Supporting student mental health and responding to trauma

COVID-19 and racial inequities are unfortunate realities of our time that can lead to student trauma. Trauma can include any event that leads to physical or emotional harm with lasting impacts.¹

These traumatic circumstances have a profound impact on students:

In one survey of high school and college students,

- 75% of students said their mental health had worsened to some degree because of COVID-19.
- 18% said their mental health had worsened significantly.²

The same survey found

- 81% of students struggle to focus
- 74% of students have trouble maintaining a routine during this time of pandemic.²

A July U.S. Census household pulse survey found

- 63% of Americans felt nervous, anxious, or on edge.⁴
- 52% of respondents felt down, depressed, or hopeless during the pandemic.⁴

47% of parents with children under 18 years of age have lost their jobs, lost income, or had their hours reduced without pay because of COVID-19, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.³ Family economic challenges also may impact students’ mental health.
One survey found that 55% of students do not know where to find help for mental health crises; the following are several strategies that educators and administrators can use to provide much-needed support to students.

### Promising research-based strategies to support students’ well-being

#### Understanding students’ experiences and needs.

*Students may be experiencing various types of trauma including COVID-related and racial trauma. Start by acknowledging these types so you can better understand students’ needs.*

- **Recognize early warning signs** that students may be struggling. Examples of early warning signs can include the following:
  - Intense emotional outbursts.
  - Trouble controlling behavior.
  - Withdrawal from others or appearing disconnected.
  - Changes in personal hygiene.
  - Difficulty sleeping.
  - Loss of appetite.
  - Complains of aches and pains.
  - Trouble focusing on learning.
  - Regressed behaviors or loss of previously acquired skills.
  - Increased risk-taking.

- Learn to **recognize and mitigate students’ trauma-related triggers**.

- **Connect students to trauma-specific mental health services**, including those that address traumatic grief.

#### Being responsive to your students.

*Students may have different circumstances and perspectives that affect their experiences of trauma. Learn more about each student’s experience and support each student’s individual needs.*

- Ensure that your students are **physically and emotionally safe**.

- **Listen to and validate** your students’ experiences and feelings.

- **Help students develop emotional regulation skills** by observing student interactions and providing individual support. Self-regulation is essential for students to address trauma and channel emotion into meaningful activities.

- **Keep in contact with students and reinforce that you care**, listening to students’ concerns and offering help.

- Use either nonfiction or fiction literature to **help students see parallels to real-life situations**, express their perspectives, and learn about effective ways to deal with challenges.

#### Connecting with families.

*Families are crucial partners in education. By communicating with families, you can learn more about student needs and share resources for supporting students at home.*

- **Use culturally responsive and trauma-informed techniques** to build strong connections with families and support student well-being. For example, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has developed a [trauma-sensitive schools training package](#) for building trauma-sensitive learning environments.

- **Share strategies with families** that they can use to support their children at home (for example, letting students drive conversations about COVID-19 and anxiety while providing appropriate reassurance).

#### Equipping staff to support students.

*Educators are not the only people who can help students through traumatic times. Administrators are well-positioned to adjust school structures and support educator efforts.*

- **Offer opportunities** for students to connect virtually with school psychologists and counselors.

- **Partner teachers with school psychologists** to help students who have experienced trauma.

- **Offer professional development** around trauma sensitivity to your teachers.
Incorporating equity to improve trauma responsiveness

Trauma-responsive instruction requires educators to self-reflect and to connect with others about issues of equity. Tammie Causey-Konaté of the REL Southwest team provides a four-phase model to guide self-reflection and discussion with colleagues:

- **Phase I. Resist traditional domination.** This phase involves learning more about historical events and institutions that contribute to inequities and understanding your role in perpetuating and dismantling inequitable systems.
- **Phase II. Disrupt deficit-based public discourse regarding traumatic events.** This phase involves challenging dominant perspectives and incorporating the experiences and voices of underrepresented groups.
- **Phase III. Empower and arouse agency and creative self-transformation.** This phase focuses on capitalizing on your strengths to connect with others, learn about diverse perspectives, and expand your understanding.
- **Phase IV. Develop culturally affirming, sustainable solutions.** This phase involves working with others to co-develop strategies to remove barriers and expand access to opportunities for underrepresented groups.

Additional resources

To learn more, browse these curated resources from the REL network and other sources:

**REL Southwest**

- Blog post on addressing systematic racism and trauma: Taking off our blindfolds, while we wear our masks.
- REL Southwest webinar on research-based, trauma-responsive education practices, featuring resources from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments’ Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package.

**Around the REL network**

- REL Appalachia infographic on selecting the right interventions to support students’ mental health needs.
- REL Mid-Atlantic infographic on considerations for reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- REL Mid-Atlantic fact sheet on trauma-informed strategies to support the transition back to school.
- REL Midwest Ask a REL response on the prevalence of trauma and mental health concerns across student demographic groups.
- REL West video on the importance of trauma-informed practices.
- Please visit the REL Network’s COVID-19 page for additional resources to support equity during this time.

**Other sources**

- Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.
- Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools: A System Framework, developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, includes a framework and strategies for adopting a schoolwide trauma-informed approach.
- Active Minds resource hub on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mental Health America online screenings for mental health, including screenings for youth and parents.
- The Trevor Project report on implications of COVID-19 for mental health and suicide prevention among LGBTQ youth.
References


6 This is not an exhaustive list of evidence-based strategies, and the strategies were not selected systematically. Strategies were selected from REL resources because they are particularly relevant to educators to support student mental health and well-being.


