



Maintaining Connections, Reducing Anxiety While School Is Closed

Teachers can play a huge role in helping students with anxiety or trauma histories feel safe right now—even from a distance.

Jessica Minahan

Seemingly overnight, the world changed. Teachers and school leaders have had to revamp their entire instructional systems with, in many instances, only a day's notice. To say many of us are experiencing whiplash, disorientation, and anxiety is an understatement.

Our students are feeling it too. Typically, nationwide, one in three teenagers has

experienced clinically significant anxiety in their lifetime ([Merikangas et al., 2010](#)). It's probable that during a pandemic that heavily impacts everyday life, levels of anxiety in children and teens are even higher, and the possibility of subsequent trauma greater.

In these unprecedented times, teachers are rising to the occasion creatively and quickly to shift to remote learning amidst school closures.

Even in a traditional classroom, it can be a challenge to support students with anxiety and trauma histories to stay calm and learn. With distance learning, this difficulty is magnified. However, there is much teachers *can* do to reduce anxiety in students even while teaching remotely. During this crisis, we need to prioritize students' mental health over academics. The impact of trauma can be lifelong, so what students learn during this time ultimately won't be as important as whether they feel safe.

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Essential: Maintaining Connections

In a time of crisis and change, when students are separated from their school adults, it's paramount to help them continue to feel safe, cared for, and connected. Strong relationships with teachers can insulate anxious students from escalating.

Teachers across the country are finding creative ways to stay connected with students. For example, many communities have held a "teacher parade," with educators driving through the neighborhood while students waved from their doorsteps. Teachers have also, with precautions for safety, delivered school lunches door-to-door.

Connecting doesn't have to be time-consuming to be effective. Providing a video of yourself explaining a concept, posing a challenge question, or doing a read aloud is a fabulous way to help students feel connected

to you and the class. In any video, greeting the students and explicitly telling them you miss being with them and can't wait to see them again is a powerful way to help them feel cared for.

Whenever possible, make the effort to connect with each student individually. One supportive adult can help a student overcome a very difficult home situation and shield them from resultant anxiety (Brooks, 2003). A connection with a caring teacher can be a lifeline for a vulnerable student. For students who don't have internet access, try a cell phone-based messaging communication system like Remind—or traditional mail. Other strategies for making these individual connections include:

- *Send individual messages.* Instead of sending a group email to students, copy and paste the content and send it individually to each student, using their name in the opening. When communicating individually with a student (through Google Classroom, email, etc.), use the student's name often in the correspondence. It will make them feel special.

- *Make phone calls.* Receiving a call at home can cheer up not only the student, but the parents as well, and provides tangible proof that you care. Creating a Google Voice account will allow parents and students to leave voicemails for you. You can also send and receive texts with a family in their home language using this app.

- *Send a brief letter to each of your students and include a stamped envelope so they can respond.* This is a nice way to start a dialogue. Jotting a personal note back to a student who responds can mean the world to that student if she's feeling isolated and anxious. You can do a similar thing via email, but sending letters through the mail can ensure equity for students who may not have consistent computer access. A letter is also something concrete a student can save and refer to when feeling stressed.

- *Use a folder in Google Classroom or other file-sharing program for students to share art and other work.* This allows you to provide personal

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positive feedback, which is essential for students who don't receive acknowledgement from their caregivers.

- *Hold “office hours” during which students and caretakers can check in through messaging, a conferencing app, or a phone call to ask for help or to connect.* For older learners, you might schedule small-group Zoom, Skype, or Google Hangouts meetings for students who need help with content, creating another opportunity to provide more individual attention.

- *Create routines.* Consistency helps students feel safe and calm. Having something like a recorded video morning greeting or a Zoom help session at the same time each day gives structure to the day, and is helpful when things feel unpredictable.

- *Establish daily check-ins.* Have students show you how they are feeling. For young students, this might mean sending an [emoji during morning meeting](#) with the option of sharing publicly or just with you, or at any age students can signal a thumbs up or thumbs down before a distance-learning lesson. Students in upper elementary through high school could use a private Google form to check in each day (see an example from the [Association of Middle Level Education](#)). If a student indicates distress in his or her check-in, follow up through email, one-on-one conferencing, or a phone call.

- *Use the village.* Give each member of the school community who isn't involved in distance learning (such as paraprofessionals, school nurses, or counselors) a list of families to call weekly. It would be helpful to give each caller a reference sheet for how to respond to anxiety in students (using the suggestions below).

Responding to Anxiety, Fear, or Panic

As we keep lines of communication and connection open, educators need to be prepared to respond to difficult questions from stressed and traumatized students. Students with anxiety and trauma histories tend to think negatively. Scary information can be magnified. Here are some suggestions for responding most helpfully:

- *Validate feelings.* Before you make any suggestions, reflect back something like “It sounds like you're scared” or “I'm sorry you are so worried.” Tell the student it's normal to feel anxious when routines have changed.

- *Stay calm.* Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it. When reassuring students, have the cadence, intonation, and volume of your voice on the phone or video mimic the way you would read a story to a youngster. Students are watching us. If we seem anxious, it could confirm their worst fears.

- *Be truthful.* Being vague or minimizing the facts can be unsettling to young children—and send older kids searching online for more information, which sometimes creates greater anxiety. We want to make sure they don't overestimate the danger or underestimate their ability to protect themselves—or the need to do so. Tell them the basic facts, including that young people don't typically get sick with the virus and that washing hands and social distancing are the best courses of action. Be optimistic, but don't overpromise when asked about school closings. “I can't wait to be all together again” is more appropriate than “I'll see you soon.”

- *Reframe negative comments.* When a student makes an inaccurate or overly negative comment like “We've been in the house forever” or “We can't ever see my grandmother again,” respond with an accurate and more positive reframe: “You have been in the house for 10 days, but it's so nice you are all healthy and together” or “It's so important that you are taking care of your grandmother by staying away. It's wonderful that she's healthy and you can connect over FaceTime.” For

more ideas on reframing, see “[Mindset Shift During a Pandemic](#)” by mental health advocate Sumaira Z, and for more on reframing negative thoughts, see my 2019 article “[Tackling Negative Thinking in the Classroom](#).”

■ *Remind students to look for the helpers.* Mr. Rogers famously said that when frightening information is on the news, children should look for the helpers. This positive focus helps deter negative thinking. A wonderful suggestion to give students after they report an upsetting news story is to ask them to count the helpers mentioned, focusing them on the good that often far outnumbers the bad. Young students can be asked to list five helpers supporting people at this time. Teens might write a letter to—or an essay about—a helper. Encourage students to access positive news stories at [goodnewsnetwork.org](#) or [inspiremore.com](#).

■ *Notify a caretaker if a student expresses serious fear and anxiety.* If you have significant concerns regarding panic, self-harm, or aggressive behaviors, you may want to—with the guidance of the school counselor—recommend a parent seek the help of a therapist for their child (many are practicing through remote sessions).

Giving Students a Sense of Control

One of the most terrifying aspects of the pandemic is that it's out of our control. Typically, people have a baseline belief that bad things (like car crashes) are unlikely to happen to them, which stops us from being in a constant state of anxiety. When a crisis affects us all, we can feel that any bad thing is now possible and experience catastrophic thinking (“everyone I love could die!”). Particularly for anxious students and students with trauma histories, maintaining a sense of even limited control can ease this pervasive anxiety. Here are several ways teachers can empower students:

■ *Remind them of what they can control.* Remind students that by following health guidelines like washing hands, getting adequate nutrition, and practicing social distancing, they are protecting themselves and others—and

sacrificing for others, which is what heroes do.

■ *Suggest journaling.* Students of all ages can be empowered by keeping a journal about their experience of this unprecedented time (which may even someday be a primary source for historical research).

■ *Encourage helping others.* Research suggests that a focus on helping others is empowering and can help us all feel better in times of crisis (Bokszczanin, 2012). “Distance” volunteering ideas include starting a story and sending it to an elderly neighbor to finish, creating posters to combat racism resulting from COVID-19, reading to younger children via video chat, and making birthday cards for foster children who are celebrating in isolation. [Dosomething.org](#) is a great place to find structured online volunteering opportunities for youth.

Remember, Behavior Is Communication

Many students will communicate their feelings through changes in behavior. Not all children and teens react to stress the same way, but the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) lists common behavior changes to look out for during this crisis, when interacting with students:

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children.
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, bedwetting).
- Excessive worry or sadness.
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits.
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens.
- Difficulty with attention and concentration.
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past.
- Unexplained headaches or body pain.
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

When you see students disengage from activities, mention alcohol use, or write an irritable note, respond with compassion. Their behavior is their way of telling you “I’m scared, nervous, or uneasy.” It’s helpful to share this information with caretakers, who may misunderstand the student’s behavior as just being lazy or having an attitude. For a detailed list

of common anxiety-related behaviors by age, with suggestions of how families can respond, refer to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network's factsheet](#).

Teach Emotional- and Behavioral-Regulation Strategies

Even when we aren't physically with students, teachers can provide much-needed instruction in emotional-regulation strategies. Students with anxiety and those who are experiencing trauma require specific instruction on how to manage anxious feelings. Their feelings are too big for them to regulate without such guidance, and the student may not have a supportive caretaker.

- *Share strategies.* In a recorded video greeting or letter, mention strategies that *you* used that day. Create a shared folder on Google Classroom so students can share their own emotional-regulation strategies, like distracting themselves with an engrossing movie. Sharing experiences reduces stigma and normalizes needing strategies or support.

- *Give reminders.* At the end of a lesson, remind students of a strategy they can use if they're feeling overwhelmed. Tell them you can't wait to connect again tomorrow.

- *Limit exposure to news, including news or discussions about the pandemic on social media.* Suggest parameters around watching/reading the news, such as not more than 20 minutes per day or only watching the evening news with your family. To shield younger students from scary information, provide caretakers links on how to set up parent controls on devices. Encourage older students to avoid triggering apocalyptic online games like *Pandemic*.

- *Teach media literacy.* Help students develop skills in evaluating information they read or hear. Teens can complete an assignment about discerning fake news from facts about [COVID-19 specifically](#), or more broadly. Younger students can listen to podcasts on the subject, such as [this four-part series from Brains On](#).

- *Teach "channel switching."* Teach students

that their brain is like a remote control that they can use to "[switch the channel](#)" to help them calm down when they're feeling anxious. Cognitive distractions or thought breaks are incompatible with negative thinking and can break the cycle of anxiety. Suggest listening to an audiobook or a "find the picture" book for younger children, or *Mad Libs*, trivia, or saying the alphabet backwards for older ones.

- *Strengthen independent work skills.* We're asking a lot of our anxious students—to work in a whole new way at a time when they may be flooded by negative thoughts and worry. Self-pacing, organizing materials, initiation, and persistence are challenging tasks for anxious students under typical circumstances. They may actually be dependent on teachers to support them in getting work done. It's helpful to explicitly teach these skills. Suggestions on how to embed specific teaching and strategies for initiation, persistence, and help-seeking behaviors are included in my 2017 *Educational Leadership* article "[Helping Anxious Students Move Forward](#)."


- *Encourage grounding and mindfulness.* Mindfulness practices can protect students from being overcome with anxiety. Being outdoors can be a grounding experience. So whenever possible, embed outdoor activities in science and math lessons and remind students that while they are working on the assignment, outdoors is a great place to practice mindfulness activities (some free resources are available from [Mindful](#)).

- *Focus on gratitude.* Gratitude reduces anxiety and increases well-being (Jans-Beken et al., 2018). Have students keep a gratitude journal or prompt them to write five things they're grateful for as an assignment.

- *Develop emotional identification.* Giving young students activities that will help them identify the emotions they may be feeling makes the internal experience less scary and more normalized. Whenever possible have read alouds, [online games](#), and videos involve emotional identification and emotional-regulation strategies. Give all students productive ideas for

how to express their feelings, such as drawing or talking to a close friend.

On the Front Lines Against Anxiety

During this crisis, teachers must perform a critical role in combatting trauma and anxiety. While academics are important, our most important task is supporting the mental health of students, especially our most vulnerable students. By maintaining connections, teaching key coping strategies, listening and responding to students' behavior, and helping students feel in control, we can help them come through this challenging time feeling resilient and supported. When the crisis is over, students won't remember what you taught them—they'll remember that you made them feel safe and cared for. 

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