



## **Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 11: Meaning Making for Families**

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Alex Clark discusses tips on how families can make meaning out of stressful times and utilize that meaning as a way of protecting themselves. And now, Alex Clark.

Hello I'm Alex Clark, a licensed marriage and family therapist and project coordinator at the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. Over the past two years, we have all experienced unique stressors in our world that have challenged some of our assumptions and expectations about our lives and our connections to others. In this Well@Work podcast, I'm going to talk with you about how families make meaning of what's going on around them to positively adapt to stressors and build resiliency together. Let's first take a quick look at meaning making. Meaning making is a broad term that describes how we combine our memories and emotions to create a story about our experiences. Meaning making is especially salient following experiences of tragedy like grief and loss, as it provides an avenue for coping and healing after stressful events. When a discrepancy appears between "what I believe," and "what I just experienced," meaning making helps us reconcile these differences. For example, the COVID-19 virus and its variants have potentially challenged our beliefs concerning our safety. Experiences that are incongruent with our beliefs force us to either reappraise our experiences or modify our beliefs to accommodate the new experiences. Families use meaning making to make sense of what is happening, establish a new perspective, and then integrate that new meaning into the fabric of the family's stories. Openly including all family members in the shared meaning making process builds trust and deepens bonds between loved ones, leading to greater resiliency. Parents in particular have a special responsibility to facilitate the meaning making process for children, as children may not have yet acquired the skill or experience to navigate stressors well. By modeling a balance between vulnerability and tolerating risk, parents have an opportunity to demonstrate resilience to others.

Let's consider the family meaning making process through the lens of Christopher, a father of three. Christopher works hard, but also worries about exposure to COVID for himself and his family, continuing to calm his worries and maintain vigilance has slowly worn him down. He thinks his children may be missing valuable opportunities to develop and enjoy normal life. Christopher wonders what he can do to model resilience and problem solving during a prolonged pandemic. Here are some tips that can help Christopher and those of us like him.

Tip number one: tell the story. Stress can be disorganizing and overwhelming, even more so for children. Families can therefore begin to create and shape a story about what is going on. Everyone can contribute, everyone has a voice that matters. By acknowledging

everyone's stressors and organizing the experiences into a coherent story, we are helping restore order to both the internal and external worlds of our family members, so narrate your family's experiences out loud. The problem is the problem, not the other people in our family. Of course, none of us are at our best during prolonged periods of stress, but as parents or caregivers we can model what it is to tolerate that stress, do our best to navigate our way through it, and make meaning of our experiences. We are signaling to our children that they can do this because they won't have to do it alone, they can do it together, with us.

Tip number two: utilize the power of emotions. Emotion is the key instrument for shared meaning making and building resiliency, our family's different emotions become pathways to understanding our experiences. As the old phrase goes "Others don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." Meaning unfolds over time, but we can always be supporting members of our family throughout the process, even before meaning is made. Likewise, for Christopher himself, as a parent of three it's important for him to first acknowledge, understand, and organize his own emotional states. Misunderstood or unacknowledged emotions can interfere with his ability to provide care to his children or others. Conversely, processing his own emotions creates an internal map that Christopher can use to guide his children through parts of the same process. For example, Christopher might say something like "Our family has gone through a scary time when Aunt Lisa was sick with COVID and we were worried what might happen, but now we are vaccinated and Aunt Lisa has recovered so we are feeling a little better." Christopher can reduce his children's stress and increase the family's resiliency by leading the way.

Tip number three: maintain hope. As stressors go up around the family, it becomes more and more important for a parent or caregiver to hold enough hope for everyone in the family. Children are not yet experienced in persevering and may not have experiences of things. Working out that enables them to wait patiently for an expected outcome. Accordingly, hope plays a significant role in meaning making. For example, the statement "This pandemic is not over," can be skillfully and hopefully modified into "This pandemic is not over yet." If your tank of hope is running low, then refill it with various meaning making oriented activities. Talk with a loved one, seek advice from an older mentor or family member, engage in spiritual practices, remember the good, reconnect culturally. Transcendent values, connections, and memories enable families to zoom out from the stress and expand their perspectives. All of these activities can fill your tank and enable you to hold enough hope for your entire family and help restore purpose.

Once again together, these three tips can help any family make sense of what is going on. Once meaning has been made, that meaning can be utilized as a powerful protective factor, so remember to keep telling the story together. Continue utilizing the power of emotion together and maintain hope throughout. For more ideas, check out our website in the video description. And remember to stay well at work and well at home together. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast.

Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.