

COPING WITH COVID-19

Handling stress and grief during the pandemic and beyond



This series is released each Tuesday and Thursday for the foreseeable future. These are extraordinarily difficult times we are in. Resources for coping, and protecting our mental and emotional well-being, will be provided by Deaconess Cross Pointe, Deaconess Clinic Behavioral Health, and additional experts.

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Helping Kids (and Grown-Ups!) Cope with Holiday Disappointment

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Although nobody knows for sure what the next few weeks will look like, one thing is certain: this year's holiday celebrations will be different from those of years past. With all the changes our children have had to adjust to this year, having to modify the magic of the holidays may feel like too much for some kids.

Rather than have them see this year's changes as another set of losses, help model resilience and positivity by showing them all the unique opportunities and gifts these changes may bring.

The following phrases can help you build resilience in your child when discussing the changes this holiday season.

1. "What can we do to make this year special?"

When your child complains that it's not fair they can't go to Grandma's house, or that the holidays won't be the same without a school holiday party, try helping them identify something that's important to him that he *can* still do. This activity may be an old favorite that is still doable, or something new they've always thought sounded fun. Building in special activities is important every year, but it's especially so this year.

2. "When I'm sad, it can help me to..."

Our children's feelings are real and legitimate; it's important to let them feel all their feelings. A great way to build resilience is to help children identify how to help themselves when they feel sad or angry. Use these times as a chance to help your child build self-calming skills that will last a lifetime.

3. "What if instead of doing that, we try..."

Help your child identify replacement activities that accomplish the same outcome as the traditions you have to skip this year. Although you might not visit Santa at the mall, maybe you can write him a letter together. Although you can't play with cousins, maybe you can do a Zoom call and play Holiday Show and Tell to show off new presents. Get creative and find ways to replace family favorites.

4. "You know what we can finally do this year?"

We all know the holidays are overbooked and high-stress most years. There's likely something you or your child have always wanted to do, but never had the time to make it happen. This can finally be your year! Maybe it's staying in jammies all day because you don't have to visit relatives, maybe it's making a gingerbread house from scratch, or maybe it's reading all your holiday stories in front of a fire. This is the year to build in those activities you never could quite fit in.

5. "Because it will be different this year, I have a very special job for you..."

Let the holidays be a chance for your child to become a special helper. If you're used to having relatives all help cook for the big family dinner, this is a great year to teach your child how to make a simple dish alone or to help you make something more complicated together. Maybe this is the year your child can hang all the decorations herself, since nobody will be stopping by to judge your house, anyway!

6. "Let's think of one way our family is lucky this year."

2020 has been a rough year, and we've all had to give up things and adjust. Regardless of how much your world has changed this year, there are still ways your family is lucky. Rather than focus on how you're not celebrating the holidays like you did in 2019, use this year as a chance to appreciate all you still have.

Maybe you've stayed healthy, maybe you've had neighbors help you out when you were sick, or maybe you've had extra time to spend together. Whatever it is, search for what you can be thankful for this year, and make a conscious effort to help your children see it, too.

7. "What is something we can do to help another family?"

Part of resilience and positivity is reframing your thoughts. Rather than focusing on what you can't *have*, think about what you can *do*. Maybe you can cook an extra batch of cookies for someone while you're already baking, maybe you can buy gifts for families who have had a rougher year than you, or maybe you can write extra holiday cards and send them to the military or to people in the hospital or nursing homes. Think of something you can do together to make this holiday special for you and for someone else.

8. "Those traditions all started with someone doing it once. Let's start a new tradition this year!"

When you catch your child complaining about all the traditions you're missing ("but we ALWAYS go to grandma's house and bake cookies!"), help her realize traditions all had to start somewhere, and this is a great chance to start a new tradition. Think of something fun that you can do not just this year, but that you can plan to keep doing each year. It could be baking a special kind of cookies, learning a new recipe for family dinners, writing a holiday story, taking silly pictures together, adopting a family, or really anything that sounds fun.

9. "Let's make a list of things we'll do when we can."

If your child is stuck on all the things that can't be done this year, start a list of what matters to him and plan to do those things once it's safer. Sometimes it's easier for kids to hear "not now" instead of just "no," and this list can help kids see that fun things will eventually happen again. Your list could include baking cookies with grandma, taking a vacation, or going shopping at the mall together. It could include almost anything you usually do. Save the list and once your family thinks it's okay to do those things again, pull it back out and start checking off activities!

10. "I know it's frustrating that we can't..."

Finally, remember it's okay to just empathize with your child and acknowledge that this year hasn't been fair to any of us! Help her know you're there for her and you're glad she's able to talk to you about what bothers her. Knowing people care and respect her feelings is just as important as reframing her thoughts, and it can help your child get through this holiday season.

This year's holiday season is sure to be unique, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing! Use the phrases above to help you and your child reframe all the changes and see the blessings that this year can still bring!

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