TOGETHER AT HEART WHILE WE’RE APART: DISCUSSION STARTERS

I wrote ***Together at Heart While Apart: A Message of Hope*** in the simplest way possible to help kids process the collective uncertainty, grief, and fear resulting from COVID-19. While many of us are apart, we need to feel secure and healthy, and keep growing and hoping. Rather than moving in fear, we can embrace our vulnerability and rise up to our highest humanity, being joyful, loving, kind and sharing.



**THOUGHTS FOR POSSIBLE DISCUSSION**

***When We're Apart:*** We’re mostly staying home and away from others for now because something catchy is going around, and we don't want to catch or share it. It's called COVID-19, and by socially distancing, we're helping ourselves and everyone. It's hard, but we can spend our time in new ways.

***We Stay home with family:*** Whoever the children are living with now is the family they're staying home with during the pandemic. There may be separation and anxiety from other family members who are frontline COVID-19 workers, sick, divorced, working remotely, or other. Sending kind and happy thoughts to those they can't be with and miss often helps.

***Always Careful/Why do people get sick?*** Invisible germs, viruses, and bacteria are always around, and COVID-19 is more contagious than many diseases. Still, most of us will stay well with healthy habits and by keeping our immune systems strong. Here are some tips:

* Keep hands away from face and wash often with soap and hot water for 20 seconds.
* Practice social distancing and wear masks to help slow the spread of disease.
* Eat nourishing, whole foods and drink plenty of water. Minimize sugary snacks.
* Plant a victory garden to eat and share healthy veggies and herbs this summer.
* Immerse yourself outdoors and in nature often. Sit on the ground, hug trees, connect with the sun and the earth, notice the beauty.
* Exercise and move your body to stay strong, flexible, and balanced. Do yoga, take walks, bike, run, or other.
* Take [breathing breaks](http://www.inspirationforcreativity.com/2020/01/take-breathing-break.html) often during the day to feel and find inner calm.
* Create joy now: Make art, dance, sing, play music, write, pray, play, journal, etc.
* Notice your thoughts and think happy, kind, grateful, healing thoughts on purpose.
* If you live with other people or pets, hug, talk, play, and support each other.
* Stay tuned to many news stations for a more complete view of what's happening.
* Limit screen time and turn off all devices at least 2 hrs. before bed for better sleep.

***Missing and loving them.*** Young kids may not understand what they're feeling. Maybe they're missing friends, cousins, teachers, grandparents, other relatives, coaches, teammates, or important people in their lives. They also may be confused about why we're apart, and may worry that something has happened to the people they love. Reassuring them that it's ok to have these feelings, that everyone's ok or trying to get well if they're sick, and that you wish we could be together now too, can help them cope.

***Can’t wait to see you for real.***There are many ways to stay in touch. You can write texts, emails, social media posts, and snail mail letters. You can phone often and do frequent video chats, schedule online meetings, parties, and movies together. Send pictures and art. Put hearts, rainbows, and bears in your front window for your neighbors. Make and fly flags. Write chalk messages on the sidewalk. Find new ways to reach out.

***I need a hug.*** Humans need to be together, to be touched. If you're fortunate to live with others or pets, spend time daily hugging, holding hands, or giving a little back or foot rub. Beneath our skin is our fascia, a gel-like connective tissue that’s the largest organ in our body. The skin and fascia contain many nerve endings, so when we’re held or massaged it’s very calming to our nervous systems. Or, you can hug yourself, roll on foam rollers or give yourself rubs to work the fascia and relax the nervous system. Squeezes and massage can also help to keep our lymph moving, important for a strong immune system.

***May they be well. May they be happy:*** Scientists who study happiness have shown that when we think kind, happy, and grateful thoughts on purpose; and when we wish happiness, forgiveness, wellness, and kindness towards others: we feel happier. Also, when we do kind deeds and practice being grateful, we're happier. As Anne Frank wrote, “Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.”[[1]](#footnote-1)Try feeling like you’re sending thanks or happiness or healing or kindness from your heart to others. How many happy thoughts can you think on purpose today?

***Feel better? It will be ok.*** Life isn’t always easy, and some of us have many struggles. Why do some people rise above adverse situations? Much of what happens to us in life comes from our own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. We don't always like and can’t always control what’s happening around us; and it’s sometimes difficult and frightening. But we can always stop, feel our bodies and emotions, watch our thoughts and let them quiet. When we do, we tap into our higher selves, and can feel stronger, more relaxed, and think more clearly to solve problems. As Victor Frankl said in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

When we notice and name our emotions- which are the messages of our hearts- it helps take us out of a state of constant anxiety (sympathetic nervous system) and back to a more thoughtful and calmer state (parasympathetic nervous system). Feelings are meant to come and go, to inform us, but many of us have learned to stifle difficult emotions, trying to bury, ignore, or push them away. When we do this, stress and tension builds inside, our energy slows, and, if unresolved, in time we may feel pain, illness, and even PTSD. In other words, “our bodies keep the score”[[3]](#footnote-3) of all that happens around and inside of us.

It’s ok to have feelings like anger, sadness, fear, or insecurity, especially when things are happening that we have little control over. We are energetic beings, and are affected by the energies in and around us. When we stop and watch our breath, feel what we feel, then acknowledge and name how we’re feeling, it helps us process and let go stuck energies so we can feel less stress and respond well rather than being reactive.

Science supports the power of the breath to bring us out of anxious places and back to a more thoughtful calm. Also, it’s important to note that we all regulate to the people around us, which is why it’s so easy catch and escalate others’ moods, whether it’s laughter and peacefulness, or sorrow, anxiety, frustration and anger. Children learn to regulate by observing how the adults around them are managing their stress. When we’re calm and the children aren’t, we can name what we’re feeling and seeing around us, and we can invite them to breathe with us and just find stillness inside. Other times, we need to step away and deal with our own difficult emotions first so that we can calmly help the children regulate theirs. We can model this by letting them know how we’re feeling, and why we’re taking a breathing break. Once calm, we can then invite them to join us if still needed.

***I’m sorry.*** Everyone makes mistakes, and in confined quarters during quarantine or social distancing, it’s easy to get impatient and frustrated, or to sometimes overstep or hurt one another’s feelings. To help ease tension and heal relationships, we can model noticing and saying a heartfelt “I’m sorry” when we’re unkind, or “I forgive you and still love you” when those around us slip up. The sooner we can make amends, the sooner we can let go anger and stop resentment from building. Forgiving others doesn’t mean that we condone what they did; rather, we don’t let the insult or injury continue to hurt us. However, during this difficult time, it’s also important to help protect anyone who is in harm’s way and being abused. Find a counselor or reach out to a hotline for help if this is you.

***Waiting’s Hard!*** It’s important to build up delayed gratification skills, but patience is difficult for all of us, especially children, who haven’t developed self-control and who like immediate rewards. For now we’re all being asked to wait to see friends and relatives, to postpone lessons, to stay off playgrounds, to postpone sports, to continue school independently, etc. What to do? Acknowledge that it’s hard for everyone to wait, then find creative ways to have new fun and encourage learning. You can make up songs, stories, or games. Change up the toys and plant interesting books and magazines around the house so there’s always something to do. See who can think of the best questions, run imagination experiments, think happy and grateful thoughts, exercise, play online games with friends, call grandma to read the bedtime stories… and take breaks together, when needed, to relax.

***Isn’t life good? Isn’t Earth an awesome home?*** Earth is home to all of us, from the tiniest microbes to all the plants and animals and humans. When we take care of our earth, we help everyone to have a better planet to live on. We rely on all other life to sustain us. We even have so many bacteria living inside us that 90% of our DNA isn’t t even human! We can’t live without microbes, we just need to be careful of the harmful ones.

***I grew these for you!*** In times of trouble, we can contribute and add purpose to our lives by sharing our best and helping others. What strengths, talents and resources do you have that might bring a little ease or joy to others? Maybe you can share artwork, or meals, or songs, or make face masks, or something else. What can you do now? How can you help your children to build and share their strengths? And, we can also notice all the helpers out there, doctors, nurses, store workers, delivery people, artists of all types, and all those who are rising up during this difficult time. ​Whether at your ideal job or furloughed, find something meaningful to work on; and encourage the children also to find something to help create a little joy for someone.

***Thank you!*** Scientists who study happiness have found that people who are grateful are happier, so try practicing gratefulness. You can stop and feel gratitude and say a heart-felt thank you whenever someone helps you. Other gratitude practices you can try are:

* Pause before meals for a prayer or thankful moment.
* Picture someone who was kind to you, feel deep thankfulness, and imagine sending this gratitude from your heart to theirs.
* Notice and count the good stuff and the blessings in your life to boost your heartfulness.
* Start a gratitude jar, and everyone can share notes of what and who they're thankful for.
* Keep a gratitude journal, noting at least 1 daily thing that makes you happy or thankful.

***What happens after life?*** There are many ideas about this. Some think nothing, it’s just over. Others think our soul lives on. Others believe we’ll be reborn into a new body. Death is not the opposite of life, it’s the opposite of birth, and the way of nature. We humans are part of nature. All of nature is born, grows, and eventually passes on, transforms, and we all will. too, some day. It’s not something to be afraid of; instead, it helps us remember to live each day as though it’s going to be the best day ever- because life is what happens between birth and death. When we lose someone we care about, though they’re gone in body, the love between us stays alive. We can always stay together at heart.

***Always together at heart.*** Whether thinking of grandparents, cousins, friends, teachers, other important people, those who are sick, or those who have passed, we can always remember, together at heart, we’ll get through this!

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1. Frank, Anne. Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. 1947.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frankl, Victor E. Man’s Search for Meaning. Beacon Press; 4th edition, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Van Der Kolk, Bessel, M.D. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Penguin Books, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)