

# How do you find emotional equilibrium during a pandemic?

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Over the last two years, many of us have faced major life changes, personal loss and seemingly constant stress. What can we do to remain resilient? How do we help our households find their equilibrium? In this

post, we focus on family dynamics, emotional regulation and building resilience during a crisis.

To address these topics, we spoke with Kim Allen and Adria Shipp Dunbar, two NC State experts who offer insights on how we can sustain our emotional equilibrium while supporting those around us. Allen is a published author, podcaster, and co-founder and leader of the Family Life Coaching Association. She's currently serving as the interim associate dean and director of Academic Programs in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at NC State. Dunbar's work focuses on developing technologies for counselor education and supervision, and promoting digital health in students. She is an assistant professor and doctoral program coordinator in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development's Counselor Education program at NC State.

## **The Abstract: We often hear about the importance of emotional well-being and mental health. What does it mean to be emotionally well?**

Kim Allen: I tend to think of the word resilience when I think of well-being. Clearly, life has been especially difficult for many of us over the past few years. With constant change and fear and loss, it can be challenging to be resilient. However, when we are able to find the positive and feel hopeful despite the hardship, that is mental well-being.

We know that resilience is all about the ability to bounce back, and that is different for children than adults in some ways, and similar in others. Resilience and emotional well-being come from both nature and nurture. While there is a [genetic component](#), we can all learn resilience skills such as emotion regulation and calming ourselves down. If we can focus on building resilience in ourselves, it also helps our kids. Nurturing and

loving parents are protective factors for kids. Learning to manage our emotions and build our resilience helps our children.

## **TA: How easy is it to make emotional regulation a habit? Are there any practices that come to mind?**

Allen: Anyone can learn the skills to regulate emotions. You know the old adage "take a breath and count to 10?" That is an [emotion regulation](#) technique! We hear about mindfulness a lot, and regulating emotions is closely related to mindfulness. That means being aware of our senses, noticing [physical changes](#) when we are starting to feel strong emotions and noticing our thinking patterns during highly stressful times. When we start to feel tension in our necks or start to think that the worst is about to happen, we can regulate our emotions by slowing down, taking deep breaths (which actually releases calming hormones) and slowly count to 10, taking in deep breaths for the countdown.

## **TA: There is so much information circulating, it's hard to know what we don't know. How do you avoid feeling overwhelmed by the news cycle?**

Adria Shipp Dunbar: One thing that worked really well for me at the beginning of the pandemic was to list three "wins" for the day. We were home with two preschoolers and a [newborn baby](#) while juggling remote work and remote school responsibilities. Reflecting on what was going well, or what we were grateful for, definitely helped my mindset.

Acknowledging who we are in stressful times, and our behavioral patterns as stress responses can also be really helpful to us, and to those who live with us. Kendra Adachi, one of my favorite podcasters and authors, talked about this in an episode of The Lazy Genius. For her, she needed to create a plan and talk through every minute detail and

logistical decision to regain a sense of control when her family tested positive for COVID-19. Other people may clean the house, make lists, start a new journal, rearrange childcare, plan future trips, or spend time outside. For me, a walk outside or a barre class plus a hot shower renews my sense of calm and control enough to help me move past my typical stress responses.

## **TA: What can parents do when they don't have all the answers to the questions their kids are asking?**

Allen: Gosh, I totally relate to this one. Before my teens were able to be vaccinated, I worried so much and just didn't have good answers for when they wanted to be with friends. That is what I told them: "I know this must be so frustrating for you. We just don't have good information available for me to make the decision for you to be with your friends." Showing empathy is key—letting children know you understand their feelings and validate their frustrations can help children know that we are all figuring this out.

## **TA: When speaking with others, adults and children alike, how can we avoid putting our anxieties into the responses we give?**

Dunbar: I rely on Janet Lansbury's podcast to help me with this one. There's an episode I've listened to numerous times about talking to children about death and dying that helps remind me to be honest and concrete with children when giving them answers to hard questions, but also not sugarcoating my answers. Kids are listening for and watching for any indication that we may not be telling them the whole truth, or that we may be softening information for their own good. Many times, while we are actually trying to protect children from difficult realities, we may instead increase their anxieties around an issue.

**TA: It seems like a lot of folks these days are struggling with guilt: parental guilt for choices you're forced to make that you never considered; social guilt, both for going to events and not going to events; and so on. How can people cope with these increased feelings of guilt?**

Dunbar: Grounding ourselves in our values can really help with this one. We had some family norms, or boundaries, before the pandemic began to help us maintain boundaries with some of the decisions that parents tend to experience guilt around. For example, we don't often attend birthday parties unless they are for close friends and family. We made that decision a long time ago and we stick to it. Maybe it's a bit of a minimalist approach to parenting, but it works for us. And our family's values are not every family's values. Deciding what fits for your family, and grounding yourself in that, can help avoid guilt and decision fatigue.

Disappointment can be tough, especially during a pandemic, especially after years of restricting ourselves from social events or activities we enjoy. I also recommend having some preplanning around what happens if plans fall through because of COVID or other circumstances that are out of our control. This can help us keep disappointments in perspective and give ourselves space to feel all the feelings about a disappointing situation.

**TA: There have been so many conversations about mental health and self-care in recent years, but what does that look like when you're primarily responsible for giving care to others? How can caregivers ground themselves?**

Allen: There has been a lot of research that shows that the pandemic has been especially difficult for moms. Moms tend to carry the weight of both the physical and mental loads of family life and all that stress and work adds up and takes a toll on our health. Caring for ourselves is critical.

As a mom, I can say that [self-care](#) is easier said than done. However, I think we can learn from younger generations. My kids are older, 18 and 20, and they have really mastered self-care. My 18-year-old is the first in our home to call for a self-care day and do things that bring her joy. Boy, can I learn from her!

It isn't just my kids. Last week I asked my students, mostly 18- to 20-year-olds, what they see as a major difference between their generation and the older generations. Not surprisingly, they said it seems that the older generations are less likely to understand and nurture wellness and [mental health](#). So for those of us that have children, especially moms, I'd say we need to learn from our youth and prioritize caring for ourselves.

## **TA: How has your parenting changed over the course of the pandemic?**

Dunbar: I've tried to let my kids take more of a lead in choosing how we spend our free time. There can be times I feel like I am managing them, instead of connecting with them, which doesn't feel good to any of us. They are my barometer for how we are doing as a family.

Sometimes we need more time together, sometimes they need more one-on-one time, sometimes they need more time with friends, sometimes they need more structure to their days. We've also needed to add more systems at home to keep things running smoothly: a jobs chart so

everyone can contribute to our household, a smart light to let people know when it's bedtime, weekly movie night, Friday afternoon frozen custard, etc. The predictability and structure has been helpful to all of us.

## **TA: What is one practice that could benefit the entire household if adopted?**

Allen: There is family science research that looks at the amount of positive interactions between family members and the quality of their relationships. There is a magic ratio of 5:1. We need five positive interactions for every one negative. When life is stressful and busy and when we are all tired of the pandemic, it is important to slow down, take a breath, and remember to nurture our relationships. It is the [little things](#) that count here—a little cuddle before bed, a high-five on the completion of a task, or simply asking the other about their day. The more positives we have in our relationships, the better our health and the more resilient we become.

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