

## A Road Map to Mental Health during Quarantine

**This is hard!**

**Parents are not okay, kids are not okay, nothing of this is okay!**

**So why don't you just:**

**“Take a deep breath, take a walk, think a happy thought,  
use mindfulness strategies....”**



We have heard it all before, maybe so much that we don't even listen to it anymore. You may have tried some of those things to calm your fears during these unsettling times and it did not really work. You may still be worried, your body still feels bad, you still have issues sleeping and you are still stressed.

Understanding how our bodies and brains work can be the key to using strategies successfully. **WHY** should I take a deep breath and how is thinking about something happy going to solve my problems?

Invest 20min and learn to understand yourself better so you will gain the motivation and control to change something you CAN change during these times when so much is out of your control!

In the following pages I tried to explain in simple terms how our brains and bodies work, what we can **do** and how we can help our children.

These are hard times and this information will not externally change the realities you are facing right now - **but it will provide a road map and give direction on how to change and control things from the inside out, which WILL have a positive impact on your reality and the physical and mental health of you and your children.**



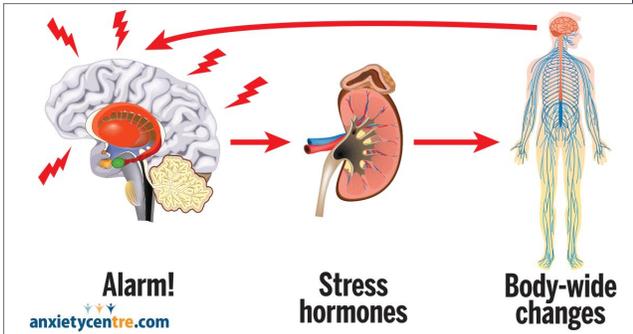
I am with you on this same journey to try to make sense of it all and come out of it, hopefully healthy and thriving.

We are not okay and we are not alone! Let's get through this together, Angela

Angela Bryan,  
Trauma Informed Care Educator

## When things are out of our control \_

...a little part in our brain called the “Amygdala” alerts our system to danger. The thinking part of our brain, the prefrontal



cortex, receives this alert. The prefrontal cortex decides whether the alarm is justified and what to do about it. The body’s response depends on how strongly developed the

prefrontal cortex is and how severely the amygdala is getting engaged.

In moments of severe threat or the perception of severe threat, the amygdala will hijack the system and override our thinking brain to insure physical survival at the basic level. A whole cascade of chemicals are released in the form of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. The body’s goal is to put extra physical abilities at our disposal so we can escape, run, fight or hide from the impending danger.

Our blood pressure rises, our heart beat increases, our pupils dilate, our senses get heightened - we are on alert. This takes a lot of energy that has to come from somewhere. This energy automatically gets diverted away from our digestive system (since that uses most of our energy resources) to other areas of our body such as large muscle groups so we can get ready to run, defend ourselves or attack if needed - **fight and flight**.

**As a result, when things are out of control:**

- Our stomach hurts and we have this horrible feeling in the pit of our stomach, often leading to **digestive problems**
  - We **can’t sleep** well because our system is on alert, not allowing us to rest our mind
  - Our bodies are tense and under pressure leading to **headaches, pain and inflammation** which over time can turn into dangerous conditions such as heart problems and other organ damage
  - Our **immune system becomes weakened** because our system is focused on the perceived



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danger, letting its guard down becoming more **vulnerable to attacks from bacteria and viruses**

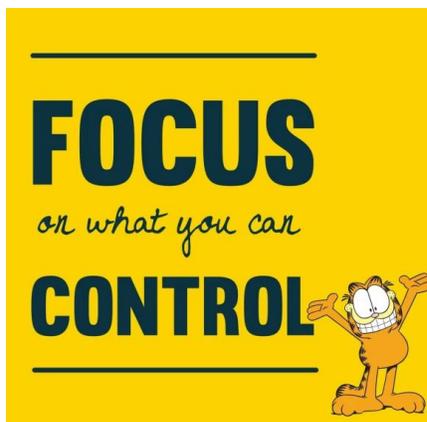
- **We struggle with relationships.** We are feeling more easily aggravated, offended or bothered by others because our system is not in “thinking mode” but reactive, fight mode.
- Since our senses are heightened, sounds, smells and visual input is amplified and will exhaust or bother us more easily, **making it harder to navigate high sensory situations - such as dealing with lively children all day.**
- Our brain is foggy and **can not think clearly** because our prefrontal cortex is getting hijacked by our survival system - **making decisions, attending to work and daily tasks become increasingly difficult.**
- Our language center is located in our thinking brain, the prefrontal cortex, so we find it very hard, at times maybe even **impossible to put what we feel into words** to share with someone, leaving us **feeling alone** and lonely
- We feel fear - our heart beats fast, our chest tightens, our skin tingles, we may sweat or even feel dizzy; at times this may lead to **not being able to breath normally**, which in turn increases fear and can lead to panic attacks
- ALL of this is **EXHAUSTING**. Our bodies can only be on high alert for so long before shutting down - which is the 3rd survival response: **freeze**.  
At some point we become **hopeless and numb**.

**Have you felt any of these things above in the past weeks as so many things are threatening our lives and livelihoods?**



**These unprecedented events are not in our control and our amygdala is sounding the alarm bell.**

**However when things are out of our control,  
we have one powerful tool:**



### You can (learn to) control:

- What you focus on
- What you do with your body
- What you do for others
- What you say to yourself
- How you will respond



BUT FIRST TO BE ABLE TO **FOCUS** ON ANYTHING CONCERNING YOUR BRAIN,  
we need to

## CALM the AMYGDALA

### CALM the survival part of the BRAIN,

so you can regain function of your thinking brain.  
Here are some of the functions of our prefrontal cortex:

- **Consequence and logical thinking:** understanding that what I do now will have an impact later, so I can make better choices and plan my future
  - **Analytical thinking and creativity:** the ability to find creative solutions that are productive
  - **Logical thinking** the ability to make better decisions, or any decision at all
  - **Empathy and compassion:** reaching out to others to feel what they feel and engage in meaningful, life giving human connection
  - **Learning:** the ability to absorb and store NEW information
  - **Language processing:** understanding, “hearing” words, processing verbal input, remembering messages, forming words and expressing yourself verbally
  - **Impulse control:** the ability to filter what you say, stop your actions, and think before you speak or do something (which may save your relationships and work)
  - **Attention and focus:** the ability to tune out unimportant tasks and focus on what is at hand, even if it gets hard
  - **Body and emotion control:** the ability to tell your body what to do and the ability to regulate your emotions so they don’t run away with you
- **Motivation & Control:**  
not just knowing things but having the ability to **EXECUTE** what you know is good for you!

## How to calm the Amygdala

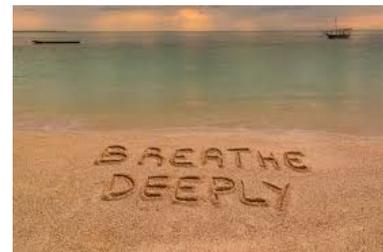
When the amygdala overrides our thinking brain, the explained stress responses above are activated, and we have **whole body responses**. To calm our brain and be able to regain our “thinking brain” capacities **we need to respond with whole BODY strategies**. The following are **WHOLE BODY STRATEGIES**:

**STEP 1**

And here it is: **BREATHING - WHY and HOW:**

Stress hormones speed up our heart beat and raise our blood pressure. It changes our breathing pattern to short, shallow breathing.

Taking a **deep, SLOW breath in, holding your breath for three counts and breathing out slowly** sends body signals to the amygdala that there is no life threatening danger, we don't need a fast heart beat, we don't need access blood flow to our muscle groups, we are safe and “Can I please have my thinking brain back?”



**BREATH IN**



Smell the cupcake.

**BREATH OUT**



Blow out the candle.

It will slow our heart beat, lower our blood pressure and our thinking brain comes back “online”. The fog can lift, my chemical brain and physiological balance shifts, and the prefrontal cortex will be back in control. Repeat breathing deeply until you feel your body relax.

Use these links to help [YOU learn how to use breathing](#) to get back in control and how [to teach your children how to breath](#).

And my personal favorite to do WITH your kids: [Cotton Ball race!](#) Great fun and deep breathing!



What breathing strategy will you use? \_\_\_\_\_

Which one will you teach to your child? \_\_\_\_\_

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### STEP 2

### BECOME AWARE OF YOUR BODY

While you keep breathing slowly, feel your body. Massage some of your [pressure points](#) or simply apply pressure to anywhere on your body. Stroking your skin or stretching are also ways to put the body front and center and to become aware of it. Plant your feet firmly on the ground; if you are sitting, feel the floor you're sitting on and push your weight into the ground.



Deep pressure releases Dopamine and Serotonin, two neurotransmitters that help you calm and feel happy which automatically decreases stress hormones. [You can massage your child's hands when they feel stressed to help them regulate.](#)

Place a cold pad or heating pad, or any other cold or warm items on your skin to force your system to pay attention to your body sensation without causing yourself harm.

The idea is to do something simple that does not require a lot of thought or will power to execute. These can be done anywhere whenever you start to feel overwhelmed.

### STEP 3

### CHANGE THE INPUT & DIVERT YOUR ATTENTION

Now that your heart is starting to slow and your amygdala is starting to receive the message that you are not in immediate danger, your prefrontal cortex function will slowly increase. You can choose one of the following strategies to calm your brain and nervous system.

- Put on music you love or [use a calming app](#)
- Spread smells you like with candles, sprays, or diffusers. Smell is processed directly in the limbic system, where the amygdala is located, so it has the power to change how we feel immediately
- Count out loud, name things you see around you out loud, hum or sing
- Focus your attention on a beautiful object
- Go outside or change rooms to see something different
- Saying things out loud, looking at an object closely, or getting new input through music or a change of environments engages our prefrontal cortex and will start to override the amygdala and our "thinking brain" can regain the leadership over the brain. [Grounding activities for you to use or to use with your child](#)



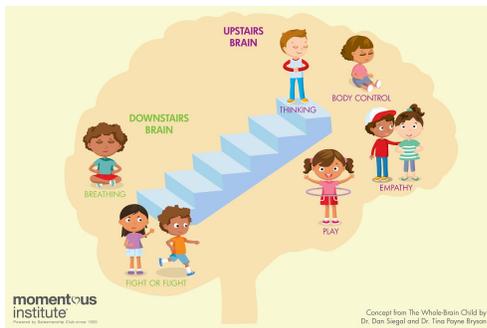
Which grounding strategies will you use? \_\_\_\_\_

## Caring for your mental health and that of your children during Crazy Corona Times



**First calm the Amygdala**  
**- then teach your brain to focus on what you can control**

Once our thinking brain is “back online” and more in charge, we **NOW** have the **ability** to teach our brains to focus on what we can control.



Many strategies that are shared on social media, TV, by friends or by counselors can be truly helpful, but may be too hard to execute, get started with or remember when we are not in our thinking brain. Also, without understanding what these strategies actually do for our brain and body, we are much quicker to dismiss them. We give up and allow our amygdala to continue to “run the show.”

Once you are in your thinking brain however, the following strategies will help:

1. **Establish a routine** - but let the routine serve you and your family. Don't be afraid to tweak and adjust it as things change. Make sure to establish one that fits your family during this time.  
Of course you want to be productive with work and school, but the main goal should be to lower your stress response. When in question, opt for peace and joy, leave something undone if needed, so your amygdala can relax and your thinking brain continues to function. This will minimize the trauma impact of this difficult time and make you resilient. Afterward, this will also provide you with new prefrontal cortex connections that can help you to get unpleasant things done more easily or solve a problem without getting hijacked by emotions.  
[Here is an inspiring video](#) on how routine can make a difference.
2. **Go outside each day, even if it is just for a few minutes.** Even if it rains. Changes in scenery provide us with stimulation and input that will keep our thinking brain engaged and help our amygdala to not overreact.

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3. **Move or exercise each day.** Exercise and movement lower stress hormones in the body. Remember, when the amygdala releases stress hormones such as cortisol, they are meant to get us ready to fight, flight or freeze. All of these chemicals when not released get stored in our bodies and can lead to inflammation and a weaker immune system. [Here is a short article explaining it further.](#)  
Repetitive motion, such as walking, or deep pressure input, such as jumping, releases dopamine and serotonin (previously mentioned “happy” neurotransmitters). **FUN** lowers cortisol right away - so go outside with your kids, jump on the trampoline, walk your dog or play catch with your children. Yoga is a great way to calm your stress system and release stress from your body. There are many apps that have a free component to get you started. My favorite is [“Daily Yoga”](#)
4. **Connect with someone each day, even if it’s short.** Humans are made for connection. Our brains are wired for human input, and if we don’t have it often, our brains suffer. [Powerful video here about human connection.](#)  
Call, skype, zoom, write a letter on paper, reach out on social media so your amygdala won’t alert your survival system starting you on a downward spiral of feeling alone.
5. **Drink water.** Neurotransmitters, the agents who help information travel in the brain from one place to another, need water to function well. Dehydration will not only lead to headaches, but also to difficulty focusing and diminished cognitive functions. Pay attention to your food intake. Skipping meals or eating only processed foods will mess with your blood sugar level, and in turn cause you to feel more aggravated, tired, and compromise all prefrontal cortex functions.
6. **HAVE FUN.** Play with your children; do things that bring you joy. The sensation of joy and laughter can not co-exist with fear in our system. Fun and laughter immediately lower cortisol levels in your body. In the latter section about helping your children with school work, we will talk more about how to incorporate fun to increase learning.
7. **Find your place to be alone.** Each person in your family should find a spot in the house that is their spot to go to when they need to be alone for a little while. When we struggle with self regulation, we need to know where we can go to take a moment to calm down and get grounded again.

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8. **Forgive and accept.** Just like you get triggered, so will the people you live with or work with. Instead of getting upset with them or judging them for their behavior, stay calm, help them to regulate, forgive quickly and move on. You will only be able to do this if your thinking brain is in charge.
9. **Focus on safety and attachment.** Loving, connected relationships provide a buffer against trauma. More important than your child getting her math homework done, you completing a task for work, or your child picking up his toys is HOW we treat each other during these times.  
**Opt for relationship over task completion - connect with your child before you correct your child.** Also connect with yourself, calm your amygdala before you judge yourself and demand a better performance from yourself. We are our own worst critic, and negative self talk will put the amygdala in control.
10. **Lower the bar - your expectations.** Nothing is normal right now. Adjust your expectations for yourself, your partner and your children. Let go and breathe.
11. **Limit news and COVID19 conversation.** What we focus and dwell on will cause our brain to fire in corresponding parts. If the focus is on bad news, scary things or things that are not in our control, the amygdala will alert your system and launch a stress response. Instead...
12. ... **focus on what you are grateful for and what you can control.** There is a host of science around gratefulness and the powerful, positive effects it has on the brain. [There are many videos on gratefulness. Here is one.](#) Challenge yourself and your children to write down 3 things they are grateful for each day.
13. **Help others.** Focusing away from yourself. Putting your efforts towards helping others will automatically engage your prefrontal cortex and calm your amygdala. In addition, the human connection that is created will release oxytocin, a powerful love hormone boosting your joy and improving your immune system. It also helps you to focus on WHAT YOU CAN DO; it gives you a much needed measure of control.
14. **Don't look at the mountain, look at each step, step by step.** Focus on the present day and plan for just one week at a time. You can only control your response and actions in this moment. We don't know how long this will take and what life will look like after, but we can tackle the current moment. Embrace the present, it is all we have.

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15. **Remind yourself that this is temporary.** Speak to your brain. Focus on the positive truths that you do know. As you do this positive emotions will follow.

16. **Use a mantra or prayer.** Repetition and a positive message will stimulate your prefrontal cortex. Especially combined with **rhythm and music**, a mantra or prayer will increase brain function and release a cascade of happy chemicals in your body. [Here is a powerful song and message](#), also great to use with your children. Watch until the end! It is worth it.

17. **Go ahead and cry. It is good for you!** It relieves stress, lowers your blood pressure, removes cortisol, one of the main stress hormones, reduces pain, releases oxytocin and endorphins and crying helps you sleep better after. Keeping your tears in means you store stress in your body instead of releasing it and making room for positive emotions.

What information was new to you? \_\_\_\_\_

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Which new strategy will you start using today?

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Which strategy will you use with your children?

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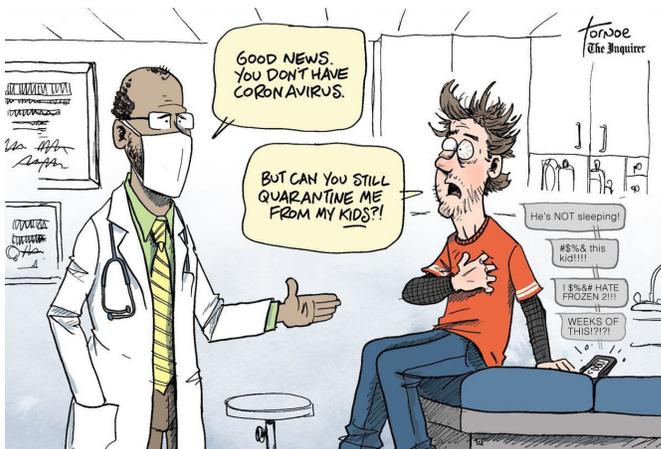
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## I Am a Parent, not a Teacher! HELP!!!

**School work is not the most important thing right now!**

**The most important thing is that YOU, the parent, are okay!**

When you, the parent is okay and feels calm and positive, your kids will also. So in the following section I collected some strategies and links to provide you with tools to help you homeschool your children and keep your sanity.



### 1. Teach your child the concept "FOCUS on what you can control"

What we focus on, is what our brain will believe to be true and our neurochemical balance will adjust accordingly - actual chemicals get released into our bodies that change our physiological state, so we will physically feel accordingly and then act accordingly and then the atmosphere and our relationships shift in that direction also. If we focus on the stressful things, we will be stressed and as a result create more stress and it turns into a downward spiral. **I added some templates at the end to use with your child.**

Talk about what we can control as parents, what can you control as children? We can all (learn to ) what we think, what we say, how we react, prepare and respond. Add more things to the list and shift your focus.

**Here is a cute story for little kids, helping them to understand why we are all staying home and to give them ideas what they can control right now :**

**["Time to come in bear"](#)**

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### 2. PLAY and HAVE FUN: Fun buffers stress

Really !! Let things be light hearted and fun - to relieve stress and buffer this traumatic time for you and your kids so you can actually function and think at your best.

**A stressed brain can not learn well. It takes about 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in your brain UNLESS it is done with play and fun, in which case it takes about 15 -20 repetitions to form a new brain connection.**

Before school work, do something fun - buffer each section of school work with a fun activity - fun & laughter release serotonin and dopamine which increase focus and logical thinking.

[Here are some ideas for fun and play at home.](#)

### 3. Use a TIMER

Once in a good frame of mind, set a timer for 15 - 30 min of focused school work - this works well for Math.

Also many children who struggle with focus, can focus better while **chewing gum** - the large muscle motion of chewing releases calming chemicals in the brain and increases memory and focus.

### 4. Get "BRAIN STRONGER" little by little:

Each day, challenge your child to do school work a little longer and chart it on the wall somewhere. Make a big deal about it increasing (maybe tie a tangible reward to it). Teachers do this in class to build reading stamina (reading for longer and longer times independently).

### 5. BREAK UP the tasks:

This works well for writing: Break up the task into small goals. For example: Write one paragraph, then do something fun, then write another paragraph, then have a snack, then write another paragraph.

### 6. Use MATCHING/Attunement:

Children with attention issues and anxiety do better when someone sits down and **models** what he is supposed to do rather than only verbally explaining and watching over him; **instead do it alongside him.** If he has to do a worksheet, print the same one out for yourself and do it next to him at the same time or sit next to him and focus on reading while he has to read. I know often parents think: "I can't always sit next to him and model; he needs to do things on his own." However, the ability to focus is a

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skill, just like learning how to swim or any other body skill. So brain skills such as *focus* take scaffolded assistance just like you would offer when you teach body skills like swimming: First you hold your child in the water and swim along with them and little by little let go more and more often. Another thought parents have is: "He should know this by now, or be able to do this by now!" .. well, who cares what he *should* know - if he doesn't yet, we keep teaching until he will! Each child is their own person with their own timetable and make up! Especially right now when everyone is thrown into uncharted territory.

### 7. MOVE while learning!!!!:

Do Math drills while throwing a football or kicking a soccer ball. Brainstorm writing ideas while jumping on a trampoline. Break up frustrating tasks with fun challenges in between like doing push ups or running around the house one time - the more your child moves, the longer their ability to focus and the more they will learn.

### 8. "Tell your body what to do"- practice SELF-CONTROL:

Set the timer for 1 min and challenge your child and yourself to not move at all, don't look around, don't engage with anyone, just focus on your body and breath and tell your bodies to not do anything. When the timer goes off transition slowly and calmly without talking and then try to do the difficult task. So after you do a few minutes of the fun activity, do that 1 min challenge and then do the work. This is a great re-set option for transitions.

### 9. Give CHOICE/measure of autonomy:

Autonomy is a big thing for children. They are much more likely to be engaged and excited about an activity when they get to choose it, or when they get to choose anything at all about it. If he/she can't choose the activity, but gets to choose where in the room to do it, or what gum to chew while he does it or how long to do it. etc - any measure of autonomy will help your child to follow directions and complete things that are hard for him.

**Think about how you can give your child choice and autonomy that will help them get done what you need them to get done?**

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### 10. Make a Schedule and SHARE THE POWER



**Create a schedule *with your child together***, allow her to have some power over her day. Things you can not compromise on, let her know that you are the boss and the leader and this has to be done when and how you say, but then on the flip side she gets 10 min where she is the leader and she gets to tell you what to do.

Remember - the schedule is there to serve you and your children. Tweak and adjust it as needed!

### 11. Make a GAME PLAN each day or the night before for the next day:

I suggest having daily **family meetings** with conversations such as: What can I control and what can I not control? Have a daily family challenge, for example: "What is your happy thought today?" -for you and him and everyone else at your house. And then commit to holding that thought in the forefront of your mind - like a mantra. Also, mantras that are sung are even more powerful as they cause us to breathe deeply and engage all areas of the brain. [Here is a great link again that explains this more.](#)

### CLOSING THOUGHTS

Keep each day simple and FUN - rephrase this situation for yourself and your child. **Either way these will be days your child will not forget**; this could be a time you all remember as mainly a family togetherness and bonding time.

**School work is not the most important thing right now! The most important thing is that YOU, the parent, are okay!** When you, the parent is okay and feels calm and positive, your kids will also. Easier said than done, but a starting point is letting go- let go of expectations and lean into the moments that present themselves. Be present in the moment and ask yourself often - What do I need right now? ( PEACE AND QUIET AND TIME TO MYSELF!!! of course - but when that is not an option, instead maybe I need to just let this activity/ school work go for right now and calm down and we'll do it later. What does my kid need right now and then do that.

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**Here are some questions to focus on and guide family meetings:**

1. What am I grateful for today?
2. Who can I connect with today online and check in with?
3. What expectation of "normal" can I let go of today?
4. What can I create or cultivate today?
5. How can I move my body today?
6. What can I do to make the people in my house feel good today?
7. What disappointment can I let go of today?
8. What worry, fear can I lay down today?

## MATERIALS:

**IN-AND-OUT**

What are some things that are stressing you out? Determine which ones are in or out of your control.

**IN MY CONTROL!**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT THESE THINGS TO HELP YOU FEEL LESS STRESSED?**

**OUT OF MY CONTROL!**

**WHAT SHOULD YOU DO ABOUT THE THINGS YOU CAN'T CONTROL?**

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The worksheet features two hand-drawn shapes: a scalloped circle on the left and a starburst shape on the right. Arrows point from the starburst to the circle and from the circle to the starburst, indicating a relationship between the two categories.

# Circle of Control

What I can't control

What I can control

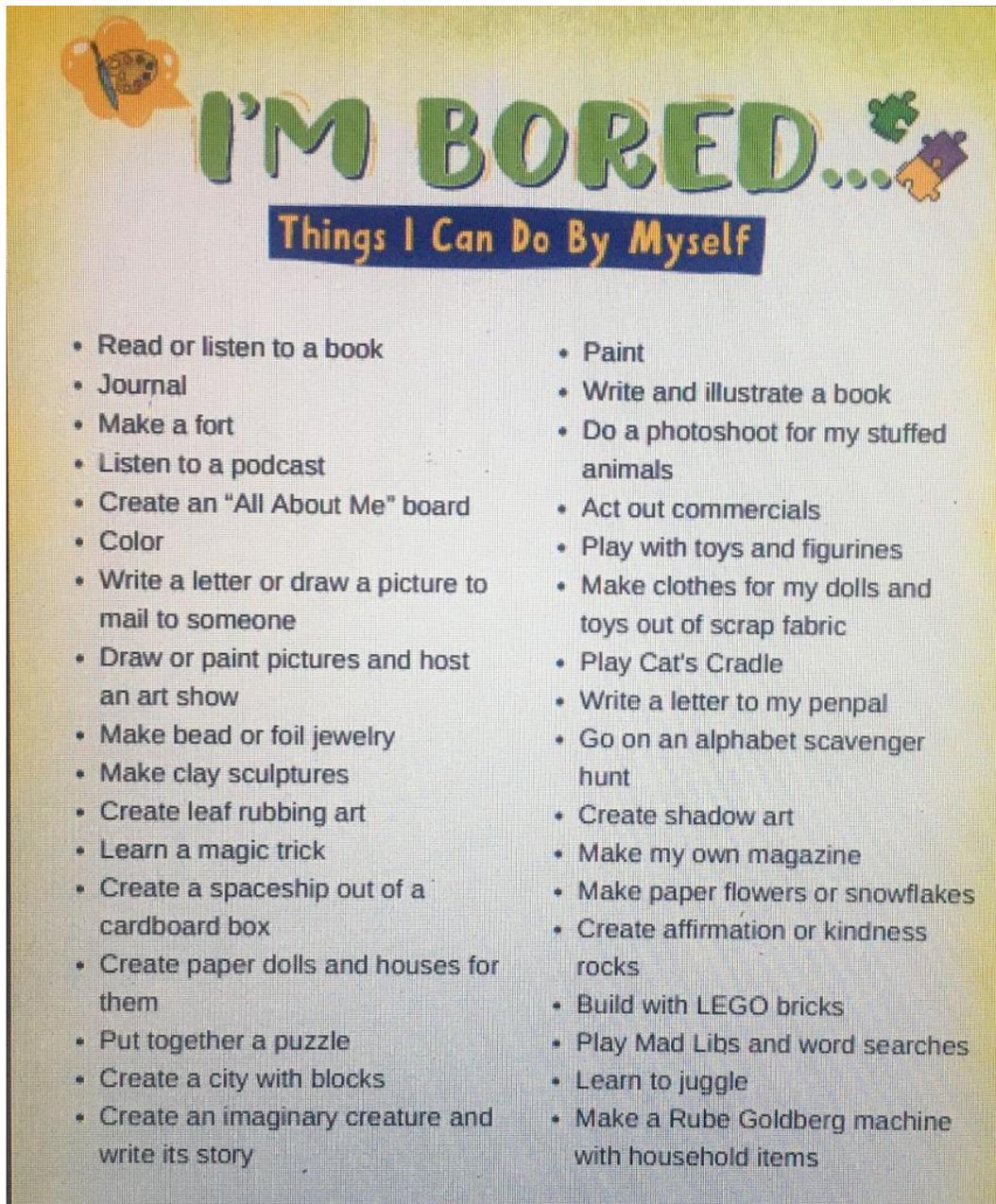
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## A Road Map to Mental Health during Quarantine

Make your own list with your child and challenge them to pick a different thing each time they are bored. Once every item is checked off, have a special little celebration, a special snack or other reward. Then start over.

[Also click here for FREE printables “Stuck at home activities for your child and teen.”](#)





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