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How to help your kids cope with reality

by Deborah Ann Davis

We all want our kids to feel happiness, to experience success, and to be excited about life. However, if we want our children to be truly happy in the world, then they have to learn how to function within it. That means learning how to handle disappointment, and how to bolster themselves regardless of what's going on around them.

One of the top creators of inner happiness is gratitude, both feeling it and expressing it. It's a powerful tool to teach your children. But, what if they're not feeling particularly grateful right now?

What if your child is quietly flipping out about changing school procedures, and the pandemic, compounding their normal teenage angst? Possibly, they haven't wanted to burden you with problems in light of your own pandemic anxiety. For that child, broaching a new gratitude practice may come off as sounding preachy, or as a temporary holiday filler, or like you're grasping at straws for ways to make things better.

Gratitude Lists

Many families practice the lovely tradition of sitting around the dinner table, taking turns stating something they're grateful for. Here's an alternative if the current times make it difficult for your loved ones to come up with something to feel grateful for:

Pass out pens and slips of paper. If you have six people at your table, everyone gets six slips of paper. Write your name at the top of all of your papers.

Pass one of your papers to everyone at the table. In turn, you will receive a paper from everyone else. Privately make a Gratitude List for each person: five items you believe the person should be grateful for.

Once all the Gratitude Lists are written, everybody receives their lists.

Read the lists to yourselves, or share them aloud. Either way, everyone will be reminded of the multiple blessings in their lives. Save this activity for special occasions, or, end each week with it. You know how to best fit it into your family life.

Quick Fixes*

On the other hand, if anxiety reigns in your home, the first thing to do is put it in its place. Learn how to self-soothe and calm yourself with some Quick Fixes. Once you've mastered these powerful, yet simple, techniques, teach them to your kids. Letting them observe you practicing self-soothing strategies models the empowering behavior they need.

Quick Fix #1 – Stomp and Heave

Stomping your foot on the ground, accompanied by a swift, strong exhalation, is – no, it's not a hissy fit – is an immediate pressure release. If it produces a giggle here and there, so be it. Both provide a small rush of happy hormones.

Quick Fix #2 – The Fake Smile

Pasting a grin on your face, even when you don't feel like smiling, creates the same happy hormones that a real smile produces. Why? Because your body can't tell the difference. Grinning like a loon may scare innocent bystanders, but it certainly will make you feel better, even if you don't believe it will.

Quick Fix #3 – Fingertips to Forehead

We instinctively cradle our face in our hands when stressed. Let's maximize that instinct.. Lightly place your fingertips along your hairline. Listen to your breath while focusing on the sensation of your fingers touching your skin. As your energy shifts, you will notice a sensation there, a type of fluttery feeling or vibration in and under some of your fingertips. The longer you hold the position, more fingertips will experience the sensation. If you hold it long enough, the feeling will synch in all 10 fingertips.

Doing this will create a calming Me Moment. It will also channel the brain energy forward to your logic and reasoning centers. For these few moments, you'll be centered, and blocking out the distractions of the outside world, essentially shutting down your inner anxiety factory. By the way, the more you do this, the quicker it will kick in!

Quick Fix #4 – Break the News Habit

Mood is definitely influenced by the media. Substitute an hour a day of "breaking news" for an hour of something that will make you laugh or feel good. Not only will you create happy hormones (especially if you laugh), but you also will have one hour less of anxiety-hormone production. Your body will thank you.

Better yet, limit your news intake to one hour a day. Fill your former news-time with song and dance, or go for a walk, play tag with the kids, read a book, learn a new hobby, play an instrument, set up a family puzzle, try a new recipe – the possibilities are endless!

All Quick Fixes come with a bonus benefit. They empower you when you cut some of the anxiety out of your life, and:

- it will make it easier to deal with life.
- your children will learn from your example
- when your kids mirror your behavior, their anxiety will lessen, making them feel better
- your periods of stress-hormone production will decrease dramatically
- happy hormones will be produced at increasing rates.
- your entire family will feel empowered by taking back control of their lives

If you want your child to start handling anxiety like a champ, and deal with disappointment eloquently, it's not automatic. You actually have to train them to change their habits and reactions. These Quick Fixes are the perfect place to begin.

There are literally dozens of tools you can use, including Meditative Deep Breathing. Take 3-5 slow, deep breaths. Listen to the sounds of the air moving in through your nose, and out through your mouth. Do it before a meeting, before getting out of bed, while falling asleep, before and after a meal, after an argument, before getting out of the car – do it anytime it occurs to you. This simple tool massages your organs, moves your lymph, and gets oxygen to your brain. And, like all the other Quick Fixes, it carves out a moment of essential Me Time.

Inserting these techniques into your already filled life might seem like a good idea while you're reading this, but good ideas, like good intentions, fade. If you want tomorrow to be different, you have to do something different today.

So, please, do yourself a favor. Pick one strategy right now, jot it down on a sticky note right now, and put it on your bathroom mirror right now. Go ahead... Do it now.

Which one did you pick? It doesn't matter. Whatever it was, add a Fake Grin to it. Congrats on moving forward. You got this.

*By the way, be sure to share these simple strategies with your family ahead of time so you don't freak them out when they see you Fake Smiling in the middle of an argument, or quietly holding your Fingertips to Your Forehead in the other room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Armed with an M.Ed. in supervision, and a 10th grade sense of humor, Deborah's science and personal trainer background provide everything she needs to help busy moms reconnect with their angsty adolescents, by helping them focus on caring themselves first. Her newest book, "How To Keep Your Daughter From Slamming the Door" contains the basic instructions that didn't come with your daughter, but you wish that they had.

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