaches. And if you're near a breaking point, there is the option of calling or texting the Crisis Line, or 911. And we're going to be providing links to some of these resources on our website, at the [skagitcounty.net/coronavirus](http://skagitcounty.net/coronavirus). And as more things become available we'll make sure that that's on our website.