



Virtual Learning: Creating New Expectations and Strategies for Stress Relief

Creating New Expectations for a New Reality

By: Stephanie Handel, LICSW

There are parents all over the country, in tears, feeling like “they’re not doing this right.” They see other parents seemingly handling virtual school more gracefully. They see other kids outside playing while their kid is on hour three of gaming in the basement. But I’m here to tell you that you’re not alone. You’re not failing. You *are* sharing an intense pain, and as I look through my clinician lens and think about how we can best get through this experience, I’ve come to some conclusions.

First, we need to put the memories of our pre-covid “normal” life in a box for now, up on a shelf. View happiness as it exists today, in this new reality. The rituals and milestones are still happening – they’re too deeply ingrained in our culture to not occur – so we need to create new expectations to meet where we are today. A bar mitvah, graduation, confirmation, birthday, wedding, and holidays are still real. They just need to be reimagined – and re-framed – so that they will not disappoint.

I encourage clients to think about grief in terms of transition. Pre-covid, we said goodbye to our bedroom and house every morning, and hello to work and school. Then we transitioned in the reverse at the end of the day. But these hellos and goodbyes are no longer happening in the same way, if at all. Not all families have the luxury of moving from one space to another, so they have no transition. It’s important to recognize this, because it’s a major cause of anxiety. Tied to this is that we have had to say goodbye to our hopes and expectations, no matter our age. A first grader envisioned what it would be like to enter her new classroom. A senior envisioned his last year at high school. They’re grieving the symbolic loss of what they expected and had invested hope in; the result is grief, heaviness, and pain. Parents, who are witness to the pain but unable to fix it, feel stuck in a role that we don’t get to transition out of either.

It’s also beneficial to examine the specifics of what we’ve lost, even if it feels painful. When we send kids to school, for example, we launch them into the care of other adults to care, teach, and model behavior. Every time a teacher comments on an essay or compliments a child for something they saw on the playground, our kids feel pride and a boost to their self-esteem. They learn more about themselves and understand their impact on others. The school environment also shows kids the importance of consistency and structure. They learn to appreciate rituals and routines; when a kindergartner learns to find his cubby, hang up his coat, and find his desk, his sense of proficiency is strengthened. He realizes, “I can do this.” Virtual schooling has stripped us of many of these moments.

So, what can we do? This is where we come back to creating expectations and rituals that are in line with today. If the school dance was really important to your teen, can you invite a few friends to get dressed up and take photographs outdoors? Can we recreate a senior sunrise breakfast in a way that still creates memories and feels positive? Start small, and ensure that there is parental oversight to create a safe environment. Involve small groups of teens who feel safe to invest in planning and will know what their friends want. Recognize that kids are out of practice, and inertia may keep some home.

But with the armor of friends, I believe we can create safe outdoor events that will help kids reconnect and remember how it feels to be with peers face-to-face.

For those who need to stay home due to risk vulnerabilities, create opportunities for connection in other ways. Younger kids could enjoy comic books “together” by connecting online and reading the same book. If seniors gather for a lunch in the park, they could FaceTime in peers who can’t be there in person, and open the chat feature to include them. Kids could do homework together on the patio. There are little ways to step toward connections, and while some kids may balk at their parents organizing something, those feelings will likely subside once they are “in it” with friends and peers.

Focus on daily routines at home, too, and ensure that the kernels of your family’s traditions and rituals remain unchanged.

Remember that the child-adult relationship is founded on trust, and developing and building on that trust is an adult’s way of providing a child with a blueprint for future trusting relationships. Don’t tell your child that the school year will be uninterrupted; tell them that the school system is working hard to make schools safe, and we’ll watch health metrics and see how it goes. In other words, share what you actually know, rather than what you hope for.

Acknowledge their feelings, as well as your own. Validate that there is confusion and anger surrounding so much of our lives right now, and sweeping life changes are unsettling. Lastly, navigate each day with the acceptance that it is a new day, and we can choose to open or close our eyes as we search for a crevice of light in the darkness. The light is there; it’s up to us to find it.

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Strategies for Mind-Body Stress Relief

By: Ivonne Miranda, MA, Ed.M, NBCC, SEP, LPC

As a therapist and mother of four, ranging in age from second grade through college, I’m experiencing a lot of what all of us are, as we juggle childcare, virtual schooling, and the wearing of many hats – teacher, IT department, cook, parent, spouse, and professional. None of this is easy, but there are steps you can take to mitigate stress, set realistic expectations, and help your kids navigate what often feels impossible. Some school systems are delivering content fairly well, others are struggling. But regardless of where your school system falls, the bottom line is that there’s a huge variation between how individual kids can engage and learn online.

Define what works for your child and communicate that to the school. Be specific about what would help your child learn best; while schools cannot possibly deliver exactly what every child needs, understanding limitations and strengths is important, and communicating with them will allow them to make tweaks wherever they can.

Incorporate movement; taking breaks to move, stretch, walk, run, or even do jumping jacks can help quell anxiety and restlessness and improve focus.

Sing, hum, sigh heavily, or focus on making sure your exhale is longer than your inhale: doing so helps stimulate your vagus nerve – the longest nerve in our bodies – and sends a message to our bodies that it’s time to relax and de-stress. It’s our body’s built-in system for calming and settling, so consciously activate and stimulate it regularly!

Be kind by making space for mistakes. This whole experience is new to all of us, and we'll all make mistakes. Always remember that we're learning together, and forgiveness of mistakes can be our biggest act of compassion.

Acknowledge and validate each other by wishing each other well every day. It's a really affirming moment and opens us up to possibilities that things really can be more good than not.

Just as we teach our kids to say please and thank you, we can teach them how important it is to express gratitude for being safe or healthy, while recognizing that we can hold conflicting feelings at the same time: We can feel sad and relieved at the same time. We can feel grateful and overwhelmed at the same time.

Be realistic with your kids about what's happening. Don't give timelines or expectations unless you're really certain. Instead, share what you know is true. We need to help kids learn how to cope with uncertainty, because so much about life is unpredictable.

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