

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

Miriam Silman, MSW

Damien Sweeney, Ed.D.

Judi Vanderhaar, Ph.D.

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- Withdrawn, disengaged, lethargic, depressed, sad, hopeless, suicidal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- Withdrawn, less engaged, absent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

Awareness

Look

- Practical needs
- Psychosocial needs
- Academic/professional needs

Listen

- Students and families
- Staff
- Community

Link

- Internal resources
- Community partners

Build Resilience



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)*

Contact Information

- Damien Sweeney, Ed.D.
 - Damien.Sweeney@education.ky.gov
- Miriam Silman, MSW
 - Miriam.Silman@ky.gov
- Judi Vanderhaar, Ph.D.
 - Judi.Vanderhaar@education.ky.gov