As a student, a teacher, and now a parent, the first days of school have always been fraught with anxiety for me. It’s the excitement and anticipation of a new year jumbled with the stress of the unknown and new.

As we come to the close of a summer unlike any we’ve experienced before, we know that the anxiety our young people are facing going into the school year is different from the usual first days of school stress. It’s not just the new teachers, different classes, and that locker combination they hope works, but anxiety about health, new procedures, and how their daily life will be different. Whether attending school virtually or in-person, concerns about the social aspects of school loom larger than ever.

As parents and adults who care about youth in our community, we can’t help but share their anxiety. A national study of young people between the ages of 13 and 19 conducted this spring by The Harris Poll for the National 4-H Council does little to allay our concerns. It revealed that “64% believed that the experience of COVID-19 will have lasting impact on their generation’s mental health,” and that “61% of teens said that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their feeling of loneliness.”

As troubling as these findings are, The Harris Poll also reported that, “resilient teens reported higher levels of confidence solving their own mental health struggles, as well as helping others with theirs; they also felt more equipped to tap into support networks than their non-resilient counterparts.” Which begs the questions: how can we build resilience in our young people and make sure we are a part of their support network?

As parents and caring adults, our first big step in building resilience in young people is to model it ourselves. Some days it may seem like a huge reach, but finding the positives and turning away from the overwhelming feelings of missing how things used to be allows us to focus on developing strong and healthy social and emotional skills according to K-State Research and Extension youth development specialist Elaine Johannes. According to Dr. Johannes, “It’s important that adults demonstrate resilience, discuss how they’re feeling and seek meaning when feelings of fear, frustration, anger are mixed with grief for what ‘used to be.’ Making meaning helps us cope with what we’re experiencing now and the grief that is felt for the old, once familiar patterns of each day.”

In order for adults to help make meaning and model resilience for young people in the midst of grief and uncertainty, Dr. Johannes references strategies suggested by Dr. Alexander Chan of the University of Maryland Extension.

- Talk about how you want to emerge from this crisis: What will it say about you that you lived through the pandemic? Will you have developed new habits or ways of appreciating for daily life?
- Acknowledge and show support for others’ efforts to cope: People find meaning in different ways which might not be something you would do. That’s okay. Pushing through adversity and revealing resilience is a unique, lifelong endeavor.
- Show acceptance for all emotions daily: Allow young people, and yourself, to feel joy, sadness and anything in between. Acceptance of and talking about feelings are steps toward finding meaning in what is happening.

It’s never too soon (or too late) to start these conversations with the young people in your life. Let them know that the anxiety is real for all of us, that we are all working to make find meaning in the world around us. This is something we will get through together.

More information about the findings of the teen mental health survey conducted by The Harris Poll may be found online at: https://4-h.org/about/research/#/healthy-living.