St. Benedict's
PREPARATORY SCHOOL

As students and school staff members prepare for the start of the 2021–2022 school year, they'll likely experience a range of emotions from excitement to anxiety. The nervous excitement many students experience at the start of any school year may be heightened as they prepare to reconnect with former friends, meet new classmates and resume learning through virtual, in-person or a hybrid setting.

For some students, the start of the year may prompt feelings of fear and anxiety regarding attending school with large groups of people, resuming classes, coping with challenges of technology, attending a new school and creating new relationships with students and adults in a challenging time. Some students may have experienced trauma over the past few months and will need additional support. By focusing on direct student services, school staff can help students develop skills that will help them navigate changing expectations and environments.

Local education agencies and individual schools planning for students and staff to return following COVID-19 closures must prioritize efforts to address social and emotional learning and mental and behavioral health needs. Addressing instructional loss or learning disruption remains an important objective; however, students will not be ready to engage in intensive and rigorous academic learning until they feel physically and psychologically safe. Establishing that sense of safety and a predictable routine may take weeks or even months, depending on the evolving context in individual communities and a range of factors unique to each individual. Even within a school community, individual students and staff may continue to experience different stressors that could affect their personal sense of safety and well-being.

The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of this crisis creates anxiety and a sense of helplessness. It is important for teachers and school staff to understand what puts individuals at higher risk for stress and anxiety, and how to help students manage those emotions. When caregivers engage in self-care activities that help promote a sense of safety and security, children and youth are more capable of addressing their own challenges related to COVID-19.

BE AWARE OF WARNING SIGNS

The signs and symptoms of anxiety, stress, and trauma can sometimes be observed by others and sometimes are only known to the individual who is affected. Consequently, monitoring both oneself and others is important. Indicators of stress and trauma can come in the form of physical reactions, emotional symptoms, and social or interpersonal signs:

- Physical reactions, such as chronic fatigue and exhaustion are the most frequently reported.
- Difficulty paying attention, confusion, hypervigilance, headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension may also be felt.
- Sleeping and eating may be difficult.
- Emotional symptoms can include excessive worry or anxiety, disconnection or numbing, feelings of anger, compassion fatigue, demoralization, or resignation.
- Recurrent crisis thoughts or distressing dreams and even some confusion and difficulty making everyday decisions can occur.
- Some people may experience sadness, depression, hopelessness, and/or suicidal thoughts.
- Social or interpersonal signs can include difficulties in relationships, irritability, outbursts of anger, social withdrawal, or isolation.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Self-care can come in many forms, and each can help address stress and feelings of loss and grief. School personnel are encouraged to take time to care for themselves and model self-care strategies for children. The following strategies may be helpful for you or your students to employ when managing the challenges associated with this crisis:

- *Create a structure and routine for the day.*
    - By maintaining a daily routine and building structure into the day, you can foster a sense of control and bring predictability to this unpredictable situation.
    - This will help reduce stress responses, keep our bodies regulated, and facilitate recovery.
    - Establish a morning routine, meal routine, exercise routine, bedtime routine.
    - Create a "to do" list.
    - Do allow for flexibility in the routine given the challenges with social distancing.
- *Reduce and limit exposure to media coverage of the pandemic.*
    - Watching media coverage for long periods of time may actually increase anxiety, as this can keep our response systems activated.
    - As a way to reduce stress, get news only from reputable sources, watch or read the news for short periods of time (i.e., no more than 30 minutes), and don't view the news right before bed.
    - Instead you may want to watch a documentary, funny shows/movies, YouTube Videos, and TEDTalks, or listen to humorous podcasts, etc.
- *Attend to your physical self-care.*
    - This includes getting adequate sleep and taking breaks during the day.
    - Exercise can help calm the physical body and reduce stress.
    - Take walks or bike rides.
    - Eat healthy foods.
- *Care for your emotional health.*
    - Finding a balance between home and school is important, especially during times when crisis demands add to already busy workloads and schedules.
    - The use of good time management skills and priority setting can help people focus on something practical to do right now to manage the situation.
    - Keep in mind the difference between things one can change (in the system or the world) and accepting those one cannot.
- *Use meditation and deep breathing strategies.*
    - There are several websites, audio files, and apps that can help you with the steps of meditation and deep breathing.
    - Use stress management techniques such as using yoga, deep breathing, and calming self-talk, or soothing music.
- *Provide for your intellectual care and creativity.*
    - Activities that allow for creativity, learning, and knowledge development can help to motivate us and develop our problem-solving skills.
    - Read a book.
    - Write stories or a personal journal as a way to get your thoughts on paper.
    - Identify a project to complete that may be challenging and rewarding.
    - Take a few minutes and focus on gratitude and write a few things you are thankful for.
    - Engage in hobbies or passions for creativity.
    - Return to old hobbies or learn a new hobby.
- *Maintain social connections and focus on social care.*
    - Communicate regularly with family and friends.
    - Even though this virus requires social distancing, you can connect using phones, social media, virtual meetings, text messages, and letters.

- *Practice your spiritual or religious faith; this may provide comfort and be calming.*
    - Engage in acts of kindness, activism, or advocacy, which can reduce stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation that continues to cause stress and uncertainty. However, there are steps that teachers can take to foster their own health and well-being, and the health and well-being of their students. Keep in mind that recovery from a crisis takes time and may not happen in a linear fashion, especially during a pandemic that does not have a discrete, known end. It will take time to integrate new self-care strategies into your routines.

Awareness, balance, and connection can help! Set and celebrate achievable goals and celebrate the resilience of the great people in your school who go above and beyond as they support and help others in times of crises.

If you or someone you know needs help, please feel free to reach out to anyone in the counseling center.

Thank you,

The Grossman Counseling Center