Behavioral Health for Staff and Students During COVID-19: Considerations for Distance Learning and Re-Entry

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Sources of COVID-19 Stress

- Anxiety about exposure and illness
- Limited connections to others, limited support system
- Lack of cognitive stimulation, monotony
- Limited access to normal coping strategies
- Family members stressed
- Limited resources, financial stress
- Losses and grief
- Uncertainty
Signs of Stress in Students

• Clingy, whiny, tearful, frightened, anxious
• Agitated, hyperactive, over-reactive
• Irritable, impatient, aggressive, angry
• Withdrawn, disengaged, lethargic, depressed, sad, hopeless, suicidal
• Poor concentration, limited comprehension, poor memory
• Vague physical complaints
• Sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance
• Seeking attention, “in your face”
Signs of Stress in Staff

- Anxious, fearful
- Depressed, sad
- Withdrawn, less engaged, absent
- Irritable, impatient, frustrated, angry, explosive, over-reactive
- Agitated, poor concentration, poor memory
- Vague physical complaints, headaches, GI problems, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance
- Overwhelmed, confused, difficulty with problem-solving or making decisions
- Loss of creativity, lack of motivation
Risk for Increased Stress Response

- Recent loss or history of significant loss
- Past or current exposure to trauma
- Pre-existing behavioral health concerns or history of such
- Limited support systems in family, community, workplace
- Feeling of isolation, difficulty with attachment and relationships
- Poor coping skills and supports
What Can Schools Do?

A. Awareness
B. Build Resilience
C. Crisis Plan
Awareness

Based on psychological first aid
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Build Resilience

- Connection
- Self-Regulation
- Empowerment
- Competence
- Safety
- Nutrition & Exercise
Build Resilience

Connection
- Frequent, sustained outreach
- Mentors/buddies
- Check-in, check-out

Safety
- Normalize stress response
- Look, ask and listen
- Model appropriate emotional expression

Nutrition & Exercise
- Healthy snacks
- Recess
- Movement breaks
Build Resilience

Competence
- Frequent targeted affirmation
- Small chunks
- Repetition, patience

Empowerment
- Choice
- Voice
- Flexibility

Self-Regulation
- SEL and emotional literacy
- Mindful focusing
- Regular breaks
Crisis Plan

• Crisis team: must have representation from all components of school community
• Assume SEL is part of process and content
• Ensure flexibility and real-time response
• Warm, caring culture and climate
• Re-open with sense of renewal and hope
• Address grief and loss
  • Students have to be ready to learn
  • Staff have to be ready to teach
Compassion

- For students:
  - There’s a reason for their behavior, mood, attitude, engagement, learning style

- For staff:
  - Compassion, grace and generosity for ourselves as well as for one another

*Ask what’s happened to them and what’s strong with them ... (not what’s wrong with them)*
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