

Teaching Sensitive Content

Health class is a place where students will be learning about themselves, including their health habits and relationships. It is also a place where students can have some of their most important questions answered. Teaching health involves teaching content that is sensitive for some instructors, students, and families. Topics like mental and emotional health, body image, and substance use might pose unique challenges, including strong opinions from students and the community. In this section, you will learn about creating a safe space for students in your classroom, teaching difficult topics sensitively, and practicing cultural responsiveness.

Creating a Safe Space

Topics like suicide, eating disorders, and violence can bring a lot of emotion, experiences, and questions to some classrooms. To discuss important, sensitive topics in a helpful way that will not cause harm to students, each class needs to be a safe space with mutual trust and respect.

One of the most important steps for establishing this positive environment is setting *ground rules* for class. Ground rules or a group agreement will help maintain a sense of order as you discuss sensitive topics. Your students should be the ones to create these rules or agreements, with your guidance. As a class, you should discuss these ground rules and agree on them. Then, you can turn these rules into clearly stated expectations and post them in the classroom for students to see.

The list of ground rules does not have to be long. It just needs to include things your students and you think are important. Some examples of ground rules follow:

- Be respectful of your classmates and instructor.
- Think about your questions before you ask them.
- No offensive words.
- No sharing personal stories.
- Show respect for people's differences, including differences in race, family and ethnic background, sex, ability, and beliefs.
- Listen while others are talking and do not interrupt.

Another strategy for creating a safe space is setting up a *Question-and-Answer Box*, if permitted to do so. This will allow students to ask questions they might not want to say in class and give you time to think about and answer questions without being put on the spot.

For example, you could give all students an index card at the beginning of each lesson. At the end of every class, you could have students hand their index cards back to you, whether they wrote a question or not. This will prevent students who want to ask a question from feeling singled out, and you can recycle blank cards for another class. You can then answer students' questions, either in class discussion or by posting the answer in an *Answer Area* for students to read on their own. Some questions that are shocking in

nature may need to be rephrased to make the answer appropriate and relevant.

When teaching sensitive topics, you will also want to be aware of state and local laws and requirements for reporting. For example, Texas Family Code §§ 261.001, 261.101 requires immediate reporting in the case of suspected abuse or neglect. Texas Health & Safety Code §§ 611.004 requires disclosure if there is an immediate threat of physical, mental, or emotional injury to the patient or another person. Over the course of class, you might encounter students who show signs of suicidal thoughts or abuse at home. Being aware of state and local laws will help you know how to respond.

Be a trusted source for any student who comes to you and be supportive in your actions and responses. If you cannot directly help a student or answer a question, refer the student to the appropriate person or group that can help. Know your school's or district's expectations regarding what you can and cannot advise, but be an advocate in helping students get the help they need.

Teaching Difficult Topics

Whether this is your first time teaching health or you have taught these topics for many years, being aware of some factors can make instruction easier and more helpful for students. If this is your first time, you may be feeling nervous and uncomfortable, concerned about what to expect. If you are a veteran teacher, this may be your favorite subject to teach.

Students want health information from a trusted and credible source (you) and they want accurate and up-to-date information that is relevant to their lives. By the time you teach difficult topics in health class, hopefully you have established a positive learning environment, built trust within your classroom (among students and between you and your students), and developed rapport with your students so they can receive sensitive topics openly and honestly.

Know State and Local Laws

Before teaching difficult topics, become well versed in state and local laws and requirements that deal with them. For example, in Texas, a School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) reviews the health education materials for each district. Schools are required to provide parents and guardians the opportunity to opt students out of instruction related to human sexuality. During this instruction, students who have been opted out should be separated from the class and may participate in alternative activities. Other laws related to health instruction in Texas can be found in the Texas Education Code.

Sometimes sensitive topics might bring out student emotions or disclosures of assault or abuse. Know where students can go to get help, such as a school nurse or school counselor. Also, know your personal and professional responsibilities, as outlined by state or local laws, in reporting suspected assault or abuse. For example, Texas Family Code §§ 261.001, 261.101 requires immediate reporting in the case of suspected abuse or neglect. It is important to know your students, know your parents, know your school community, and use common sense dealing with sensitive issues.

Answer Sensitive Questions

One element of teaching difficult topics that can cause apprehension is answering

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questions. You might feel nervous anticipating the types of questions you will get.

When students ask questions, remember to use the materials and resources available to you. If you do not feel you have a good answer to a question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know, but I will try and find out.” You may need to research the question, using valid and reliable sources of information. You can also talk to a school nurse or someone else in the medical field. If you cannot find a good answer, or if you are not permitted to discuss the topic or question, refer the student to an appropriate and safe source.

Examples of questions you may encounter include questions requesting clarification, “Am I normal?” questions, “Is it okay to do this...?” questions, or shock questions to get a reaction. When answering any question, base your answer on what is in the curriculum (the facts!). Be appropriate and clear and use appropriate, unbiased terminology. Follow your class’s ground rules, do not share your personal beliefs or information, and refer students to another appropriate adult, if needed.

Understand Your Own Values and Beliefs

When you are teaching health, it is important to understand your own values and beliefs so you do not impose them onto your students or let them interfere with your instruction. The way you teach is just as important as the information you are teaching, and it is important to keep instruction objective, unbiased, and neutral. If you feel that, because of personal values and beliefs, you cannot effectively teach a topic, talk with your campus or district administration.

As stated earlier, students want this information, they want it from a trusted source, and that trusted source is you. Appreciate the opportunity you have to share health content with your students. By doing this, you can truly make a difference in the outcomes of their lives and help them make healthy decisions about their own health and activities, now and in the future.

Practicing Cultural Responsiveness and Humility

When teaching health, be sensitive to the different backgrounds of your students. Part of showing sensitivity is practicing cultural responsiveness and humility. *Cultural responsiveness* is the process of learning from and respecting different cultures. *Cultural humility* is an understanding of your own culture and its blind spots when it comes to learning about other cultures.

Promoting cultural responsiveness and humility in your classroom is an ongoing process that has many benefits. The earlier and more frequently young people are exposed to diversity, the better able they will be to bridge cultural differences. Demonstrating and encouraging cultural responsiveness and humility in your classroom can help students practice these skills throughout their lives. Some strategies for practicing cultural responsiveness and humility include the following:

- Actively promote a spirit of openness, consideration, respect, and tolerance in the classroom. Listen carefully to what students say and show respect for their viewpoints.
- When teaching health concepts and skills, apply them to students’ unique communities and situations. Talk about how concepts matter in real life.
- Use a variety of teaching styles and assessment strategies, including strategies that

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support students from different cultural and language backgrounds.

- Use cooperative learning activities whenever possible and rotate group roles so everyone has leadership opportunities.
- When grouping students, make sure the composition of each group is as diverse as possible.
- Incorporate learning materials that reflect cultural diversity and give examples that will resonate with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Give students opportunities to share aspects of their culture with the class.
- Make sure one group's opinions do not dominate class discussions.
- If a student makes a sexist, racist, stereotyping, or other offensive comment, ask the student to rephrase the comment in a way that will not offend other class members. Remind students that offensive statements and behavior are inappropriate.
- If a difficult classroom situation arises involving a diversity issue, ask for a time-out and have everyone write down thoughts and opinions about the incident. This allows everyone to calm down as you plan a response.
- Arrange for guest speakers who represent diversity in race, ethnic background, sex, and age.
- Have students change seats occasionally throughout the course and introduce themselves to their new "neighbors," so they become acquainted with all of their classmates.
- Several times during the course, ask students to make anonymous, written evaluations of the class, reporting any concerns that may not be obvious.