

Solutions Newsletter

December 2020



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Holiday Distress- The Pandemic Edition

We are all familiar with the sights and sounds of the winter holiday season, including articles and TV interviews with health professionals advising us about how to understand and manage the stress that many people experience 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 not be about fighting 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, made worse this year 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 parents to help children 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?". This attitude 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 efforts on what we can control. Parents should acknowledge the full range of their children's emotions, and offer hope for better times to come. Accepting "what is" can free us up to find creative ways to connect with family and friends during the holidays, and to create holiday traditions that fit our current circumstances.

Another DT skill that can help with holiday stress is **Distracting**. Families can create lists of activities to do when painful thoughts or emotions seem to take over. Activities might include early holiday decorating, watching holiday movies together, exercising to a video, cooking, taking a relaxing bubble bath, riding around looking at holiday lights, dancing to a favorite song, etc.

Self-Soothing is a DT skill that involves using the 5 senses to calm oneself. Help your children create portable "self-soothing kits" that might include a photo of a beloved family member or pet, a small tube of scented hand lotion, a small tasty treat, a soft or fuzzy piece of fabric, etc. Encourage your children to use these when feeling stressed during the school day, or whenever the holiday blues set in.

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, and prevent future-oriented worries and "what-if's". For example, practice paced breathing exercises with your child (e.g., inhaling to the count of 3, exhaling to the count of 5), or practice a body scan exercise, letting go of tension from head, to face, to neck, to shoulders, etc., all the way to one's toes. Staying in the present will also help you and your children focus on and be grateful for what you have to celebrate NOW.

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>