



# FAMILIES

TACKLING TOUGH TIMES

# TOGETHER



FAMILY

CHILDREN

## Our Family Will Get Through This! Making Meaning of Adversity

During these difficult times, some children may be excited to spend more time with family, while others may be confused or frustrated about changes being made to their daily routine. With the right information, children can better understand and reflect on the changing world around them. Information helps our children accept the things that are different from what they've known.

### Reflecting With Your Child

Talking to our children about difficult subjects can sometimes be hard. Knowing what to say and answering questions is important in helping our children make sense of what is going on around them. Without information and reflection, children may come up with their own reasons about why things happen in the world. Supporting our children by talking with them in a child-friendly way is important to their long-term growth. Reflection can also be helpful as children take what they've learned and begin to make sense of it all.

### Meaning Making Activity

You can support your child as they make meaning of the pandemic by reading an online story together. Some age-appropriate online books for young children include the following:

- [Coronavirus Social Story](#)
- [COVIBOOK – A Book About Coronavirus for Children](#), this book is offered in [several different languages](#).

### Reflection Activity:

Most children may be more comfortable in expressing themselves through stories, play, or art. Activities that include one of these elements are helpful to your child as they can reduce or help them to understand their feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression. Making an art piece is a good way to reflect on difficult times together.

- Talk with your child about what makes them strong during this difficult time of COVID-19. Help with ideas, if necessary. Examples: my family, my favorite book, my pet. Encourage your child to write their thoughts on a piece of paper or invite them to dictate their thoughts as you write them.
- You may wish to place the written thoughts in a frame. Encourage your child to use the thoughts as a reminder of how to better think about things that are hard.

To learn more about the science behind the importance of talking to children about illness and difficult topics and reflecting, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Talking to Children About Illness](#)
- [Talking to Children About Illness and Death of a Loved One During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)



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FAMILY

YOUTH

## Our Family Will Get Through This! Making Meaning of Adversity

We all know that because of the pandemic youth have had losses. Those losses include proms, graduations, participating in sports and tournaments and club activities, to name a few. Less obvious but no less important are losses of freedom and social contacts. As a family, how do we help our teens who may be experiencing stress and anxiety due to these losses, while also helping them to think of ways they can make meaning from these experiences?

### Listening and Acknowledging Fear and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety need to be faced head on. Avoiding our fears builds roadblocks and can cause anxiety. One way to move forward while facing fears is to focus on doing our best with what is possible and letting go of the rest. This starts with understanding the difference between what is and what is not within our control. As [Amy Morin suggests in Psychology Today](#), figuring out what we can control can be as simple as “taking a minute to examine the things you have control over. You can't prevent a storm from coming, but you can prepare for it. You can't control how someone else behaves, but you can control how you react. Recognize that, sometimes, all you can control is your effort and your attitude. When you put your energy into the things you can control, you'll be much more effective.”

### Activities

- **Carrying out small house projects.** Sometimes even little things, like cleaning or organizing your space, can help you feel more in control. And (added bonus!) those little things may also help the people we're living with! Take back some control by choosing and completing a small, manageable house project that may benefit yourself or the folks you live with. Even taking time to do both the little and big things in life will offer you opportunities to find a sense of purpose.
- **Journal writing.** Using journal writing as a way to think about all that is going on inside you and in the world can provide mental, physical and emotional health and wellness. Therapeutic journal writing provides a space for you to write down, record, use photographs, or draw your experiences, thoughts, and feelings along with a space to analyze your concerns and feelings. Below are some journal prompts to help you get started:
  - What is something you feel nervous about right now?
  - What calms you down when you are afraid or upset?
  - If you had one song to play continuously, non-stop, to sum up the backdrop of your life, what would it be?
  - If you could add, change, or cancel one rule at home, what would it be?
  - Where do you feel the most safe and why?

For additional writing prompts visit [50 Therapeutic Journal Prompts for Teens and Adults](#).

To learn more about the science behind the importance of acknowledging fear and anxiety and expressive writing, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Validating Young Children's Feelings and Experiences of Fear](#)
- [Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing](#)



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FAMILY

YOUNG ADULTS

## Our Family Will Get Through This! Making Meaning of Adversity

The pandemic has meant loss in some way for everyone. Anything we are attached to as humans can and does result in loss when it is no longer with us. As individuals, thinking about both the losses and gains that may be related to the pandemic can help us make meaning out of our circumstances. As we move through the losses, we should try to honor the complexity of what we are experiencing and know that a key theory of grief ([Stroebe & Schut, 2010](#)) stresses two parts – shifting back and forth between loss and coping.

Each of us (including each of our family members) has experienced losses connected to the pandemic that might include losses of routine, structure, work/life space, productivity, identity, freedom to come and go, community, privacy – and even more tangible losses including death losses and losses of income, access to resources, internships, and planned activities or celebrations. These losses are real, and the grief associated with them is **real**. Grief affects us in many ways including on cognitive, emotional, physiological, social, and spiritual levels – and it is **normal**.

We often hear that grief happens in stages, but that is not true. Grief is not stage based, meaning that it doesn't occur in any step-by-step manner. But there are other thoughts on grief that may be more useful in these particular circumstances. Grief is often considered a meaning making, or sense making, process; it can help us make sense of our lives after different experiences or losses. A helpful quote about grief reads: *Part of grief is loss and part of grief is remaking your life*. It's both. It's grieving the loss, but it's also trying to determine how we understand the loss and how our life stories change and move forward (not move on) from here.

Space is needed for sense-making and moving forward into a new world. Families are strengthened when they are able to have conversations with each other about the ways they're experiencing losses differently, experiencing grief differently, and that it will be unique and different for all of them.

### Video and Podcast Resources

- [Association for Death Education and Counseling®: COVID-19 and Non-Death Losses](#)
- [UC Davis Grief and Loss in Wake of the Pandemic](#)
- [TEDTalk: How to Make Stress Your Friend](#)

### Internal Actions

- **Using narrative/art of expression:** Consider taking the time to write down, take pictures of, draw, or type out your own losses – and gains – brought on by the pandemic. Focus on the gains and wins along with the losses. Update and reflect on the list as you move forward.

### *External Actions*

- **Mentoring/Coaching:** Take a moment to think about the best mentor you have had. If possible, make a point to talk to them or someone else who has made a difference in your life — with a phone call, an email, or a socially-distanced conversation — someone who was important in your life growing up (a teacher, coach, old neighbor or babysitter) that you think about but maybe haven't actually reached out to and connected with in a long time (or maybe you have but you would like to deepen the relationship). What made that person stand out to you? Now think about what qualities you have to offer others as a mentor. Make a plan to reach out in the community to make a difference, and begin (or continue) your journey in someone else's life.





# FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



**FAMILY**

OLDER ADULTS

## Our Family Will Get Through This! Making Meaning of Adversity

The pandemic thrust everyone into uncharted territory. Older adults who are at higher risk for illness may especially experience stress and anxiety during the pandemic. We can help the older adults in our lives to build resilience by acknowledging their feelings and helping them to put their feelings into perspective. With careful thought, meaning can be found during uncertainty.

Finding meaning during difficult times can help us:

- Have a better ability to cope
- Feel a sense of control again
- Improve our mental health

### Diary Writing or Reflective Journaling and Debriefing Activities

**Reflective journaling** allows time for self-reflection and self-expression and encourages storytelling. Journaling provides an opportunity to get out feelings and concerns while also sharing memories and history. Such activities have proven to reduce stress and promote psychological and spiritual resiliency. Journals can be written, video recorded, or created through drawings or taking pictures. Some suggestions for questions to address while reflective journaling include:

- How does it feel to be in this current situation?
- What can be learned from this experience?
- Are there family heirlooms that provide a meaningful story to tell? How can those stories be shared?
- What stories from the past are helping you through this day, this week, or this month?

Journaling every day can help tell a story and make sense of experiences during stressful times. The below sites contain more information about reflective journaling and how to get started:

- [What is a Reflective Journal?](#)
- [How to Write a Reflective Journal](#)

**Debriefing** is important for individual and family support. Research shows that debriefing activities, such as talking through events, can help individuals and families endure emotional stress. Take time to encourage those in your life to share feelings, concerns, and stories. This can be a phone-based or virtual activity where you can call family members at the beginning or end of the day to discuss the challenges you each faced during the day. Debriefing conversations can help feelings seem more normal. Encourage discussion of difficult feelings, such as:

- the pressures faced;
- fears and anxieties;
- grief and suffering felt; or
- personal needs.

To learn more about the science behind on how debriefing and reflective writing helps individuals overcome adversity, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Digging Deep: Using Diary Techniques to Explore the Place of Health and Well-Being Amongst Older People](#)
- [Writing About Stressful Experiences on Symptom Reduction in Patients With Asthma or Rheumatoid Arthritis](#)
- [Online Positive Affect Journaling in the Improvement of Mental Distress and Well-Being in General Medical Patients With Elevated Anxiety Symptoms: A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Trial](#)
- [Building Team Resilience and Debriefing After Difficult Clinical Events: A Resilience Curriculum for Team Leaders](#)



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## Our Family Will Get Through This! Making Meaning of Adversity

Changes to our daily lives may get in the way of personal goals and expectations. It's important to reflect and capture the meaning of these experiences so they can be shared with others.

When families pause to think about the events occurring around them, big or small, this can be used as a chance to see things differently. Resilience is strengthened when our family views a crisis as a shared challenge to be tackled together. Family experiences give us a collective

history and can help us to feel connected. We are better able to handle adversity when family members have faith in each other and reflect on challenges together.

### Creating a Time Capsule

This is a very important time for many families. The loss of so many experiences can cause a sense of grief. Help each other to make sense of the pandemic by saving important things in a time capsule. A time capsule can comfort each of us on our journey to emotional healing. It can also help us to connect to each other as meaning is made of losses and we reflect on our experiences together. A time capsule also serves as a way to document current hardships or difficulties for future generations. It can also capture good times.

### Time Capsule Activity

A time capsule provides an opportunity for your family to address the collective need to belong. It also offers space to tell a story of the present. Future family members can go back and revisit this history together or individually. Encourage your family to discuss the important things chosen and why they were included. Below are some suggestions for a time capsule:

- Pictures of family members as they live life during the pandemic.
- Items from events missed or events that were changed during the pandemic. For example, an invitation to a virtual birthday party, prom dress not worn, or certificate from a virtual awards event.
- Special projects or activities done during the pandemic such as a book read, recipe tried, or picture of a virtual chat with friends.
- Notes from friends that may mention life during the pandemic.
- Lists of favorite shows watched or social media activities enjoyed during the pandemic.
- Significant reminders of social distancing such as a mask or gloves.
- A letter written to yourself about how you felt and what you went through during the pandemic.
- A list of the things you miss and what you would like to do when the pandemic is over.
- A short story or note about "A day in the life..." during the pandemic.

To learn more about the science behind the importance of reflecting on experiences and sharing those reflections with others, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning.](#)



# FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



College of Health and Human Sciences

## Welcome to Families Tackling Tough Times Together!

We hope you find the enclosed ideas and suggestions helpful as you care for your family during the pandemic. We know the pandemic is a very big challenge. How families cope can affect both parents and children for a long time.

We are scientists, educators, and students from Purdue University, and we are here to help! For nine weeks this fall, we will provide weekly collections of ideas for families to use to build on their strengths.

These tools are free, flexible, and informed by science. They are designed for families of all types, with tailored suggestions for children, youth, young adults and older adults, and suitable for both civilian and military families. We hope that your family will try one activity each week!

### Would you like to earn financial rewards?

We especially welcome families living in the continental US who are interested in trying out project materials and telling us about their experiences. These families can earn financial rewards by sharing about one hour of their time over the next two months. Sign up now at the link below!

[https://purdue.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3vK1BJq2EiUksAJ](https://purdue.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3vK1BJq2EiUksAJ)

For more information

- Join the Families Together Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HHSFamiliesTogether/>
- Visit the project website: <https://www.hhs.purdue.edu/families-together/>