

Back to school during COVID-19:

Ways to support the mental health and wellness of students



It's no secret that this year will be especially challenging for students returning to school. Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 alone can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. Add to that, the stress of shifting school policies, procedures and plans, delayed and canceled activities and events, altered social lives, and more. Students might need help adjusting to how COVID-19 has disrupted their daily life. Following are proactive ways for caregivers, school staff and other trusted adults to support the mental health and well-being of children and teens.

Watch for and anticipate behavior changes

Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. Some common signs a child is struggling with stress and anxiety include:

- **Excessive crying or irritation** in younger children
- **Returning to behaviors they have outgrown** (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- **Excessive worry** or sadness
- **Unhealthy eating** or sleeping habits
- **Irritability** and "acting out" behaviors in teens
- **Poor school performance** or avoiding school
- **Difficulties with attention** and concentration
- **Avoidance of activities** enjoyed in the past
- **Unexplained headaches** or body pain
- **Use of alcohol**, tobacco or other drugs

Talk to them

You can help children and teens make sense of what they hear in a way that is honest, accurate, and minimizes anxiety or fear. Remember that children will react to both what you say and how you say it, so try to remain calm.

- **Reassure children.** Let them know it is OK if they feel upset. Share with them ways to deal with stress, so they can learn how to cope.
- **Be available** and let children know they can come to you when they have questions.
- **Avoid language that might blame others** and lead to stigma.
- **Pay attention to what children see or hear on TV,** radio or online. Consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19. Too much information on one topic can lead to anxiety.
- **Provide information that is truthful and appropriate** for the age and developmental level of the child.
- **Teach children everyday actions** to reduce the spread of germs.
- **If school is open, discuss any new actions** that may be taken at school to help protect children and school staff.

Discuss facts about COVID-19

Try to keep information simple and age-appropriate, and remind them that health and school officials are working hard to keep everyone safe and healthy.

- **What is COVID-19?** COVID-19 is the short name for “coronavirus disease 2019.” It is a new virus. Scientists and doctors are still learning about it. Recently, this virus has made a lot of people sick. Scientists and doctors are trying to learn more so they can help people who get sick. Doctors and health experts are working hard to help people stay healthy.
- **What can I do so that I don’t get COVID-19?** You can practice healthy habits at home, school and play to help protect against the spread of COVID-19.
- **What happens if you get sick with COVID-19?** COVID-19 can look different in different people. For many people, being sick with COVID-19 would be a little bit like having the flu. People can get a fever, cough or have a hard time taking deep breaths. Most people who have gotten COVID-19 have not gotten very sick. Only a small group of people who get it have had more serious problems. If you do get sick, it doesn’t mean you have COVID-19. People can get sick from all kinds of germs. What’s important to remember is that if you do get sick, the adults at home will help get you any help that you need.

Note: If you suspect your child or student may have COVID-19, call your health care provider to let them know before you bring your child in to see them.

Help them manage stress and worry

Being a caregiver is difficult, even in the best of times. Get the support you need – when you need it.

- **Check if your school has a plan to help students adjust to being back in school.** Support may include school counseling and psychological services (including grief counseling), social-emotional learning (SEL)-focused programs and curricula, and peer/social support groups.
- **Put news in context,** and talk about the things that are happening to keep people safe and healthy.
- **Engage children in creative activities,** such as playing and drawing, to help them express and communicate any negative feelings they may be experiencing in a safe and supportive environment. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness.
- **Help them find ways to relax,** such as by taking deep breaths, stretching or meditating, and encourage them to do activities they enjoy, like exercising, gaming, reading or other hobbies.
- **Spend time with them.**
- **Be a role model by practicing self-care.** For example, take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise, eat a healthy diet and stay socially connected.

Help them build resilience

The ability to adapt well to adversity and trauma can help students manage stress, and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Encourage students to:

1. **Make friends.** Connecting with people provides social support and strengthens resilience.
2. **Help others.** Children who may feel helpless can be empowered by helping others. Engage them in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for help with a task they can master.
3. **Develop and stick to routine,** as routines can provide a source of comfort.
4. **Take a break** and focus on something besides what's worrying them.
5. **Practice self-care,** including by eating properly, exercising and resting. Caring for oneself and having fun helps you stay balanced and better able to deal with stressful times.
6. **Move toward goals.** Even a tiny step forward can help focus students on what they have accomplished, and help build the resilience to move forward in the face of challenges.
7. **Nurture a positive self-view.** Remind children they have successfully handled hardships in the past, which helped them build the strength to handle future challenges. Help children learn to trust themselves to solve problems and make appropriate decisions.
8. **Keep things in perspective** and maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic and positive outlook enables children to see the good things in life and keep going even in the hardest times.
9. **Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** Tough times are often the times when children learn the most about themselves. Help children take a look at how whatever they are facing can teach them "what they're made of."
10. **Accept that change is part of living.** Change often can be scary for children and teens. Help children see that change is part of life and new goals can replace goals that have become unattainable.

These tips are abbreviated from the American Psychological Association. For the full list, as well as age-specific guidance on building resilience, go here.

Seek additional help and resources

If a child is taking steps to manage stress and anxiety and they don't seem to be helping, here are some additional resources:

Mental health screening

Free, private and anonymous screening at: mhascreening.org.

Based on the results, MHA will provide information and resources to help.

Crisis hotlines and textlines

Crisis counselors are available every day, all day:

Call **1-800-985-5990**

Text **TalkWithUs** to **66746**

If in crisis or thinking about suicide, get in touch with someone immediately:

Call **1-800-273-8255 (TALK)**

Text **MHA** to **741741**

This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Consult with your clinician for specific health care needs, treatment or medication. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and its components may not be available in all states or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks or the property of their respective owners. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2020 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF2989888 204835-082020 OHC