



*Insights* is published by ESS as a service for educational professionals. Each issue highlights an important research article and provides practical applications of the findings for the classroom and the school environment.

## Holiday Distress- The Pandemic Edition

We are all familiar with the sights and sounds of the winter holiday season, including online articles and TV interviews with health professionals advising us about how to understand and manage the stress that often emerges at this time of year. The 2020 holidays, however, will be stressful in ways that we could never have imagined before now.

Our stress this holiday season will likely not include maneuvering through traffic and crowds of shoppers, dealing with the challenges of travel, or preparing traditional holiday meals for large gatherings of friends and relatives. We will, however, face the predictable sadness associated with memories of those who have left us, this year heightened by pandemic-related losses, by disrupted routines, by social isolation, and by the fear and uncertainty that COVID-19 has brought.

Now more than ever it is important for teachers and students to identify and strengthen their **Distress Tolerance** skills. The ability to tolerate and accept distress is an essential mental health goal since pain is a part of life that cannot be avoided or removed. Distress Tolerance skills are needed to survive crises, and to cope with things over which we have little or no control.

One Distress Tolerance (DT) skill is known as **Radical Acceptance**. Non-acceptance of COVID's impact on the 2020 holiday season might sound something like this: "This is not fair", "I'm not going to let some stupid virus change my holiday traditions", "Why is this happening to me?", "They're making too big a deal of this". This stance of non-acceptance interferes with effective problem solving, and increases both mental and emotional distress.

"Acceptance" is not the same as approving of or liking a particular situation. Acceptance means fully embracing "what is", and focusing our efforts on what we can control. And, what we can currently control are safety behaviors like wearing masks and hand-washing, and following social distancing guidelines set by local government officials. Accepting "what is" can free us up to find creative ways to connect with family and friends

during the holidays, and to modify holiday traditions to fit the current constraints that we are facing.

Another DT skill that can help with holiday stress is **Distracting**. Students and their families can create lists of activities to engage in when painful thoughts or emotions seem to take over. Activities at home might include early and more extensive holiday decorating, watching holiday movies together, exercising to a video, cooking, taking a relaxing bubble bath, or dancing to a favorite song.

**Self-Soothing** is a DT skill that involves using the 5 senses to calm oneself. Parents can help their children create portable "self-soothing kits" that might include a photo of a parent or a beloved pet, a small tube of scented hand lotion, a small tasty treat, a soft or fuzzy piece of fabric, etc. Teachers can also create a self-soothing corner in the classroom that contains a variety of such objects, and perhaps also headphones that give students access to favorite songs or encouraging recorded messages.

It is also more important than ever to incorporate daily **Mindfulness** practice. Staying present in the moment will help avoid regrets and longing for the past, as well as future-oriented worries and "what-ifs". Teachers and students can practice paced breathing exercises (e.g., inhaling to the count of 3, exhaling to the count of 5); can close their eyes for 60 seconds and pay attention to all the sounds they hear; can practice body scan exercises, letting go of tension from head to toe. Any activity can be a mindfulness practice, as long as the individual turns all attention to the thoughts, feelings and sensations associated with that activity.

The staff of ESS wish you a peaceful and safe holiday season, full of hope for a better future.

### Resources:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544>