



STUDENTS ARE STRESSED. EDUCATORS CAN HELP

SCHOOL COUNSELORS OFFER STRATEGIES EDUCATORS CAN USE
TO ADDRESS STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

BY KWOK-SZE RICHARD WONG

Childhood and adolescence are stressful, even in the best of times — and these are not the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased already-high stress and anxiety levels among students. In addition to the health dangers of the virus, and the sense of worry

and hopelessness some families are experiencing due to job losses, school closures have caused many students to lose a source of stability and support.

All plans to support students, both during distance learning and the eventual return to classrooms, should include a focus on students' social and emotional health and well-

being. Like all of the other challenges we're navigating right now, this will take professional learning to do well. Fortunately, teachers, and those who lead and support them, can learn from the strategies of professionals trained to help students navigate challenging times: school counselors.

The American School Counselor

Association has developed many resources and teamed with organizations such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the National Association of School Psychologists, and the American Academy of Pediatrics to provide assistance for helping students with social and emotional needs during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

While we encourage leaders and teachers to leverage school counselors' expertise in working with students directly, we also want to share some strategies and advice that you, and the educators you support, can apply in everyday ways.

UNCERTAINTY BRINGS STRESS

Despite the way school is portrayed in coming-of-age films and books, most students enjoy going to school. Many students view school as a safe harbor that provides a stable environment for cognitive, emotional, and social growth as well as physical safety.

For some, school is a respite from a volatile home life, especially in extreme cases such as homelessness, food insecurity, undocumented status, or abuse by a family member. Some students feel school is a place to be their authentic selves — for example, LGBTQ youth who have not come out to their families but have affirming peer

relationships at school.

Most schools have instituted distance learning to continue the educational process, but the uncertainty of working in a new environment may bring heightened stress. That may be especially true for students who do not have the necessary resources, must share a computer with other school-aged siblings, do not have space conducive for school work, or are expected to take care of younger siblings, perform household chores, or work at the family business. Such disparities may highlight the inequities for students who already feel disadvantaged relative to their peers.

Even with distance learning, all students are at greater risk of feeling lonely and isolated. They miss their friends and the routine of school. At the same time, they may feel more stress from being in close quarters with their family members without the opportunity for breaks.

START BY CONNECTING AND LISTENING

The first step to supporting students in this time is to communicate with students frequently and show concern for them. Asking about their well-being regularly shows students empathy and compassion, and one caring adult in a student's life makes a world of difference.

Personal contact, even virtually, helps alleviate their sense of isolation

and loneliness. You may want to share some of the following strategies with the educators you support to help them cement the connections that are so important right now.

When conducting distance learning classes, take a minute before starting the lesson to ask students how they're feeling and discuss any questions they may have. Provide relevant information without unnecessary details, and always try to present it in a positive but realistic way. Similarly, avoid negative terms when possible because negative terms tend to foster negative thoughts.

It's also important to communicate with students individually via email, the chat function of the distance learning platform, or phone. Show concern for students by asking questions. Learn their fears and concerns. It's hard to reassure students when you don't know what's making them anxious or afraid. Don't try to answer all their questions in one conversation.

Don't tell students they shouldn't be worried. Instead, legitimize students' feelings and help students manage their fear and uncertainty by identifying behaviors caused by their fears and changing their behaviors so they don't act out of fear. They can't control their feelings, but they can control their behavior, which can change their feelings.

Teachers have many opportunities to teach self-regulation skills. A social and



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emotional learning (SEL) curriculum is one option, but there are other everyday strategies that help, too. You can start each class (whether in-person or online) with a check-in that helps students learn to recognize their mental and emotional states and share strategies that are helping classmates cope.

You can lead mindfulness exercises by asking students to take a minute to breathe deeply and slowly and to be aware of their surroundings. You can also use guided imagery by asking students to close their eyes and envision their favorite place, or teachers can describe a tranquil place such as a beach or a forest.

In addition to relaxation and mindfulness that help students replace anxious and fearful thoughts, you can explore other strategies for addressing stress and overall wellness. One way is to encourage students to engage in a hobby.

Many activities are currently unavailable to students, but they can engage in reading, journaling, blogging, painting or drawing, playing music, or practicing TikTok dances with friends online. This can be a good time to learn a new skill or find a new hobby.

School leaders, as well as teachers, can encourage students (and their families) to establish a predictable routine at home to help reduce uncertainty in daily life. Students should also keep in touch with friends virtually. And even though they should keep their distance from others, they should exercise as much as possible to remain physically fit and expend energy. All these activities provide a healthy distraction from their stressors and promote expression of their feelings.

LEAVE SPACE FOR LOSS

A consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is grief. Grief can come from any loss, not just the death of a loved one, which many students (and staff) are experiencing. Students are also facing loss of mobility, loss of companionship with their friends, loss of their daily routine, and, for many, loss of life events they'd anticipated

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for years, such as graduation and promotion ceremonies. Grief can have a significant impact on students' learning, school performance, and social and emotional development.

Students experience and exhibit grief in different ways. They may have trouble sleeping, experience difficulty with concentration and be distracted easily, become confused or overwhelmed by school assignments, lose interest and motivation, or have outbursts of anger or despair. They may be unable to request help because they can't imagine what might make them feel better. They may withdraw and become isolated or feel embarrassed by their strong feelings.

Although educators should not be expected to be grief counselors, they can support students by recognizing these signs and identifying when students are struggling with grief. You may want to share these strategies with the teachers and other staff you support so they can be of greatest help to students:

Acknowledge the loss. Adults often avoid talking about death and loss because they feel awkward, don't want to cause more pain for a student inadvertently, and don't know what to say. Unfortunately, silence may send the message that the student's loss and grief aren't important and that the adult doesn't care or isn't willing to provide support. A simple, straightforward comment, such as, "I was so sorry to hear about your loss. I'm thinking about you and your family" can make a big difference.

Ensure school is a safe place, not a source of additional stress. Grieving students typically struggle with

classwork, some for the first time in their lives. This can create anxiety and frustration. Many schools have relaxed grading procedures during shutdown and distance learning, which is helpful to students. School staff should be flexible in assignments, grading, and overall policies so grief, loss, anxiety, and stress will not have a negative impact on student performance, both during the shutdown and after schools reopen.

Be aware and refer. It's important to help students and their families access resources that can help them cope. Administrators, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and school social workers are usually trained to provide this type of support. Since many students only have contact with one teacher right now, rather than the range of specialists and support people they usually interact with at school, it's especially important for teachers to help make these connections.

CHANGE CAN LEAD TO GROWTH

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that the only constant in life is change. That's an important lesson that many students are just beginning to learn. Throughout their lives, students will be confronted with problems that require them to learn to manage and accept changing situations.

The COVID-19 crisis, while probably the most serious global problem they'll face, is the beginning of many unanticipated challenges. Supporting students' social and emotional development will help students develop the underlying abilities to cope with any situation as well as help them get through the current situation.

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