

Climber's Mental Health Toolbox: Anxiety during the Pandemic

Mental Health Vitamin with Dr. Kristi Pikiewicz

At the top of the auto-belay route I'm suddenly filled with anxious thoughts.

Where's my daughter Kestrel? ... Is that woman next to her six feet away? ... Maybe the routes only look close from up here ... Wow, lot of chalk on these holds. What was the research on chalk and germs again?

Climbing has historically quieted those anxious voices. Climbing has always let me focus on movement and being in the moment. I can just be present with my friends and family. COVID has changed that, with the anxious voices now drowning out the rest. Instead of finding flow and connection at the gym (and elsewhere), I notice myself clenching my jaw, getting frustrated easily, and having a hard time focusing. I'm probably not be the only one.

Youth virtual competitions on KAYA have allowed our young athletes to compete in a safe environment. A side benefit some families have noticed is that virtual comps also reduce anxiety and stress. My family loves the option of choosing the best time and date to compete. Having just a few other athletes in the gym at the same time helps my kids keep their stress levels low and their stoke level high.

With climbing gyms and our lives opening back up, there's talk of things finally returning to "normal." It probably won't feel exactly like turning a light switch back on, though, which makes it a great time to hone your strategy for anxiety. What can we do to support ourselves, our kids, and each other? Here are some ideas:

1. Check in with yourself: I know my anxiety level is high if I'm having difficulty focusing or my temper is short. What are your anxiety red flags? What are your kids' anxiety red flags? Model the practice of checking in with yourself, and encourage your children to check in with themselves.
2. Name the emotion: The whirlwind of thoughts I shared earlier were red flags for anxiety. Name the emotion you're feeling and use this language to share with your family. For example, I could have said, "Kestrel, I am feeling a bit anxious. I haven't climbed in a gym in eleven months and it's a bit overwhelming for me right now."
3. Toolbox: Self-regulate. "Kestrel I am feeling anxious and overwhelmed. I need to go outside and take a mask break for a minute." It would have been great if I had named my emotion and suggested a behavior. Instead, I pretended my husband called and we needed to get home for him to use the van.
4. Plan for comps. Ahead of time, think about specific moments that trigger anxiety. Is it when you see the first route? When a "rival" sends a problem? Plan your strategy, and practice it ahead of time so you're ready for the comp. First, name what you're feeling. Second, remind yourself that anxiety is part of any performance or competition. You probably won't be able to make the anxiety go away entirely, but you can use mental skills to reduce the feeling of anxiety to the point where you can focus and perform well. Practice strategies to find out what works for you, such as a breathing or meditation exercise or queuing up a favorite song. Maybe you bring noise canceling headphones to Regionals or take a walk outside after you've climbed.

Even if you and your athlete are cool as cucumbers in high pressure situations, this year might be different, and that is OK. This year is different in so many ways. Take care of yourself and your family's mental health needs.

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