

November 16, 2020
Kerry Elsen
Buffalo County Extension
For Immediate Release

Helping Youth Cope with Holiday Stresses

2020 is delivering more challenges than many of us have experienced before. The holiday season is quickly approaching and potentially could be more stressful than previous years given all the events of the past year. As individuals and families plan holiday gatherings during a global pandemic, many will be modifying holiday traditions based on enduring the safety and well-being of families and others. Breaking from rituals can be challenging and upsetting, however, with some planning and creative thinking these changes might help your family develop new traditions.

Children and youth often anxiously await the holidays, which often mean a time to gathering with family, share gifts, and participate in traditions such as baking favorite holiday foods, decorating one's home or attending religious celebrations. Changes to holiday traditions and routines might add to youth's feeling of anxiety, sadness, or depression. Research shows that the social, emotional, and mental health of our youth have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The mental health impacts of COVID-19 and potential changes to a typical holiday routine can compound the feelings and emotions youth are experiencing.

Below are some strategies to help youth cope through the holidays.

- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** Simply ask them how they are feeling. As an adult check-in with them daily about what feelings they are experiencing that day. As your child is sharing their feelings with you, make sure you are listening and not passing judgement. Try as best as you can to keep the lines of

communication open. As an adult be a good role model and take the time to express your own feelings with family members. Showing youth how to show and communicate one's feelings in a healthy fashion provides a positive example for young people.

- **Talk with your children.** Be intentional about taking the time to talk with your children. Simply, ask them about their day or what is bringing them joy, happiness or what they are finding difficult. Take time to schedule a virtual meeting for children to interact with grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other extended family members which they might normally interact with over the holidays. You can even encourage activities such as making a favorite holiday treat or making a craft together in a virtual setting. These social interactions can help young people not feel alone and supported.
- **Explain why this year is different.** Talk to your children about how the holidays may look different this year due to COVID-19. Explain to them that helping people stay safe and healthy, may make familiar holiday traditions be different this year. Additionally, children and youth may be encountering feelings of grief and sadness because a family member or friend has died from COVID-19 or they cannot be with loved ones for other reasons. Ask your children for their ideas on how to celebrate the holidays in a manner that helps the family be safe or ways to remember family members who cannot be present during the holidays. These new activities might just create new traditions.
- **Invest in others.** Invite your children to help others in your community. Let them be creative: make holiday cards for military service personnel, help the

elderly clean up leaves, make homemade gifts for your neighbors, or make a donation to a local charity.

- **Learn to say “no”.** Demonstrate and teach youth to make time to reflect and engage in self-care. Learning to say “no” to activities, social media, or projects can teach children and youth to stop and reflect about their own life and the world in which they live.
- **Do not abandon healthy habits.** Stick to a familiar routine; keep to morning schedules, eat regular meals, and enforce bedtimes. Encourage healthy eating by having healthy snacks available prior to and following holidays meals, avoid overindulging on desserts and sugary treats. Creatively think of ways for youth to remain physically active throughout the day and limit screen time.
- **Take a breather.** Encourage children and youth to engage in some quiet time. Establish a routine where youth spend 15 minutes in the quiet (turn off the TV, and other electronic devices), have them read, write in a journal, or create artwork that allows young people a healthy way to express their feelings.
 - **Seek professional help if needed.** Do not be afraid to access professional help for your child if feelings of anxiety and depression persist. Talk with a school counselor, your family physician, or counselors at your local behavioral health center, 308-237-5113.

These are just a few of the strategies you can help to make this holiday season easier to manage for your children. Information in this article was provided by the Center for Disease Control, www.cdc.gov and Mayo Clinic,

www.mayoclinic.org. If you are in need of activities for youth of all ages contact Kerry Elsen, kerry.elsen@unl.edu at the Buffalo County Extension.