

Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic Review

Information provided by:

- Kevin Chapman, Ph.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist
- Miraim Silman, MSW, Project AWARE/Trauma Informed Care Program Administration
- Ginny Sprang, Ph.D., Executive Director, Center on Trauma and Children, University of Kentucky
- Damien Sweeney, Ed.D., Program Coordinator for Comprehensive School Counseling
- Judi Vanderharr, Ph.D., Division of Student Success, Kentucky Department of Education

Signs that anxiety has become a chronic problem:

- **Chronic distress**—personally aware and bothered by stress
- **Impaired functioning**—negatively affects relationships with friends, work, and school
- **Impaired sleep**—not sleeping and having trouble adjusting to daily life

Some sources of COVID-19 stress:

- Anxiety about being exposed and getting the virus
- Having limited connections to others and to a support system
- Lack of cognitive stimulation and experiencing daily monotony
- Limited access to normal coping strategies
- Family members showing signs of stress
- Limited financial resources
- Loss and grief
- Uncertainty

Signs of stress in students:

- Clingy, whiny, tearful, frightened, or anxious
- Agitated, hyperactive, over-reactive
- Irritable, impatient, aggressive, angry
- Withdrawn, disengaged, lethargic, depressed, sad, hopeless, suicidal
- Poor concentration, limited comprehension, poor memory
- Vague physical complaints—headache, upset stomach
- Sleep and appetite disturbance
- Seeking attention, “in your face”

Types of traumatic events:

- Sexual or physical abuse
- Being in a motor vehicle accident
- Witnessing intimate partner violence
- Witnessing a sibling being abused
- Finding out a loved one has been injured or killed
- Repeated or extreme exposure to details of traumatic events

Factors that determine how an individual responds to trauma:

- Prior history or repeated history with trauma
- Social support system
- How parents and guardians cope with stress and trauma
- A history of being violated by people who should be trustworthy

Students at risk for increased stress response might have:

- Recent loss or history of significant loss
- Past or current exposure to trauma
- Pre-existing behavioral health concerns
- Limited support systems in family and community
- Feeling of isolation, difficulty with attachment and relationships
- Poor coping skills

Ways to help build resilience in students:**Connection:**

- Frequent, sustained outreach
- Mentors, buddies
- Check-in, check-out

Safety:

- Normalize stress response
- Look, ask, and listen
- Model appropriate emotional expression

Nutrition and Exercise:

- Healthy snacks
- Recess
- Movement breaks

Competence:

- Frequent targeted affirmation
- Small chunks
- Repetition, patience

Empowerment:

- Choice
- Voice
- Flexibility

Self-regulation:

- Social and Emotional Learning and emotional literacy
- Mindful focusing
- Regular breaks

What Can Schools Do?

A—Awareness: look, listen, link

B—Build Resilience: connection, safety, nutrition and exercise, competence, empowerment, self-regulation

C—Crisis Plan: building a crisis team to help the school address grief and loss

Ways to create a psychologically supportive space for students:

- Acknowledge the pandemic and the ways students are feeling before starting a lesson.
- Start classes with breathing and grounding exercises.
- Make sure to give students choice and voice in the classroom.
- Offer smaller amounts of information at a time.

Compassion for Students and Teachers

Miriam Silman, MSW, emphasizes the importance of showing compassion when dealing with a difficult student or a student showing signs of stress.

Ask: what's happened to them?

and

what's strong with them?

(not what's wrong with them)