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SURVIVING FAMILY LIFE

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Yesterday I had one child crying because he wants to watch tv instead of doing some writing for school. I had another child fed up with her little brother because he's complaining and yelling at her when she's trying to help encourage him to do his school work. Both have lived in each other's pockets for a couple weeks now and patience is thin on both sides. I am here in my new home office (the kids old play room) juggling the work of two jobs at home while trying to keep the peace in my household so I can actually get some work done.

Today during a meeting over the phone with my boss, I ended up carrying on that meeting with a sobbing child curled up on my lap. Meanwhile my husband is upstairs in his own online meeting for his job as he's also trying to work from home - although I think somehow he got the better deal with an office upstairs with a view!

This is our current reality. We can't see anyone else, all we have is each other. We still have our own responsibilities for our work and school work, but we're feeling the underlying stress of change and anxiety as well. The uncertainty of how long this will last amplifies the feelings.

Other mums are messaging me. Complaining their kids aren't doing their school work or are leaving toys and mess all around the house. They feel like they can't take the stress anymore. These mums are wanting to share their feelings and worry about how they will cope. What if their child gets further behind in school and how on earth can they live together without tearing each other to pieces? Some are worried because they have to head out each day to a job that potentially is exposing them to this virus. What if they get it? What if they give it to their family?

Each family have their own specific situations to cope with, not one family has it the same, but our feelings on this situation are expressing the same themes. Throughout my conversations with these other mums, the two themes that keep coming through are: Grief and anxiety.

Grief from loss of freedom and flexibility, grief from loss of an income or grief from the loss or illness of someone you care about. Kids are grieving routine and missing out on the activities they love and seeing their friends. Parents may just simply be grieving peace of mind, a feeling of control and hope.

Anxiety from all the uncertainty. Will I catch the virus? What if someone I love dies from it? What if this lasts for months not weeks? How do I keep the house clean and get my kids to wash their hands properly when normally I can barely get them to wash their hands at all? How do I explain this to my kids? Questions, unknowns, no answers. Just wait and see.

So how do we find hope in all of this uncertainty? Where is God in this mess? Why didn't he stop it? How will I get through this?

I was asked by a friend today "what are you doing to cope?". My answer was simple. "I'm not coping" but I am doing the best that I can. I am acknowledging that this is tough, that I will have good and bad days, that some days the grief of all that we've lost or will lose is overwhelming, but it also needs processing.

Acknowledging grief and allowing time to adjust to a new normal is important. And we need to do that to get through, and importantly, so do our kids. Their wellbeing is just as important as ours. We need to give them that space too.

So although I would have preferred today to have continued my meeting on the phone without a crying child in my lap, I knew my child still needed that safe place to feel those feelings that were overwhelming him. I was not going to put more pressure on him to cope when his life has been turned upside down by an event he can't fully understand. So we didn't do much schooling after that. He had a recharge cuddle and went off to play.

When I had time for a tea break, I went out and we played a game together. We talked about his feelings and about what we could try tomorrow that might work better for him. He was fine after that. Acknowledgement of his feelings and a reassuring cuddle. Helps heal the grief of change.

As a person who already suffers from anxiety, this every changing situation with the coronavirus has been a challenge for me. I was already scared of the worst happening, of my family being sick or dying. Now to see everyone seemingly around me is feeling these fears too?? Terrifying. And then trying to hold it together and help your children work through those fears too? Tough.

But... one thing I have learned through past traumas and difficult times is to look for the small blessings. Without realising it, God has placed beauty in all the things around us, these are all messages of hope from him, reminding us that he loves us. Blessing us.

After the death of my baby son, I learned to look for the small things, things that often go unnoticed. Water droplets on a flower petal in the garden, morning sunrise making the sky light up like gold or a butterfly on a flower nearby. I remember one day driving down a main road on my way home from a difficult hospital appointment and it had just been raining. When the sun came out I felt my eyes were opened to beauty I had not noticed before. All the trees along the road just glimmered and sparkled, so did the road. It was enough to make me smile when at the time, my heart was full of pain.

Gratefulness is an antidote for fear.

It can feel similar with God. We long to see his hand working, but it's hard. All we see is our hardship and fear. Even if we can't see Jesus in our situation, we can look for him there, in the small things. Take a moment to look around you, what is in your life that you appreciate but hadn't noticed before? God has placed love notes all around us in the world through nature and people. Little reminders of his presence and care.

Jesus doesn't promise to take away our hardships, but he promises to be there with us. That means he bunkers down with us. He's there feeling the pain and the grief too. When we focus on Jesus, his character and his love for us, the grace he offers us even when we're down and angry, and the hope of an eternity with him. Our perspective can change. We may start seeing how this situation can have some silver linings. Letting go of my feelings of the need to control my situation has brought about a wonderful feeling of joy and freedom.

Like the best thing I did this weekend was give my kids a few tins of paint and let them paint the cubby house however they wanted. It is the most beautiful rainbow cubby you'll ever see. Yes there is paint on things we perhaps would have preferred to be left alone (like our nice fence or the rock steps in our garden) but the uplifting of spirits that day brought our family was precious and vital. The kids said "it was the best day ever". We didn't have to go anywhere special, just our backyard and together.

I can see how God has used this situation to strip away the distractions and help me focus on what is important. We're less wasteful with our food (and toilet paper!), we're investing more time in each other and our relationships. I see our communities are connecting with each other and reaching out to help each other. That means we're helping others have things to be thankful for, we're sharing a little bit of hope around.

I think we have all come to realisation that we are not in control of our lives like we thought we were. That we need each other, that we need to know God is in control. All we can do now is wait and pray, and see what other blessings God will bring out of this new normal we are living in. And with acknowledgment of our human feelings and a grateful mindset, we can see God's hand moving throughout this difficult time. We can know his presence is with us, no matter how long this season of uncertainty is for. We can be certain that Jesus is our hope.

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