



Taking Care of Our Kids' Mental Health (and Our Own) During Back-to-School Season

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Some time has passed since COVID-19 initially impacted our lives. Depending on where you are in the United States, things may be opening, closing, or in some state of both. We have all been impacted in our daily lives with what has transpired and what will continue as a result of COVID-19.

My concerns these days turn mostly to my children and those children around me. Kids usually approach the back-to-school season with feelings of anticipation at starting a new grade, or sadness as summer ends. This year, though, the feelings kids are experiencing are different. My kids are uncertain about how school will be for them; whether it will be online; or be open and then close again. They worry about how they will stay connected with the friends they saw daily before COVID-19. They ask me questions I can't answer with any certainty, which exacerbates my own feelings of anxiety about what is to come as we approach fall, and how we will cope.

Last night, my six-year-old had a meltdown (one of very few lately, he's a pretty calm child), and gave me a list of everything that was wrong. On his list? He and his friend (with whom he is on Zoom daily) couldn't decide which games to play; he doesn't think his 11-year-old sister

likes him; and the year 2020, which in his mind "has ruined everything." Sigh.

Life is very different now, and many of us are not okay with it. The question is: how do we go forward knowing this, while caring for our kids' well-being and our own? Even if you are not a parent, it is likely that you know a parent or child who is navigating these challenges and may be looking to you for support.

I don't have all the answers, and like many of you, I am navigating these challenges daily. What I do know is that these times have forced me to be more diligent, creative and mindful when it comes to my own and my family's mental health. Some days I am better at this than others – but I know that if I pay attention to how we are all doing in terms of our mental health, we will fare much better at coping with the daily changes (and ripples) as they come.

Here are some ways to help protect you and your family's mental health as we start the school year:

1. **Prioritize mental health (and health in general).**

Right now, the basic activities that we know support our mental health are more important than ever. Proactively make sure that, as we start the school year, you and your kids are getting regular sleep, exercise and spend time in nature when possible, and are limiting intake of news or other media that can be disturbing or stressful, especially to young children. Be mindful of what is on in the background throughout your day. Ask your children how they are feeling and make time to listen without judgment. Check in with yourself about how you are feeling, too.

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- 2. Be flexible when challenges arise.** We will all be navigating new routines, adjusted start dates, changing circumstances and new requirements. It will take us time to adjust to these changes and we may have feelings about them. It's okay if things don't go as planned or as smoothly as you had hoped as we start the school year. We are all learning as we go, and learning what isn't working is just as important as learning what does work for your family. I often say to my kids, "We are figuring this out together," when new challenges arise.
- 3. Keep scheduling family time and rituals.** These can be shared meals (like Taco Tuesday in ours), walks, game time or weekly movie nights. Whatever the rituals are that you do regularly and plan around, they can help add a sense of structure and routine and give you time to connect as a family. Don't have a ritual? Create one and stick to it (even if your kids grumble at first.)
- 4. Avoid comparisons.** Ultimately, what works for your family may not work for others, and vice-versa. Try to avoid comparing yourself to others, or how other families may be handling this time. Comparisons can lead you to feel you are not doing enough (or doing too much) when the benchmark should be doing what helps to keep you and your family well.
- 5. Model healthy coping (and reaching out for help).** Managing your own stress is vital to supporting those around you. Taking care of your own mental health will help to reinforce the messages that we can all take an active role in taking care of our mental health and that it is vital during times of change. Share with your family mindfulness activities or other things that work for you, and introduce them to videos, books or other information to help them cope with their stress. Keep in contact with your support network and encourage them to do the same with theirs. Reinforce the message that there is always help available (including professional help) if they feel they are not managing well, and that help is available to the entire family

While back-to-school will mean something different for all of us this year, we can all do some things to support our families and each other as we navigate these changes. If you are worried about the mental health of someone you love, you can reach out to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 800 273-8255 (TALK) or the Crisis Text Line (text TALK to 741741) to get some guidance on how to get help for you or your loved one.

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