

Trauma: Social Distancing, COVID-19, Distance Learning, and Stay-at-Home Orders

Humans are innately drawn to others for physical, social, emotional support and connection to one another. Even those students who seem to happily beat to their own individual drum require some level of connection to other humans. Students these days are also hyper-connected to one another, via social media, and while that can ease some of the social distancing concerns, it can also bring a new slew of web-based trauma and drama. The fact that our time frame for social distancing and distance education is not fixed, can increase trauma and anxiety. There are a myriad of ways students may exhibit their response to trauma, and each student will respond differently.

Identifying Trauma

Trauma in our students is a little harder to identify when we don't see them face-to-face frequently. Pay attention to an influx of emails that seem more anxiety-ridden than most. If you had a student who already expressed anxiety symptoms, or you know was diagnosed with anxiety, check-in on the students and be prepared to show grace. Most humans don't like change, especially when already feeling anxious, so be prepared for some push back or avoidance of work in our new context.

Students may experience a range of emotions during this time:

1. *Fear and Anxiety*: Both about the unknown and what they are hearing on the news/from their parents about this virus. Students may experience excessive worry or sadness as their routines, lives, and social interactions are completely changed.
2. *Depression and Boredom*: Going off routine can be fun for a little while, but most of the kids are completely changing their routines. Sports are on hiatus: a place where kids not only get out a lot of nerves and energy but also thrive in ways they might not at academics. Hanging out with friends is done online despite our every insistence that in-person is a better way to express themselves and grow empathy. Even seeing extended family members is considered off-limits with social distancing. The outlets students once had to combat depression and boredom are now, indefinitely, shut off for them. I can only imagine how this feels for those students who have birthdays or important events during this time, who likely feel very alone when their important milestones are forced to be diminished.
3. *Anger, frustration, or irritability*: We have all had to give up a lot of control over our lives during this time – even how many items we can buy at the store! Some students may seem to have a quicker “switch” to flip when feeling overwhelmed or not understanding the material. This may also lead to students avoiding school or their performance dropping. Keep parents informed when students are not present for courses and make sure to check-in with families when students seem unengaged.

Below you will find more behavior changes adults might see in children right now, as well as ways we can help children cope with the changes, upheaval, and anxiety they might be facing.

SCHOOL-AGE (ages 6-12)	Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior	Patience, tolerance, and reassurance
	Clinging, nightmares	Play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and Internet
	Sleep/appetite disturbance	Regular exercise and stretching
	Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches)	Engage in educational activities (workbooks, educational games)
	Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest	Participate in structured household chores
	Competition for parents' attention	Set gentle but firm limits
	Forgetfulness about chores and new information learned at school	Discuss the current outbreak and encourage questions. Include what is being done in the family and community
		Encourage expression through play and conversation
		Help family create ideas for enhancing health promotion behaviors and maintaining family routines
		Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school
	Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation	

*From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

What You Can Do and Encourage (Adapted and Copied from PsyCom article)

1. *Acknowledge what's happening, and that it's stressful.* Because it is. "Denial is a remarkably adaptive skill," says Dr. Kaplin. Reassure your students they are safe, but understand they may still feel confusion and fear with all the unknown around us.
2. *Stay connected.* Social distancing does not mean social isolation. You can still FaceTime, call, text, have a Zoom meeting with peers.
 - For our students that might mean performing more email check-ins.
 - It could also look like requesting a zoom session on your "off" afternoons with an advisee who you have particular concerns about. If your advisee was already anxious or you feel this situation is causing anxiety, request a zoom video meeting to check-in with that student (including another advisor or team member, when possible).
3. *Do benefit finding.* "Looking for the good is an important strategy," says Dr. Julie Kolzet, Ph.D., and a licensed psychologist in NYC (who also sees patients remotely). An example would be if you're doing school work from home, you get to sleep in a little later before the school day starts.
 - Try keeping a gratitude journal of positive interactions, positive learning experiences, or new experiences students get to have with family with the additional time at home.
4. *Try breathing exercises.* Mindful breathing where you match your in breath with your out breath and focus on scanning your body is calming. You don't have to spend 20 minutes, even three minutes will help.
 - [Deep Belly Breathing](#)
 - [Bee breathing](#)

- [4-7-8 breathing](#)
 - [Box Breathing](#) (most kids choose this method when I teach it)
 - [10 second breath](#)
5. *Exercise your body:* Body movement helps to keep our brains active, our neural connections strong, and produces necessary chemical reactions (like creating serotonin which helps regulate emotions) in our bodies to hold the symptoms of depression and anxiety at bay. Encourage students to participate in the videos posted by PE, to take a walk around their neighborhood, or to just have a family dance party in their living room.
 6. *Be kind.* It doesn't just benefit someone else; you reap the rewards too. According to research, when you do something nice for someone else, your brain's pleasure and reward centers light up. It's called the "helper's high."
 - Give yourself small breaks throughout the day to remove yourself from the stress. This could mean taking a walk around the house, listening to music for a few minutes, drawing, pray, or playing with a pet. Taking this time can actually boost your immune system.
 7. *Share something good.* Even if it's something small or mundane, like a funny meme or cute picture. Letting someone else in on it, amplifies the good feelings you got from it.
 - Use advisory time to let students share the positives of staying at home. Did they get to clean their room? Did they finally complete that puzzle? Have they had more time with their parents? Did they get to practice their baking skills?
 8. *Change your expectations.* You add to your own stress levels by creating goals that are unrealistic. "Be easy on yourself," advises Dr. Kolzet. "It's not an easy time. Do what you can." Dr Kaplin agrees. "Our culture doesn't believe in giving people time to recover and react," he explains.
 - Your routine may be changed but you can still manage a routine. Create a new routine for yourself that you can stick to, just as you would during a normal school week. Stick to a nighttime routine and bed-time, much like your typical schedule. Changing sleep patterns can worsen symptoms of depression. Be kind to yourself, understanding you won't do this perfectly every day.
 9. *Manage your news intake.* It is way too easy to get sucked into press conference after press conference and then to check for updates on websites or to obsessively check in on the number of confirmed cases in your state. Being informed doesn't require you to act like you're a newsroom producer. It's okay to set a few times a day where you'll check in for updates. And, stick to reliable news outlets. Rumors spread quickly and feed into the panic

If you need more assistance, make sure you reach out to the leadership team and the counselors on campus. If you have a question for Cortney Kindall-Ritchey, email her and Becky Swope at bswope@pshouston.org.

Sources

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