

TimeOut

SHANGHAI

Family

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**Keep
your chill**

Your guide to fun with the fam this summer in Shanghai



Wellbeing

Well

Look after your tribe's mental wellbeing with these tips from three Shanghai-based mental health experts

2020. FOR MANY OF US, it's been a year shrouded in challenges, uncertainty and change, and looking after our family's mental wellbeing feels more important than ever. Here, three mental health specialists share advice on everything from achieving a work-life balance to working from home to tackling hard conversations with the kids.

On work-life balance

George Hu, Section Chief of Mental Health at Shanghai United Family Hospital and President of SIMHA: Balance doesn't come naturally for a lot of us (including myself), it takes discussion, intentionality and boundaries. Many families are surprised by how much intentionality it takes. So, to really succeed, we have to plan it. That means we have to discuss what our priorities and goals are as a family and divide up our time to fit those. Sometimes when it comes to family time, we see it as more flexible, and push it back if something [work related] comes up – but that means we're deprioritising it, which can make our partners or kids feel devalued. So, we have to draw boundaries to make sure we do our best to protect our family goals in the same way we would a work meeting.

Carrie Jones, Clinical Social Worker and Director of Community Center Shanghai Counselling: If you're working from home, try and set up a workspace – whether it's a corner of the kitchen table or a desk – and limit yourself to only working from there as much as possible. Designating that work area makes it a little bit easier psychologically to separate work and life. For some people, getting dressed for work can help them



get in the zone while signalling to other people in the house that, right now, I'm in work mode and later I'll be in Mum, Dad or partner mode.

On routines

Ans Hoof, Life Coach and Specialist Stress Counsellor: I know it sounds boring, but setting routines is important because we need recovery time, and we have to make that recovery a routine. For instance, Tuesday night is gym night or Sunday mornings you have long family breakfast without phones. I'm also a big believer in writing it on a paper calendar and sticking it on the wall, so it becomes a public promise to yourselves.

CJ: This year is proof more than ever that things are going to come up to disrupt daily routines without warning. When that happens, even though it's hard or uncomfortable, try to embrace it and use it as an opportunity for change and growth. Take it as a chance to re-evaluate what things you want and don't want in your schedule. [To reduce anxiety for kids in times of change], it can be helpful to incorporate small comforting rituals, or even physical things like a toy or blanket, from the past into the new routine so

even though it's new and different, there's some continuity from things that were comforting before.

On unpacking emotions, stress and anxiety

GH: We want to give children a safe space to express their emotions and feelings. Sometimes when we're trying to spare children from pain or protect them from disappointment, we accidentally gloss over their feelings, which can make them feel their emotions are inappropriate. Actually, by acknowledging the disappointment, sadness, or whatever the emotion it is without judgement; by empathising with it and saying 'Let's talk about how disappointed you are' or 'I'm disappointed too, let's have this feeling together', even if you don't have the answer or solution, it can help kids feel better equipped to cope or adapt. They know they're not alone and together you're going to figure something out – even if you don't have the solution yet.

CJ: Not everything has to be measured by academic achievements or productivity at work. Giving our kids – and ourselves – time to play, be creative and take care of our emotions is so important. If kids are not in a good state emotionally then they're not

DISCOVER!

well,
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going to be in a good place to learn. So, even if it feels like a step away from academics, it's important for our children's wellbeing to take the time to focus on their emotional side, which in turn will also help them reach a place where they can get back to studies. And the same goes for us with work.

AH: If you're experiencing immediate stress or anxiety, focusing on your breathing will automatically calm you down. Mindfulness and meditation can also be helpful for some people. Also sport, whether it's jogging or whatever you choose, just moving your body really helps. And laughter! So find something funny to do or share some jokes.

On talking through tough topics

GH: Whether it's talking about pandemics or divorce, I would say honesty is key. Obviously we need to be age appropriate – for example in the case of a separation we don't need to go into huge detail about the adult reasons why – but we should be honest and say 'Mummy and Daddy's relationship is changing, this is what's happening, and this is what you can expect, it's okay for you to feel whatever you feel and it's not

your fault.' Setting an example of honesty is really important, because it contributes to a culture of safety where children feel like it's okay to tell the truth, too.

I think a lot of parents are really afraid of 'setting a bad example', they want to create the idea of themselves as paragon of perfection as a model for children to achieve. But that's not realistic, none of us are perfect. Being honest with ourselves and our emotions, and acknowledging we make mistakes, gives children an example of what to do.

CJ: It's important to remember, especially for younger kids, that parents manage the narrative. Typically, kids hear about news or change from parents, so we need to consider how we present that so they don't take on unnecessary anxiety, but at the same time do feel it's okay to be honest about feelings. It helps to know that grown-ups are human and have feelings, too. Take the pandemic as an example, it's okay to say that scary things are happening out in the world but balance it by helping them focus more on the things you can control – like taking precautions by wearing masks and washing hands. ■

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TALK IT OUT

Where to start
in Shanghai for
confidential support
and help

COMMUNITY CENTER SHANGHAI

A community-led organisation that offers support through events and classes. CCS also has a number of trained counsellors on staff and multiple locations across the city.

→ Call 136 3631 7474 or visit communitycentershanghai.com.

COUNSEL SHANGHAI

Personal counselling, life-coaching and career-coaching services in English and Dutch.

→ Visit counselshanghai.com.

LIFELINE

An English-speaking helpline providing free, confidential and anonymous emotional support from 10am-10pm, 365 days a year.

→ Call 400 821 1215 or follow 'LifelineConnect' on WeChat.

SHANGHAI UNITED FAMILY HOSPITAL

An international healthcare organisation providing comprehensive healthcare services, including mental health.

→ Call 400 639 3900 or visit shanghai.uffh.com.cn.

SIMHA

Provides mental health services to the international communities with approximately 40 member therapists representing many different nationalities and languages.

→ Visit s-imha.com.



Find more ways to stay healthy this summer at timeoutshanghai.com/family