

Managing Mental Wellness:

Tools for Yourself, Your Students,
and Your Classroom



A Guide for
Teachers

 MAEC

Collaborative Action *for*
Family Engagement

About MAEC

MAEC is an education non-profit dedicated to increasing access to a high-quality education for racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners. We work to promote excellence and equity in education to achieve social justice.

About CAFE

CAFE is the MAEC's Statewide Family Engagement Center for the states of Maryland and Pennsylvania. We help build sustainable infrastructure to support healthy family, student, and community engagement. CAFE serves all educators – from state agencies to school districts to school staff and early care providers – and families by developing resources, co-designing learning opportunities, and fostering dialogue designed to help families connect with local schools and support their children's development and learning.

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Disclaimer

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Medical Disclaimer

The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc. and authors of this document intend that this toolkit provides support for teachers who believe that they or one of their students may be experiencing possible mental health stress. The toolkit is not intended to offer or suggest a medical or psychological diagnosis or provide treatment advice. The toolkit should not be used for this purpose. Medical attention, diagnosis, and treatment must be initiated and prescribed by a fully-informed licensed consulting healthcare provider. Teachers should not risk harm by articulating a medical diagnosis or recommended medical treatment to themselves, a student, family, or guardian.

Further, teachers and administrators work in the context of a regulated education system. The information contained in this publication does not supersede any applicable national, state, county, or school district guidelines or policies. Every school district should have its own policies and procedures related to the care and management of teachers and students with possible mental health needs. All teachers and administrators should be trained in their respective school district policies and procedures on how to respond if they suspect a teacher or student is in crisis and/or in need of medical mental health support. If a teacher or administrator is unclear on or unsure of policy related to handling teacher or student-related crisis or mental health situations, they should contact their school or district leadership for direction and guidance.

Lastly, the toolkit offers third-party citations in support of certain factual assertions. Readers are recommended to review those citations for themselves.

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Introduction

Teachers have one of the greatest responsibilities in the world: supporting children to grow into caring, competent citizens equipped with the skills to lead productive and fulfilling lives. In the best of times, teaching can be challenging and stressful. Starting in 2020—amidst COVID-19 and with a spotlight on inequities in the United States—school leaders, teachers, school staff, and families have attempted to balance physical safety, emotional well-being, and worthwhile learning.

It hasn't been easy. The Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention and local public health guidelines have led to limited in-person socialization, which contributes directly to an increase in depression and anxiety, particularly in children and adolescents (Loades et. al, 2020). The lack of in-person contact, added stress related to economic struggles and associated pressures, and increased anxiety have led to further mental wellness issues.

Moreover, any discussion about mental wellness in the United States is incomplete without examining the impact that social inequities have on stress levels. COVID-19 has heightened and clarified the effects of social inequities, especially as they intersect with poverty. The effects of COVID-19 on the poor and communities of color have exacerbated previous disparities, leaving families struggling with housing and food insecurity, unemployment, co-occurring medical conditions, and lack of access to healthcare.

In the summer of 2020, at the same time the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the United States, two murders in particular sparked thousands of protests: those of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The stress, fear, anger, and exposure to ongoing police brutality, combined with the public health crisis related to COVID-19, led to heightened anxiety, fear, depression, and even trauma, especially among Black and Brown communities (Bor et. al, 2018). At the same time, xenophobic rhetoric around the COVID-19 pandemic has risen alongside discrimination against the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

In short, although people have experienced COVID-19 in different ways, virtually no one has escaped its impact.

These combined issues have created a new context for learning. As students experience difficulties adjusting to the various challenges (e.g., new awareness of social and racial injustice, new health and safety precautions for in-school instruction, new demands for technology and self-discipline for online learners), others are not showing up or are disengaged from learning. In addressing these concerns, teachers are expected to do more. In March 2021, the Washington Post reported that 75 percent of students receiving mental health support access those services through school (St. George et. al, 2021). As a result, teachers are asked to identify those students who need additional mental health support and attempt to get students access to these services—all while engaging students in learning and managing their own mental health. Teachers are responding to crises and trauma from their students, while experiencing the same crises and trauma in their own lives.

How to use this toolkit

During these unprecedented times, this toolkit is designed for teachers, their students, and the classroom. It offers strategies to manage mental wellness in the context of school and personally, and it gives methods to assist students and families with learning and well-being. Each section includes tools that teachers can directly apply to their own experiences.

Studies show that when teachers prioritize their own well-being, their health improves, they are better able to create positive conditions for student learning, and their students' well-being improves. For these reasons, the toolkit first offers efficient and effective tools to improve your well-being in chapter one. In that same spirit, it then details in chapter two the tools and resources to identify and assist students with their social and emotional needs. But encouraging well-being is more than individual efforts—there are many tools and approaches that can be brought to the entire classroom. This toolkit offers two broader tactics: social and emotional learning (SEL in chapter three) and family, school, and community engagement (FSCE in chapter four) as pro-active approaches to well-being. Unfortunately, some students will need more help, and the publication concludes with crisis-response techniques (chapter five).

Treat this document like you would any tool: pick one tool at a time, think about it, try it out a few times, and if the tool yields some kind of benefit, continue to use it. Then gradually consider trying another tool, and so on. Self-care is not a race. Keep adding tools to your toolbox at a comfortable pace, and do what works for you.



General resources

COVID-19

- Health departments: Information on COVID-19 from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* website: <https://bit.ly/3BaeDGx>
- COVID-19 vaccine information for health departments from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* website: <https://bit.ly/2XNkAeV>

Social justice

- *Southern Poverty Law Center*: <https://www.splcenter.org>
- *NAACP*: <https://naacp.org>
- *Color of Change*: <https://colorofchange.org>
- *Race Forward*: <https://www.raceforward.org>
- *Black Lives Matter*: <https://blacklivesmatter.com>

Food and shelter

- Hunger in America from the *Feeding America* website: <https://bit.ly/3baRCZp>
- Homelessness assistance programs from the *Housing and Urban Development Exchange* website: <https://bit.ly/3Ekc72A>

Mental wellness services

- COVID-19 information and resources from the *American Psychological Association* website: <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19>
- Coping with stress from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* website: <https://bit.ly/3npcNN2>
- COVID-19 resources and information from the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>

Teacher-specific information

- Mental health resources for educators from the *Teach for America* website: <https://bit.ly/2ZrAj4m>
- Operational strategy for K-12 schools through phased prevention from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* website: <https://bit.ly/3miHzb2>
- COVID-19 handbook volume 1: Strategies for safely reopening elementary and secondary schools from the *U.S. Department of Education* website: <https://bit.ly/3GpBhP1>



CHAPTER ONE:

Resources for teachers navigating COVID-19

To succeed, teachers need time to get their work done, support from their leadership teams, a positive work culture, opportunities for professional development, adequate resources for their students and themselves, and salaries that support them. When these factors are not in place, teachers fill the gaps themselves by working longer hours, using their own money to pay for classroom materials, or taking second or third jobs to support themselves. The table below shows that their work environments do not currently meet their needs.

“Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task.”

- Haim Ginott

77%

The percentage of teachers who report working more in the 2020-2021 school year than in prior years (Horace Mann Educators Corporation, 2020)

1 in 6

The number of teachers who work second jobs (Schaeffer, 2019)

\$459

The average amount of money teachers spend annually on classroom materials (Walker, 2019)

94%

The percentage of teachers who pay for classroom supplies out of their own pocket (Walker, 2019)

As teachers know, filling in these gaps is stressful. Teaching is tied with nursing as the most stressful occupational group, with nearly half of all teachers reporting high daily stress during the school year (Pennsylvania State University, 2017). Chronic stress takes its toll physically: teachers report poor sleep quality, exhaustion, and compromised health. It also takes its toll mentally, with two-thirds of K-12 teachers feeling disengaged from their jobs. It's no surprise that half of all teachers leave teaching within the first five years. Those who leave cite poor working conditions, low salaries, and lack of classroom resources as the main reasons (Pennsylvania State University, 2017).

Teacher stressors related to COVID-19

Schools have responded to COVID-19 in various ways depending on student and community needs, but there is a theme: teachers across the country are experiencing lower morale and higher burnout rates (Mahnken, 2020; Kurtz, 2020b). Since March 2020, many teachers have navigated prolonged school closures, politicized school reopenings, emergency remote teaching, and insufficient professional development.

Specific work-related stressors during COVID-19 include having difficulty with:

- Maintaining contact with students and their families
- Supporting students' social emotional health
- Keeping students engaged
- Planning as schools bounce between virtual and in-person learning
- Managing workload
- Adjusting academic strategies to accommodate virtual learning
- Adapting to new technologies for teaching

It is no surprise that nearly half of teachers surveyed reported considering leaving the field in August 2020 (Tate, 2020).

Moreover, during this period of heightened stress, taking care of other people has likely led to an uptick in educator experiences of secondary traumatic stress or vicarious traumatization. As teachers hear about the firsthand traumatic experiences of other people (perhaps their students, administrators, colleagues, or families of students), they also experience emotional distress. In short: teacher mental wellness is suffering during COVID-19.

Working under prolonged stress makes it more difficult for teachers to be responsive, keep up their morale, make quick decisions, and practice patience (EdWeek Research Center, 2020). The more mentally well teachers are, the better they can do their jobs. Moreover, teacher mental wellness directly impacts student mental wellness: high teacher turnover leads to lower student achievement, whereas high teacher engagement (and lower teacher turnover) predicts higher student engagement and achievement (Pennsylvania State University, 2017).

“More than three in four teachers reported frequent job-related stress, compared to 40 percent of other working adults. Perhaps even more alarming: 27 percent of teachers reported symptoms of depression, compared to 10 percent of other adults” (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Managing stress and self-care



Engaging in daily self-care activities is even more important during COVID-19 due to these compounded stressors. These stressful factors can trigger mental, emotional, and physical responses, affecting individuals' whole bodies (Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020).

Signs that you might be experiencing mental health challenges:

(Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020)

- Changes to sleep patterns
- Weight gain or loss beyond what you would expect (consult your doctor for specifics)
- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Unusually high blood pressure with no pre-existing medical condition
- Higher irritability
- Mood changes
- Anxiety
- Depression

Taking care of yourself means nourishing one's body, staying active, taking time to rest, and positively engaging with the world. All of these categories are components of self-care: activities that people can do to take care of their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. As individuals who work in a particularly stressful field, it is especially necessary for teachers to practice self-care in order to keep themselves healthy and well. Physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists advocate for self-care through the following practices:

Check in with yourself throughout the day

Notice if you are experiencing one or more emotions, then give each emotion a rating from 1 to 10, 10 being the most intense. If your number is four or greater for an undesirable emotion, do something to calm yourself down, using the list of self-care practices below.

This emotion scale can also serve as a communication tool with your family, friends, and colleagues. Meaning, you can communicate how you are feeling and how strong the feeling is, which can help someone understand how upset you are in the moment.

Keep your well-being battery charged by ensuring that your basic needs are met: eating, sleeping well, and exercising regularly.

Diet	Sleep	Exercise
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep regular mealtimes, so you aren't snacking all day.• Minimize refined carbohydrates, high fat and high-sugar foods, and reduce your alcohol intake (Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020).• 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables per day and foods rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, including fish, nuts, and fiber (Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adults generally need 7-9 hours of sleep per night (Olson, 2019).• Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day.• Turn off electronics at least one hour before bed.• Drink warm water or hot tea and read a book after you climb into bed.• Avoid caffeine in the afternoon and evening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exercise daily.• Exercise should result in breaking a sweat.• Walk for 30 minutes each day.• Wake up 5-15 minutes early to stretch. *Try to stretch throughout your day in between classes.• Work out with a friend if you can. It'll help with motivation.



Develop a self-care routine

Start with these five steps:

Step	Action Item
1. Come up with a realistic plan that is achievable, manageable, and sustainable.	If you are working at home, come to your desk five minutes before your day starts so your environment can shape your mindset. Focus on your breath for a few minutes. Do some stretching.
2. Work out the logistics ahead of time.	For example, if you have a staff meeting to attend that cuts into your afternoon yoga or stretching, plan on moving those to earlier in the day or after the meeting.
3. Develop a plan to remind yourself to practice self-care.	One of the hardest parts about a routine is sustaining and maintaining it. Tell a friend, colleague, or partner about your plan—doing so holds you accountable to someone else and makes you more likely to follow through. Set reminders on your phone. When you bring your work home, pick a stopping point every day so that you can carve out time to relax.
4. Follow through.	If you can't do a five-minute meditation, do two minutes of meditation. Experiment with walking meditation: focus your attention on your body movements as you walk. It's okay if your plan changes—doing something is always better than doing nothing.
5. Sustain the routine and tweak as needed.	Don't forget to reward yourself for following through on your self-care routine!

Engage in everyday self-care practices

There are five categories of self-care: relaxation, power of the mind, physical activities, process-based activities, and pleasurable-activity scheduling. These categories tap different facets of the mind and body including thoughts, feelings, physiology, and physical health, and they help us feel better. For teachers in particular, self-care is necessary so we can practice patience with our students and ourselves—and we know there are many times when your patience is tested.

Pick one tool from each of the following five categories to sharpen every day. Setting targeted goals can help you stay on track for incorporating self-care activities into your daily routine. Think about adding in 30 minutes of self-care everyday: 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes at night, or whenever works best for you.

1. Relaxation

More than 75 percent of teachers report frequent job-related stress, compared to 40 percent of other working adults (Barnum, 2021). It's important to slow down and practice taking care of yourself. Relaxation activities help do that by lowering your heart rate and blood pressure and, in turn, reducing anxiety and frustration.

Examples:

- Diaphragmatic (deep) breathing (three cycles of inhaling/exhaling), pepper in this type of breathing throughout the day with eyes closed or gazing down focused on a spot or mark.
- [4-7-8 Breathing](#) (Dr. Andrew Weil, M.D.)—specifically for anxiety.
- Count backwards from 10 to 1, count down by one number on the exhale breath. Do at least one complete cycle a day, multiple cycles if you have time.
- Guided imagery—use peaceful images in your mind to help calm down. Tap all of your senses, like how the place smells, looks, feels, sounds, and tastes (if applicable).
- Progressive muscle relaxation—tense/relax and isolate different muscle groups. Search YouTube for free guided videos.

2. Power of the mind (thought-based coping)

Our thoughts can influence our feelings and behaviors in positive and negative ways. When you practice thought-based coping, you take control of your internal dialogue, which can help reduce the amount of stress you might be experiencing in the moment. The activities below can be modified to do in or out of the classroom, and they can even be done during class.

Examples:

- Meditations for increasing compassion, sustained attention, ability to track thoughts/emotion quicker:
 - [Compassion meditation](#)
 - [Mindfulness meditation 1 \(focus on the breath\)](#)
 - [Mindfulness meditation 2 \(body scan\)](#)
- Silver lining (“Well, at least...”)
- High-five game: find five positive things about your current situation
- Growth mindset: identify what did not go well and what you can do differently next time
- Gratitude journal: each evening, write down three things for which you are grateful

3. *Physical activities*

Doctors ask about sleep, exercise, and diet during check-ups for a reason: our bodies need activity to stay healthy. Incorporating physical activities into daily routines can look like exercising in between class periods, joining your class for part of recess, or dedicating time at the beginning or end of the day to go for a long walk.

Examples:

- Jumping jacks
- Push-ups (or wall push-ups) plus sit-ups
- Running in place, jump rope, hula hoop, or a power walk in your neighborhood
- [10 daily yoga poses](#) (pick three to five to do daily for starters)
- Dance to your favorite song!

4. *Process-based activities*

Everyone needs a support network and a place where they feel heard. Talking or writing about what you're feeling and what is bothering you is a coping skill in itself. Process-based activities push us to engage in social connections and reflect on our experiences in order to help ourselves feel better. Processing your own emotions also helps you to better support other people (like your students!) who need help processing, too.

Examples:

- Call or video chat with a trusted friend.
- Write without stopping for 10 minutes. You can use a prompt, like from [this website](#), or write whatever you need to release.
- Seek teletherapy with a therapist for yourself.

5. *Pleasurable-activity scheduling*

It's important to make time for things we enjoy so that we can combat any unpleasant moods or feelings we may experience from the challenges of the day. Find what makes you happy, and seek that out!

Examples:

- Organize a weekly hang out or game night with friends.
- Go on a bike ride.
- Do yoga.
- Watch a movie.
- Cook a meal or bake.
- Take a walk in nature.

If you need in-the-moment stress relief, try a distraction-based activity below. These activities can help take your mind off whatever is bothering you which results in the unpleasant emotion losing its power over you.

- Play a game with a friend.
- Take a walk down the hallway or around your school campus.
- Think of your top five movies and why you like each of them.
- Make a quarantine playlist.
- Ground yourself by looking at a painting or book cover and focus on the specific details.

Bonus free course

As of March 2021, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence offers a 10-hour online course for school staff to understand and manage their emotions and those of their students. School staff can earn a certificate upon completion of this program, titled “Managing Emotions in Times of Uncertainty & Stress.” Access it on Coursera.

Apps you can download:

App name	Purpose
Breethe	Guided meditations, includes a subscription option
Calm	Guided meditations, includes a subscription option
Headspace	Guided meditations, includes a subscription option
Insight Timer	Meditation
Mitra	Select and track personal values over time
MoodNotes	Thought-based coping strategies
Runkeeper	Set goals for jogging, tracks progress
Smiling Mind	Designed by psychologists and teachers to bring balance into your life



CHAPTER TWO:

Tools to assist students with social and emotional needs

Even before COVID-19 swept the United States, children faced a multitude of daily challenges. In 2019, one in five children met the criteria for a mental health disorder (Carter et. al, 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a), and only half of children with mental health disorders receive therapy (Costello et. al, 1996; Merikangas et. al, 2010).

Moreover, there are hundreds of factors that influence student learning and achievement. While some of these factors are within the school's sphere of influence, many are not. The chart below outlines some of the in school and out-of-school factors that impact student learning.



Sample of School-Based and Out-of-School Factors Impacting Student Learning

School-Based Factors

Teacher quality	Academic setting
Professional Development	Curriculum Implementation
Instructional Practices	Instructional Resources
Teacher Expectations	School Climate
Cultural Responsiveness	Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Out-of-School Factors

Students	Home/Family	Community
Disability Status	Socioeconomic Status	Crime
First Language	Parent-Child Relationships	Community Infrastructure
Physical and Mental Health	Parents' Educational Attainment	Population Demographics
Developmental Differences	Household Status	Inequality

Graphic from <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/b6940074-87c4-48b6-b395-4adf9baefbce>

For many teachers, COVID-19 transformed the nature of their work, as many states mandated remote learning to mitigate the spread of the virus. This herculean shift required ensuring that every child and educator had access to remote learning, and it reckoned with erratic or nonexistent internet access, producing unstable learning environments.

COVID-19 will continue to have an outsized effect on students. In the coming years, the number of students who exhibit social, emotional, and behavioral challenges at school is expected to double or triple (Keels, 2020). For teachers, it is vital to be aware of students' mental health status and the contributing factors that students and their families might be experiencing. This awareness includes daily check-ins with students and knowing the appropriate people at school to notify in case of an emergency or chronic situation.



Too many students, not enough staffing (ACLU, 2019):

1.7 million

students attend a school with police presence and no school counselor.

3 million

students are in school with a police presence but no nurse.

6 million

students are in school with a police presence but no school psychologist.

10 million

students are in schools with a police presence but no social worker.

The chart below highlights common signs of distress and strategies for teachers to support children experiencing mental wellness challenges in various age groups (SAMHSA, 2020).

Signs of student distress and support strategies

Age Group	Common signs of distress	Strategies to support children
Infants and toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of playfulness and engagement, no smiling • Avoiding eye contact, difficult to soothe • Exhibiting high levels of distress when separated from their primary caregiver • Regressing of physical skills such as eating, sitting, crawling, or walking, as well as appearing clumsier 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a routine schedule • Incorporate sensory experiences • Encourage physical activity • Support sleeping and eating routines • Consider laminating photos of family members for the child to hold or refer to when they express distress or anxiety over separation • Work on language, communication, and social skills
Preschoolers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thumb sucking • Bedwetting • Clinging to primary caregiver • Sleep disturbances • Loss of appetite • Fear of the dark • Nightmares • Regressing behaviors • Being withdrawn • Cry or scream frequency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make time for exercise • Create an emotions board to identify and express emotions • Create scripted stories • Provide a balance of active and quiet activities • Incorporate music, reading, and art activities • Talk about what is happening in a calming manner • Consider laminating photos of family members for the child to hold or refer to when they express distress over separation • Provide sensory play experiences • Follow a consistent routine or daily lesson plans

Age Group	Common signs of distress	Strategies to support children
Elementary school children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety or fear • Irritability • Aggressiveness • Clinginess • Feelings of guilt or shame • Nightmares • School avoidance • Poor concentration (sudden academic difficulties) • Withdrawal from activities or friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model healthy coping and patience • Encourage children to be problem solvers • Combat negative thinking through practicing positive self-talk and making time for positive daily reflections • Encourage outside time and engaging in hobbies they might enjoy • Acknowledge daily routines and activities may be different and allow for repeated questions and conversations
Adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disturbances • Eating disturbances • Agitation • Increase in conflicts • Physical complaints • Delinquent behavior (abuse of alcohol or drugs, risky sexual behavior) • Poor concentration • Depressive symptoms (isolation, feeling alone) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage physical activity • Provide time for writing and self-expression • Provide opportunities for humor and laughter • Acknowledge daily routines and activities are different and allow for repeated questions and conversations • State new safety measures as “what we know to do now,” aware that information continues to evolve

Additional resources

Mental health/social and emotional screening tools

- Ready, set, go, review: Screening for behavioral health risk in schools published by the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*: <https://bit.ly/3jG0t8t>
- School mental health screening playbook published by the *Center for School Mental Health*: <https://bit.ly/3vMJUhD>
- People Seeking Help from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*: <https://bit.ly/317YVzj>
- Universal behavior/emotional health screening in schools: Overview and feasibility published by the *Health Research Alliance*: <https://bit.ly/3bgA7Hn>
- 10 Types of Assessment Tools for Mental and Behavioral Health Professionals published by *ICANotes*: <https://bit.ly/3jQOqqj>
- Mental Health Screening and Assessment Tools for Primary Care (AAP) Parent test: Your child's mental health from the *Mental Health America* website: <https://bit.ly/3mgdoS0>

Educational tools and resources to use with students

- Preschool: Books about emotions for preschool from the *Pre-K Pages* website: <https://bit.ly/3mgdYiE>
- Elementary school: Video: Why do we lose control of our emotions? <https://bit.ly/3pGwliH>
- Middle and high school: Video: Dan Siegel - "The adolescent brain": <https://bit.ly/3pFDRdK>

Reading lists and book series for elementary school students

- Social and emotional learning diverse reading list published by *Lee & Low Books*: <https://bit.ly/3jHcSL5>
- What to do when...books from the *Childsworld at Childsplay* website: <https://bit.ly/3CmHysn>

Self-awareness and self-management activities to use with students

- Identifying and expressing feelings from the *Elementary School Counseling* website: <https://bit.ly/3bdiA2J>
- Top tools for building mindfulness in the classroom from the *Common Sense Education* website: <https://bit.ly/3GoJe7i>

Relaxation techniques to use with students

- Video: 5-minute yoga and mindfulness with Tim and Moby | BrainPOP: <https://bit.ly/3Emqqn1>
- Video: Kids meditation - Five finger breathing: <https://bit.ly/3vLR4mp>



CHAPTER THREE:

A preventative approach with social and emotional learning

Teachers play a critical role in developing students' academic, social, and emotional skill sets. Communicating effectively, understanding emotion, and regulating emotion are learned skills, like math. Educators, students, families, and community members all benefit from incorporating social and emotional learning in schools.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020). There are five competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. These areas of learning are supported in classrooms, schools, homes, and communities. There are SEL programs available for every age and grade, starting at preschool.

Research shows that students who participate in SEL programs have higher levels of academic achievement and are less likely to drop out of school. SEL programs also improve student mental wellness, including mood, cognitive abilities, and speech.

SEL skills, strategies, and tools are similar to any other skill: practice makes perfect. Incorporating social and emotional learning in school increases student and teacher well-being, helps students self-advocate more, and encourages students to utilize adaptive social problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills. Teachers who become trained in specific SEL programs benefit by learning the same skills as their students. When student well-being improves, teachers are confronted with fewer behavioral problems in the classroom, and the teacher-student relationship improves (CASEL, 2021).

How teachers generalize SEL skills

Developing a shared usage and understanding of social emotional language can improve teacher-student relationships and communication, creating connection and a sense of belonging. SEL language, based on students' developmental level and age, can be used to help students express how they feel and where their feelings come from. Teachers can also recognize and utilize students' social, emotional, and behavioral strengths, leaning in and building SEL skills based on these assets.

Teachers can model the tools below and use SEL language regularly to help with generalizing strong communication and relationship-building skills. A specific SEL program will offer additional guidance on generalizing SEL skills throughout the day.

SEL Strategy #1A

Teachers facilitate a daily Mood Check-in. When implemented regularly, this tool establishes a compassionate, safe, and comfortable classroom. It creates an environment that communicates the importance of checking in with ourselves.

Steps to facilitate a Mood Check-in ([Mood Meter app for download](#)):

1. Teacher introduces emotion vocabulary (e.g., happy, sad, angry, worried, etc.).
2. Teacher uses a visual aid such as a Mood Meter poster (particularly for elementary school children and younger) and models how each student can check in with themselves and how they are feeling at the moment.

Example:

The teacher says to each student, “Hi, [name of student]. How are you feeling today?” It is okay if the student does not want to answer. The teacher should normalize a student not responding and add that any student can speak privately with the teacher later in the day if desired. A student who wants to share might say, “I’m feeling annoyed.” A good follow-up question is, “Why are you feeling annoyed right now?” Helping students connect what they are feeling and why and facilitating the student expressing themselves with words is a coping skill in itself. It also allows the teacher to know what feelings could adversely affect a student’s academic performance or mood that day.



Quick Tip:

Students get the most out of SEL programs when they feel safe. Teachers should promote a safe space by using a neutral tone and not pressuring students to share about themselves. Teachers should provide the opportunity for students to speak to teachers in private if the student does not feel comfortable or ready to share in front of the class.

SEL Strategy #1B

Depending on student comfort, teachers can take the Mood Check-in further by facilitating students articulating an unmet need in order to feel better.

Here is the framework for teaching students how to use “I statements”:

“I’m feeling ____, because ____. **I need help with ____.**”

Using the example from above: “I’m feeling frustrated because my classmate won’t stop whispering to me.

Can I sit somewhere else in the classroom?”

SEL Strategy #2

Teachers should attempt to help students cope or regulate any undesirable feelings they may have by teaching them how to become more aware of their feelings. Mindfulness-based meditation is a tool that can help individuals notice their feelings as they arise, learn to not judge their emotion, and instead engage in adaptive coping skills to feel better. Here is an example of a mindfulness-based guided meditation that teachers can use in their classroom.

Example:

Teachers can lead a mindfulness-of-breath meditation for two to five minutes depending on how students respond. The teacher can show a calming image to students while guiding them to close their eyes or look at the image and place one hand on their chest and the other hand on their belly. Students are instructed to breathe naturally and try to feel their stomach expand as they inhale and contract as they exhale. The teacher can introduce counting as part of the meditation. Starting at 10, the teacher should instruct the students to breath in and then out and count down one digit at a time as they exhale until the whole class gets to 1.

SEL Strategy #3

Teachers should promote and model a strength-based approach to solving problems. Language like “I can,” “This is a problem to be solved,” and “Next time, I will try ____ instead of ____” should be reinforced and encouraged in the classroom.

Example: Teachers guide students in a practical and less volatile approach to solving problems.

1. **What’s the problem?** Before trying to find a solution, it is important to identify the problem in full.
2. **What are my options?** Encourage the student to look at all the options available to them.
3. **Pick the best option.** Help the student think through the outcome for each viable option. Which one can help prevent a conflict or benefit everyone involved?
 - **Double-check the best option.** The student should make sure that the option they plan to choose is truly the best one.
4. Tell myself I did a good job OR go back to step #3 and pick a different option.

SEL tools

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is one of the largest organizations promoting SEL-based learning in schools. CASEL does research on SEL programs, which helps teachers learn which SEL programs are effective and why. According to CASEL, teachers should consider the following information when selecting a SEL program for their school:

1. Ages of the student population
2. Race, gender, ethnicity, and religion of the student population
3. Culture of the community, e.g., urban versus rural
4. Number of students in the classroom

Consult the [Program Guide on the CASEL website](#) or assistance in selecting the SEL program that is best for your school district.

Below are three SEL programs backed by research:

- Incredible Years Dinosaur Program (PreK-2nd)
- RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions; K-8th)
- [Mindfulness in Schools Project](#) (6th-12th)

Additional SEL resources for teachers:

- Integrating social and emotional learning throughout the school system published by the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety: <https://bit.ly/3nrIUgm>





CHAPTER FOUR:

Strategies for family, school, and community engagement

When it comes to student success, teachers don't work alone. After all, students spend the majority of their time outside the classroom, even more so when many schools operate remotely and may continue to do so. To promote student learning, success, and well-being, teachers need to connect with the most significant people in students' lives: their families and other members of their community.

Increasing family, school, and community engagement

Family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) refers to the collaboration between key stakeholders in education to facilitate student learning and well-being. Because students are more likely to succeed when their families are engaged in school, it is imperative that teachers collaborate with family and community members (Woolf, 2016). Partnerships in FSCE might involve recruiting caregivers to support school events, involving families and community organizations in school decision-making, and identifying accessible ways to communicate and engage families from school-to-home and home-to-school.

Teachers need to recognize and honor that every family, inclusive of all races, ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and immigration statuses, has hopes and fears for their children's success, love their children, and want what is best for them. The foundation for authentic and successful teacher-family partnerships is developed by adopting these assumptions, learning about families' hopes and fears, sharing plans to move forward, and partnering in the work ahead. Family engagement should be non-negotiable. It is critical that partnerships between schools and families build trust, respect, and empathy.

Building trust between parents and teachers reaps benefits for students, including higher grades and test scores, fewer absences, and better social skills (Epstein et. al, 2019). Successful student learning requires deliberate communication and partnership between teachers, administrators, students' families, and community organizations. Strong FSCE yields positive results for all: teachers' performance and job satisfaction improves, students' attitudes improve and agency increases, and families are empowered to be effective learning partners.

Systemic racism, socioeconomic barriers, language-access issues, and other obstacles have challenged (and continue to challenge) partnerships among families, schools, and communities. Teachers and school leaders must interrogate their assumptions about the roles class, culture, and language play in family, school, and community engagement. FSCE is not one size fits all: families, schools, and communities must work together to identify what initiatives, communications, and programs best meet their needs. At the end of the day, family engagement is essential to achieve sustainable and equitable opportunities for all students.

FSCE during COVID-19

During COVID-19, developing and maintaining strong FSCE became more difficult and more important than ever before. Navigating remote, hybrid, and in-person learning requires strong communication between teachers, students, and families. To achieve this partnership authentically, teachers must adopt an asset based and culturally responsive approach to student learning and social emotional well-being (Leo et. al, 2019). For teachers working remotely, caregivers and families take on a new and critical role in their students' education. Student success depends on caregivers and teachers operating on the same page and working together to develop clear goals for student learning and well-being. Both must be dedicated to achieving those goals. If families believe that school can serve as a vehicle for success, they will communicate that belief to their children.

If families know that teachers are working in the best interest of their children, they will better support teachers. By collaborating with families and connecting them to organizations and resources that can meet their essential needs, teachers can act as powerful advocates for their students' well-being. This increased and necessary collaboration ultimately benefits teachers, families, and students.



FSCE tools

MAEC specializes in supporting family, school, and community engagement, especially through the work of their State Family Engagement Center, the Collaborative Action for Family Engagement (CAFE), and the Center for Education Equity (CEE), a regional equity assistance center. Our services target teachers, families, community members, and administrators who work with vulnerable and often marginalized populations. For more information, please visit MAEC's (www.maec.org) resources below:

- [Collaborative Action for Family Engagement Website](#)
- [Engaging Families of African American Learners](#)
- [Engaging Families of English Learners](#)
- [Engaging Fathers and Other Male Role Models in Education](#)
- [Ensuring a Safe and Inclusive Environment for LGBTQ Students](#)
- [Learning at Home Newsletters](#)
- [Pandemic, Protests, and Public Schools Webinar Series](#)
- [Interactive State Resource Map](#)

Strategies for working with families

- Provide families with consistent communication (in multiple and accessible languages) on their students' progress, school policies, and classroom practices, as well as guidance and support in talking with their children about COVID-19.
- Engage families when developing response plans (during the school year). Ask them for their input and ideas.
- Ensure that families have access to the technology they need for students to complete their work.
- Expect that the social, emotional, and behavior status of students and staff will vary by students' age, gender, culture, race, socioeconomic backgrounds, home and family supports, and presence of medical conditions and other disabilities. Practice cultural humility (self-reflection, respectful curiosity, and a desire to share power) to respond appropriately to this diversity.

Strategies for working with community partners

- Work with community partners to address the basic needs of families.
- Identify community resources for better access to technology.
- Work with district and school educators to identify community childcare centers.
- Have a continuum of community-based social, emotional, and behavioral services, supports, and interventions prepared for students who demonstrate persistent or significant challenges.

Strategies for working with colleagues

- Support your colleagues as they engage their students in developmentally appropriate conversations and lessons to discuss COVID-19 and social justice.
- Involve your colleagues when brainstorming on how to adjust to the response plans. Share lesson plans and open lines of communication virtually.
- Create a community of practice to develop and work with allies to leverage assets for increasing SEL.



CHAPTER FIVE:

Crisis management tools for teachers to assist students

This specific chapter is not meant to replace or supersede any state, local, or federal law(s) related to mandated reporting or handling of crisis situations. This chapter is also not meant to replace any existing school policies for handling crisis situations. If you are concerned about a child's safety or know of a child in danger, please contact the appropriate emergency resource:



Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

(en español: 1-888-628-9454; deaf and hard of hearing: dial 711, then 1-800-273-8255)

Crisis Text Line: Text 'HOME' to 741741

Law enforcement (Police): 911

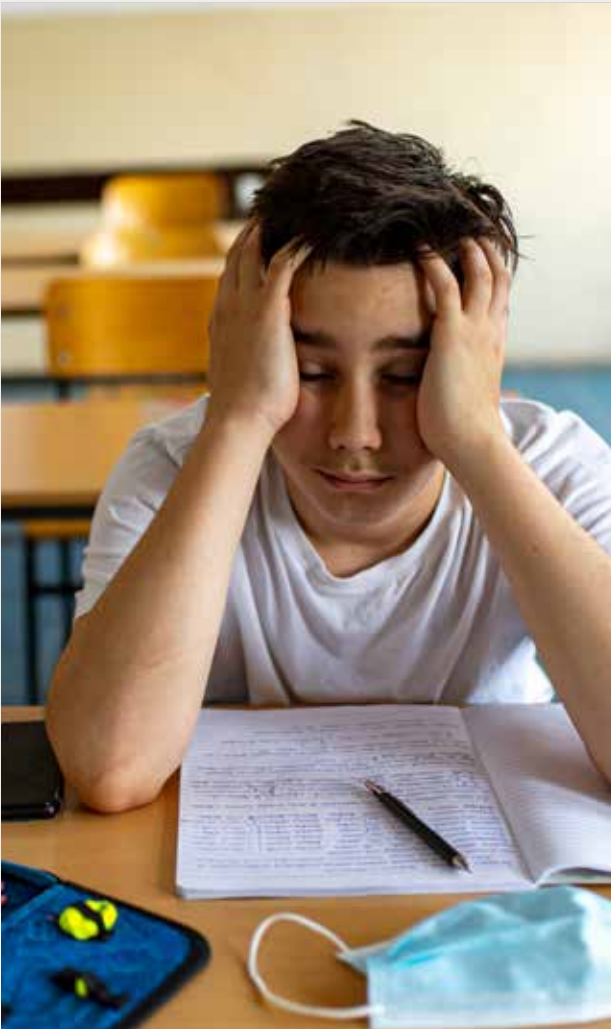
Most teachers are not trained mental health professionals, and it is not their job to provide mental health treatment to their students. However, in many cases, children and families may not seek mental health services or may not know where to look for help. Teachers are positioned to identify children in need of mental health services, collaborate with the school-based mental health staff (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist, or social worker), and help children or families learn about and access mental health resources.

Teachers navigate all sorts of difficult situations. We hope that teachers do not need to put the skills and strategies outlined below into practice, but an understanding of what to look for and who to go to is important as teachers may be the first line of response in many scenarios. In these cases, recognition and knowledge is critical. This section outlines three specific crises students may experience: suicidality, homicidality, and suspected abuse. It includes ways to identify, assess, and respond to each of these crises, as well as general strategies to manage crisis situations.

Defining and identifying a child in crisis

This toolkit defines a “child in crisis” as a potential risk to themselves, others, or both, or a child who may have been the victim of abuse. When working with a child in crisis, it is key to prioritize their safety.

If a teacher notices one or more of the behaviors below, they should follow school protocols, which likely include immediately alerting the mental health services and school administration. The resources at the end of this chapter include information on how to access general emergency and mental health services.



Signs that a child could be in crisis (Mayo Clinic, 2021):

- Crying in school often or more than you would expect
- Withdrawing from or avoiding social interactions
- Hurting oneself or talking about hurting oneself
- Talking about death or suicide
- Outbursts or extreme irritability
- Out-of-control behavior that can be harmful
- Marks or bruises on the child’s body
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, or personality, or rapid mood swings
- Changes in weight (extreme weight gain or loss)
- Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Psychosis (e.g., student has paranoia about something that is imagined)
- Inability to cope emotionally with daily tasks
- Changes in academic performance
- Avoiding or missing school

Understanding and responding to suicidality, homicidality, and child abuse

Suicidality

This toolkit defines “suicidality” as experiencing thoughts about suicide or has intent or a plan to commit suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). While the CDC has not released statistics on suicide among children in 2020, it reported a rise in emergency hospital visits among children during the months of April through October 2020 due to mental health challenges (Leeb et. al, 2020). This increase in emergency hospital visits likely relates to the increase in stress and anxiety among children as a result of the circumstances related to COVID-19 (Loades et. al, 2020).



Warning signs of suicidality

- Suicidal thoughts (e.g., “I want to die”)
- Intent (e.g., motivation or desire to attempt suicide)
- Plan (e.g., has a plan to commit suicide including time, place, and means)
- Hopelessness about the future
- Presenting with extreme emotional pain or distress
- Presenting with out-of-character behaviors usually in conjunction with the above warning signs:
 - o Social withdrawal from others
 - o Increases or decreases in sleep
 - o Intense anger or hostility that seems out of character or unexpected given the context
 - o Increase in irritability

How to support students experiencing suicidality

(National Association of School Psychologists, 2015)

- Approach the situation with compassion, calmness, and a non-judgmental attitude. Listen well.
- Involve the mental health services, school administration, and a trusted caregiver as soon as you can.
- School psychologists or an approved school administrator can perform a risk assessment.
- Use active listening skills. This includes reflecting (repeating) or paraphrasing part or all of what the child said.
- Let them know that they are not alone and that you are here to help them.
- Let them know that there are treatments available and that you will help them get access to what they need.

Homicidal

This toolkit defines “homicidal” as suspicion that a student has thoughts, intent, or a plan to commit an act of violence toward someone in the school or wider community (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2020).



Warning signs of homicidal

(American Psychological Association, 2013)

- History of violent or aggressive behavior
- Young age at first violent incident
- Having been a victim of bullying
- History of discipline problems or frequent conflicts with authority
- Early childhood abuse or neglect
- Witnessed violence at home
- Family or parent condones use of violence
- History of cruelty to animals
- [Having a major mental illness](#) like conduct disorder or antisocial personality disorder
- Being callous or lacking empathy for others
- History of vandalism or property damage

How to support students experiencing homicidal

- Keep yourself safe.
- Avoid being alone with the student.
- Without putting yourself in danger, try to remove the student from the situation that is activating them.
- Tell mental health services and school administration. Involve a trusted caregiver as soon as you can.
- Involve a professional to intervene and help the student in crisis.
- Do not attempt to deescalate a situation alone.
- Take signs of violence seriously.
- Do not resort to violence yourself.

Suspected child abuse

This toolkit defines “suspected child abuse” as reasonable suspicion that a child has been neglected or emotionally or physically, or sexually abused (Cruise, 2010).



Warning signs of suspected abuse

(Mayo Clinic, 2021)

- Withdrawal from friends or usual activities
- Changes in behavior, such as aggression, anger, hostility, or hyperactivity
- Changes in school performance
- Depression, anxiety, or unusual fears
- Sudden loss of self-confidence
- Apparent lack of supervision
- Frequent absences from school
- Reluctance to leave school activities
- Attempts to run away
- Rebellious or defiant behavior
- Self-harm or attempts at suicide

How to support students experiencing suspected abuse

- Follow your school, county, and state protocol. Start by contacting your mental health services and school administration.
- Teachers are mandated reporters, so if a teacher suspects that a child has been abused, they must report it to their local government Child Protective Services Agency.
- Offer the student emotional support.
- Don't respond with judgment or anger.
- Don't let the child leave school if there is reason to believe they may come into contact with the alleged perpetrator of abuse.
- Praise the student for talking with you or listening as you attempt to get them help and keep them safe.
- Encourage the student to say no to something that seems scary or isn't okay with them.

Responding to crisis situations

When responding to a student who may be in crisis, it is crucial that the teacher, school counselor, school psychologist, or social worker remain calm. Since the first goal is to keep the child safe, the school staff members must do the best they can to help the child feel comfortable and create trust. Below is a general framework for approaching and interacting with a student in crisis, ways of establishing trust with the student, and overall guidance in addressing a student in crisis.

General framework

1. Act fast

Those involved in responding to crisis situations need to act quickly. It is difficult for individuals in crisis to think rationally, which makes it all the more important for the person responding to act quickly in order to keep the person or people involved safe. If you are unsure whether someone is in crisis in a school setting, you should consult with mental health services or school administration immediately. Better to err on the side of caution.

2. Safety first

If the student is in imminent danger, call 911 and ask for assistance. If you or anyone else are at risk for being physically harmed by the student, take the necessary steps to ensure your own safety and that of other potential victims.

Even if the student is not in immediate danger, they may still need support. Connect the student with school administration or mental health services and develop a plan of action for making sure the student gets the care they need.

3. Communicate

In any difficult situation, communication is key. Teachers who suspect a student or colleague is in crisis should attempt to communicate clearly, concisely, and calmly. These situations can be scary for everyone involved, but communicating your ideas with each other can help you take action to keep the person in crisis safe.

Establishing trust

The LEAP Method by Dr. Xavier Amador is an evidence-based approach that can help build trust quickly during a disagreement or crisis. This approach relies on listening in a way that conveys respect for the other person's perspective without judgment (Henry Amador Center on Anosognosia, 2021). The four steps in the LEAP Method are below.

- **Listen.** Practice active listening. When someone feels heard, they are likely to feel more connected to you.
- **Empathize.** Show the student you care about them. You can do this by giving your undivided attention, using your words (ask questions and make statements like, "I think I would feel that way, too"), and make non-verbal gestures like putting your hand over your heart.
- **Agree.** Try to find things you both agree on.
- **Partner.** Let the student know that you want to collaborate with them to get them access to someone who can help. Develop a plan moving forward where the student feels heard and respected.

Overall guidance

De-escalate

- If the student is in a heightened state of emotional intensity, try to calm them down.
- Use a calm tone when speaking to the student.
- Model diaphragmatic or deep breathing to reduce your heart rate. You do this by filling your stomach with air and exhaling while putting one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
- Give the student options (e.g., going for a walk or listening to music).
- Acknowledge what the student is feeling and reflect what they are saying. This can lead the student to feel heard, which can help them calm down.
- Reassure them that you are here to help and you will keep doing what you can to assist them.
- Let the student know that you care about them.
- Be okay sitting in silence with the student. Sometimes talking can be too overwhelming for the student. Don't make continuous eye contact.
- Directly answer any questions the student asks. Share your next steps with them before you do it.

Collaborate

- Follow the school, county, and state protocol.
- Alert mental health services and school administration.
- Involve any mental health professionals who currently treat the student.

Advocate for the child

- If you are the first adult to attend directly to the student's crisis, you are in the unique position of being their advocate and voice. Treat this role with grace.

Document

- Document what the student reports to you. This information will be useful to others who become involved (or are involved) in the student's life.
- Make notations about the specific words the student uses and what seems to help them feel better.

Debrief and seek support

- Those who are involved in helping a student in crisis should consider themselves as part of a team. Team members need emotional support themselves, as well as encouragement.
- Those who are involved in managing a student's crisis should debrief with each other, share what it is like for them, ask questions, and express emotion outwardly.
- Check in with each other about what each person does well and what could be done differently.

Crisis tools and resources

Crisis contact information:

- Emergency Medical Services: 911
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (available 24/7): 1-800-273-8255 or text 'HOME' to '741741' the Crisis Text Line
- If you suspect a student has been the victim of abuse, contact your local Child Protective Services Agency. Here are toll-free Crisis Hotline Phone Numbers provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:
 - Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)
 - Prevent Child Abuse America: 1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373)
- Adolescents can utilize Teen Line in the state of California: <https://teenlineonline.org>

Screener tools:

- Suicidality:
 - Conducting a virtual suicide assessment checklist from the *National Association of School Psychologists* website: <https://bit.ly/3bc4Bub>
 - The School Counselor and Suicide Risk Assessment from the *American School Counselor Association* website: <https://bit.ly/3mfPTZ7>
- Homicidality (threat of violence):
 - A PowerPoint presentation on School-Based Threat Assessment: Best Practices and Resources: <https://bit.ly/2ZFOrqE>
- Abuse:
 - Identification, screening, and assessment of child abuse & neglect from the *Child Welfare Information Gateway* website: <https://bit.ly/3GqH86H>

Mental health services:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration treatment referral helpline: 1-877-726-4727
- 2020 national directory of mental health treatment facilities from the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* website: <https://bit.ly/2ZyAevt>

Additional crisis and mental health resources:

- *American Association of Suicidology*: <https://suicidology.org>
- Crisis hotlines and from the *American Psychological Association*: <https://bit.ly/3nDAtgZ>
- Preventing suicide: Guidelines for administrators and crisis teams from the *National Association of School Psychologists* website: <https://bit.ly/30ZuRWB>



Conclusion

With variants being diagnosed at a rapid rate, it is likely that educators will address COVID-19 and its effects in the immediate future and beyond. This toolkit strives to offer teachers relevant information and tools for addressing their own and their students' mental wellness needs.

As first responders, teachers have an added layer of stress due to the responsibility that comes with the nature of their work: teaching and guiding children. It is exceptionally difficult to balance reinventing and reimagining teaching while attempting to cope with COVID-19 and social injustice-related stress.

Now is the time to come together and use these unprecedented challenges as an opportunity for goodwill and authentic partnerships for the benefit of all children and teachers. If not now, when?



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