

4 Ways Parents Can Calm Their Back-To-School Fears

A psychiatrist offers these tools to her patients who worry that Delta will disrupt the school year.





Credit...Kezia Gabriella

By Pooja Lakshmin

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As a psychiatrist specializing in women’s mental health, I have spent the past few months celebrating alongside my patients as they planned family reunions and sent kids off to summer camp. But with the arrival of the Delta variant, old questions and a familiar despair have begun to resurface in our sessions: Patients find themselves yo-yoing between “The kids will be all right” and “What if they’re not?”

With vaccination rates still low in pockets of the country, a [rise](#) in pediatric Covid-19 cases, and [battles being waged](#) in schools about mask mandates, parents are understandably disappointed and fearful about sending their children back to school. Last year I wrote about [how to cope](#) with the anxiety of back-to-school decisions. One year later, though the details differ, the landscape is [depressingly recognizable](#). If you are a parent who is struggling to deal with the roller coaster of back-to-school emotions, consider turning to these tools to cope.

Anticipate your triggers.

Many of my patients felt profoundly out of control when schools closed suddenly last year. I encouraged them to view these triggering episodes as “little-T” traumas. Unlike big-T traumas, such as natural disasters or the loss of a loved one, little-T traumas are less externally dramatic. However, they can still evoke an overwhelming fear for one’s safety or livelihood.

When we experience a little-T trauma, our instinct is to avoid thinking about it again. We write it off as not so bad because we figured out how to survive. But this avoidance can end up backfiring and putting us at risk for more anxiety in the long run. Allowing yourself to emotionally prepare for a traumatic event, such as a school closure, in a controlled setting will not only help you prevent a future meltdown — it may even help heal some lingering wounds from last year’s events.

Try meeting the dreaded experience head on: Practice thinking about the logistics of what happens if school closes, and then visualize what it will feel like in your body to get that email or phone call. Allow yourself to feel the panic rising and connect with your body — how does it feel in your chest? Does your heart start beating faster?

If and when the time comes for a last-minute school closing, you will now have experience staying present and processing your emotions. You can breathe, go for a walk around the block and then enact the plan you’ve already visualized.

Practice psychological flexibility.

Research over the course of the pandemic [has shown](#) that people who have higher levels of psychological flexibility fare better mentally. Simply put, psychological flexibility is the skill of developing a more relaxed relationship with your thoughts and your feelings, where you don’t allow them to control you or your reality.

For example, a parent who has inflexible thinking might identify with the statement: “When I experience an unpleasant thought about school, I know it’ll stick with me for the whole day.” On the other hand, a parent who is working on cultivating flexibility might identify with this statement: “When I have a distressing thought about school, I try to recognize that it’s just one thought in a sea of many others.” If you notice yourself falling into the former category, keep a mental note of your thoughts, and practice reframing your self-talk into language that is less black and white.

A [research study](#) of more than 700 parents, which was published last October in the Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, found that parents who exhibited inflexibility with their thoughts during the pandemic were more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Their children were also more likely to show symptoms of distress like anxiety, mood problems or aggressive behaviors.

[The Coronavirus Pandemic](#) >

Acknowledge hard truths.

Experts are [encouraging](#) parents to advocate for [universal masking](#) and [physical distancing](#) because [the data supports](#) these layers of protection, but this well-intentioned call to action places more burden on already beaten-down parents. Parents can internalize systemic failures, resulting in a stressful dialogue of “what ifs” and “if onlys”: “What if my kid gets sick or schools shut down? If only we had a vaccine for kids under 12.”

When my patients allow themselves to acknowledge depressing facts like: “Things may not ever completely go back to normal” or “I don’t have control over much of anything right now” or “The vaccine will get here when it gets here,” the tension in the room goes down a notch. Letting go of rumination and surrendering to the truth can bring relief.

The best time to give yourself permission to acknowledge these scary but real truths is when you find yourself obsessing about all the ways that school could go wrong again.

Find meaning in trauma.

For many parents, the pandemic has meant there is no time for feeling, there is only time for doing. (This was [also true](#) before the Covid-19 crisis.) But I encourage my patients and all parents to acknowledge their big feelings, which might include despair, fury, loneliness and, with the arrival of Delta, a renewed sense of confusion. Many are asking themselves: “Are we supposed to be on our way to healing, or do we need to buckle up for another traumatic ride?”

What if the answer is both, and instead of turning to hopelessness, you ask yourself different and more productive questions? For example: What have you learned about yourself as a parent in the last year? Were there any unexpected positive memories that stand out to you? What are you most proud of in yourself and in your children? When we are curious about our own suffering, we can gain insight.

These questions have led many of my patients to find meaning in trauma. One patient was so delighted by the creativity and joy that she witnessed in her son when he didn’t have so many structured activities that she did not re-enroll him in sports this spring. Opting out has given her confidence to make outside-the-box decisions for her son’s development, a stark contrast to her own upbringing. Another patient stood up to her in-laws in the midst of differing views on vaccine safety, growing in her ability to advocate for herself and her family.

It’s OK, and completely understandable, to feel beaten down right now. And, while I hate being the bearer of bad news, I’ll acknowledge a hard truth: Like it or not, this year you’re a little bit wiser, and thus more prepared than you know.

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