Helping Teens Cope with Missed Milestones

The coronavirus pandemic has upended classes and other school activities. It means no prom posts, no graduation pics and no celebration party for many students and their families. Teens are mourning the loss of these missed milestones and experiences that mark the end of the school year.

And it’s not just graduating students experiencing missed milestones. There are also sporting games, music recitals and school plays students looked forward to participating in, with their families present to support them. Their new reality is to finish the school year online, practice physical distancing and connect with peers virtually.

It may now be challenging to find a summer job or go on a family vacation or visit college campuses. These other fun activities may be put off indefinitely.

Our teens need extra support to manage their feelings and find alternative ways to connect with their friends and school community. Here’s our advice on how teens can deal with the unexpected losses of these missed milestones and other life events.

**ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR FEELINGS**

Teens may express feelings of frustration, sadness or disappointment knowing they won’t be going back to school this academic year. Acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that it’s OK to feel sad about this situation.

Allow them time to grieve the missed milestones and celebrations. At the same time, recognize that some teens—such as those who are more introverted or experience anxiety—may not be affected by the changes.

Reassure them that it’s OK to feel sad about this situation.

**BE HONEST**

This is a time where everyone is experiencing collective loss and disruption of one’s sense of safety. This is a time of great uncertainty, so it’s important to talk with your teens. Start by asking them how they are feeling today or if they need help with their schoolwork. They may be looking for answers that you don’t have and it’s OK to tell them that you are unsure.

Ask your teen to help you search online for information about COVID-19 or fun family activities. Sharing your feelings and the steps you take to cope can help bring some normalcy to the current situation. Be cautious of oversharing, as your teen may worry if they sense that you are stressing about the current situation.
Social connectedness can reduce feelings of isolation and stress.

BUILDING RESILIENCE
Teens are resilient and can build upon past adverse experiences to help them cope. The losses and missed milestones from COVID-19 can build their resilience and their ability to cope with future challenges. Talk with teens about past challenging experiences and how they overcame them. Encourage them to apply those steps now. Building resilience may not be easy, but it can help you move forward during times of adversity.

PROMOTE SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
Encourage teens to connect with their peers and use social tools such as FaceTime or Zoom. Teens may find talking with friends, a school counselor or a coach can help them cope and manage their feelings. You can also game night or a time where you can cook a meal together. Social connectedness can reduce feelings of isolation and stress.

BE PATIENT
You may be eager to talk with your teen and provide a solution, but give them space to process their feelings at their own pace. Teens may not want to talk at a time that’s convenient for you. At the same time, it’s important for parents to be there when they’re ready to talk. If they don’t want to talk, suggest journaling as a way to help them put their feelings into words.

CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS
You can still honor and commemorate your child’s achievements and important milestones. Brainstorm with your teen creative ways to celebrate missed events or participate in the school activity. It may be that you stage an at home graduation with family over Zoom. You can also have them perform their part in the school play with other classmates.

While these activities won’t replace a missed event, finding ways to honor their accomplishments can help them cope.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Talking With Your Children About Stress
bit.ly/2W1zgSJ

Grief and COVID-19: Mourning our bygone lives
on.apa.org/grief-covid-19

7 Steps to Teach Your Kids to Look Up When They Feel Down
bit.ly/2yKf14e

How to Keep Kids Connected with Friends During COVID-19
bit.ly/3d3TzpN

Talking to kids when they need help
on.apa.org/help-kids

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