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

and

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 **55% of students do not know where to find help for mental health crises;**[2] 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[6]

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.[7,8] 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**.[9]

- ▸ **Connect students to trauma-specific mental health services**, including those that address traumatic grief.[10]

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.[8]

- ▸ **Listen to and validate** your students' experiences and feelings.[8]

- ▸ **Help students develop emotional regulation skills** by observing student interactions and providing individual support.[11] 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.[12]

- ▸ 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.[13,14]

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.[9] 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).[8,11]

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.[11]

- ▸ **Partner teachers with school psychologists** to help students who have experienced trauma.[15]

- ▸ **Offer professional development** around trauma sensitivity to your teachers.[8]

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.

▸ Trauma-Informed School Strategies During COVID-19, developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, includes strategies for supporting trauma-informed practice in schools in response to COVID-19.

▸ 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.

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