May 2020

In the fall of 2001, I was a 7th grade English teacher at Junction City Middle School, fresh out of college, assigned to teach four sections of English to an amazingly interesting group of kids. Full of big plans, I signed on to have my students participate in a state-wide living history project, A Day in My Community.

In class on October 11th, each of my 7th graders wrote a letter about their life on that day. While the letters included details about what they had for breakfast, how they got to school, and what they liked to do with their friends, the more pressing narrative in almost all of their letters was how they felt the world had changed in a month. Looking now at the database kept by the Kansas Historical Society of their letters, the “Notes About Letter Contents” include, “NY terror details and since that time,” “9/11/01 tragic day for America,” “insane to judge people because they look Arabic or Muslim,” and “USA will pull together.” It was the one-month anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States and my students were working to make sense of the world around them.

For the youth in our communities, everyday life changed for them completely with spring break this year. As they looked forward to a week away from school, they didn’t know it would mean the last time they’d see their friends, classmates, and teachers in person for months, that they wouldn’t be able to finish the sports season, or even clean out their desks. Big changes mean big stress and most of our youth will show us rather than tell us the stress they are feeling. Behaviors the American Psychological Association alerts us to be aware of in recognizing stress in our young people include:

- Irritability and anger
- Changes in behavior, not being themselves
- Trouble sleeping
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Eating changes
- Physically feeling sick, reporting headaches or stomachaches

While many of us are experiencing the same types of anxiety, it’s important to have a go-to list of what we can do to help our young people. Top strategies we’ll want to keep in mind to help our kids and teens process stress include:

- Encourage good sleep by limiting screen use at night and keeping digital devices out of the bedroom
- Physical activity, especially outdoors (while maintaining social distancing)
- Talk it out with a trusted adult
- Write about it

Just as my 7th grade students used a letter they wrote one day in class to process their feelings about the aftermath of the bombing of the World Trade Center, encourage the young people in your life to write about what they’re going through right now. They can journal, draw, write a poem, write a letter, the form doesn’t matter, what does matter is the act of expressing themselves and that expression has been proven to help reduce mental distress and improve well-being.

Our colleagues with Cornell Cooperative Extension – Chemung County in New York State have created guided journals to help youth process the history they are living in with writing prompts like:

- Something this experience is teaching me is…
- I have helped someone by…
- Before I go to bed it helps me sleep if I…
- Something I really hope the world learned and remembers is…

As our young people transition from the ending of a school year they never imagined to a summer that’s still unclear, let’s remember to acknowledge their stress (as well as our own!) and give time to help them process the big stress that comes with uncertainty.