

Gentle Reminders by Leah Niezwaag, LCSW, IMH-E® (Boise, Idaho)

Hello my dear supervisors, home visitors, and consultants:

I just want you all to know how very much I am holding you in mind. These are uncertain and scary times, which can easily compound the stress that we already feel from the intensity of the work in which we do. I am sure that you are wondering and worrying about your safety, your friends and families, as well as the families you work with. On top of that, you are holding the deliverables, the programmatic expectations and concerns.

A couple reminders in these times we find ourselves in -

- 1)** There are no wrong or right feelings in times such as these - you may feel a myriad of feelings and be gentle with them. They will come up and stay - honor them, give them names, and breathe.
- 2)** Notice how are you feeling - write it down, share it, or name it silently or out loud to yourself. We all process feelings differently.
- 3)** Move your bodies in whatever way feels good and nourishing - laying on the grass, walking, stretching, running.
- 4)** Feelings of stress and anxiety and ultimately of not "feeling safe" may stir conscious or unconscious memories of past times in your life when you didn't feel safe. Notice it - name it - suspend judgement. All feelings are okay.
- 5)** Anxiety likes to trick us into thinking that if we "have all the information" or "more information" that THEN we will alleviate our uncomfortable feelings, but really they just make us feel more anxious. Notice when you need a break from talking about it, reading about it, etc.
- 6)** Focus on anchors for yourself - routines that are based in connection with yourself or with others. (Coffee on the deck, calling your a friend or family member on the way home from work, family meal times, etc., etc.)
- 7)** Know that this feeling or worry about safety will exacerbate past feelings of not being safe for our families that we work with as well.
- 8)** Remember the children (home visitors, etc) are ALWAYS listening, wondering and ALWAYS asking two questions: Am I safe here? Am I wanted here? Help narrate discussions of this for your home visitors and for your own families.
- 9)** Since most of us are living right now in our limbic system (feeling part of the brain), it can be very difficult to access the "thinking part - prefrontal cortex). Remember in order

to learn or teach, we must feel safe first. Keep that in mind for yourself, your families, your home visitors, and for young children.

10) Young children (home visitors, families) don't say "geez I sense a lot of tension and things have changed and I am scared, sad, confused, worried" - they show us with their behaviors. They melt down, they want the "blue cup!" Kids are going to be more dysregulated because of the stress and change in routine - this is normal, while not fun, it is okay. They are just saying please someone help organize whats happening and see my feelings. FYI - we do the same (hence people arguing over shopping carts and toilet paper). So apply this also to the parents you work with, your own families, yourself, and your friends.

11) Breathe - belly breathing is pushing your belly out as far as it goes when you inhale and then exhale. Nothing too fancy, but helps to regulate your vagus nerve.

12) Recite a mantra "It will all work out" "I can do hard things" "I am calm" "I am healthy" - whatever you can think of.

While I share this with you, the biggest reminder is to allow space for your feelings and the home visitors, families you are working with - no need "to do" but rather just be.

Sending you peace, **Leah Niezwaag, LCSW, IMH-E®**

Also, we are grateful to a longtime CoAIMH (Colorado Association) friend and infant & early childhood mental health expert, **Betsy Rogers**, for sharing these wise words with us:

While many services translate well to distance technology, working with young children does not. What can we do during this time? We know that the most important element for young children is how their parents are doing. Even if you are not able to conduct your work effectively via distance technology, support and guidance to parents will be very important in helping to keep vulnerable children safe and thriving.

Infant mental health has the concept of "holding the other in mind". Letting parents and caregivers know that you, their provider, are holding them in mind by your outreach via phone, text or video conferencing, may help them be able to hold their little ones in mind as they cope with this unprecedented crisis. You may be able to help them problem solve or you may just need to be a listening and empathic ear. But don't underestimate what reaching out will mean to both the parents/caregivers and the infants and toddler and little ones in their care. Best wishes to all of you during this challenge.