

# Helping Youth Manage Disappointment

As communities across Nebraska continue to feel the weight of the pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the distress that our youth may be experiencing as their lives continue to be disrupted. Specifically, youth are having to learn to deal with a number of losses that are hitting them all at one time. Missed opportunities to participate in extracurricular events such as sports or music competitions, cancelled homecoming dances and winter formals, postponed family trips, being unable to gather to celebrate important milestones like birthdays, and changes in holiday traditions with families may lead youth to feel an increased sense of sadness, frustration and disappointment. Even missing out on regular activities like going to the movies with friends, sleepovers or going on a fieldtrip can be upsetting for many kids. Considering everything individuals and communities have lost as a result of the pandemic, missing out on events, milestones and activities may seem like a small sacrifice, however, this doesn't make the feelings of disappointment less heavy or easier to process for youth. While many adults are dealing with some of the same let downs, they have more experience in processing challenges as well as a greater number of skills to cope with such difficulties. Parents and caring adults can help youth walk through their disappointments by offering compassion and empathy, while offering support to help kids manage their feelings and emotions.

Dealing with change and loss is an inevitable part of life but during a time when life seems increasingly unpredictable, experts recommend having more frequent discussions about coping with disappointment and overcoming obstacles. The below tips can help guide adults to help youth deal with feelings of disappointment and loss.

**Listen Empathetically:** Avoid minimizing feelings. For example, saying, "I am sorry your basketball season is cancelled, but at least you are healthy", may not be helpful in the moment. Instead, actively listen to how your child/teen is feeling and acknowledge their experience.

**Validate:** Validate feelings of disappointment. For example, you might say, "I know what you are going through is really hard." or "You'll get through this, but it doesn't make it any less difficult right now". Let them know it is okay to feel disappointment and to grieve their loss.

**Provide Perspective:** Remind youth that they are not alone in their disappointment. Emphasize that there are youth across the community who understand their feelings because they are sharing in similar experiences. Encouraging kids to talk about what they are going through with friends can provide opportunities to bond over their shared disappointment and help kids put things in perspective.

**Provide Encouragement:** Avoid giving false reassurance but emphasize that, while we don't know when or how it will happen, eventually our current circumstances will change. It might be helpful to share with your child/teen past experiences of change or uncertainty that you have gone through and how you dealt with the challenges.

**Practice Coping Skills:** Share with kids how you cope with disappointment and change. This is also a good time to have kids reflect on their own coping skills. For example, you might ask, "What has helped you feel better during hard times in the past?" Support kids in exploring new coping strategies such as journaling, taking care of a pet, seeking support of friends/family, exercising, engaging in a hobby or starting a new project.

**Encourage Self-Care:** Now, more than ever, it is important for adults to promote mental health hygiene for our youth. This includes getting good sleep, eating wisely, exercising, getting fresh air, nurturing support systems and utilizing coping skills. Above all else, encourage kids to ask for help if they are feeling overwhelmed with feelings of loss and disappointment.

While this has been a tough year for many, it can also serve as a time of personal growth. According to the American Psychological Association, “the losses and missed milestones from COVID-19 can build youth resilience and their ability to cope with future challenges”. Building resilience isn’t always an easy process, but it can help us move forward in times of adversity. Learning how to navigate disappointment can lead to emotional growth and foster skills to help recover from future setbacks. Check in with youth often during this time to assess how they are doing. If you are worried that a youth may need extra supports or professional guidance, reach out and ask for help. A family doctor, school social worker or counselor or a licensed mental health provider can offer guidance.

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; John Hopkins Medicine (<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org>); National Association of School Psychologists