

## Responding to Return-to-School Stress

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Below are the common types of stress that students may experience as they return to school. Students may experience greater or lesser stress in response to their circumstances. Remember that the tone YOU set, proactively and reactively, matters most of all.

### TYPE OF STUDENT STRESS

### \*SCHOOL/EDUCATOR RESPONSE

#### DEMAND STRESS

This comes from the stress of adjusting to returning to school, to daily structure, and heightened academic and behavioural expectations. Students vulnerable to this stress may include those on opposite sides of the academic performance spectrum who may have experienced the disruption in learning as a welcome reduction in the pressures to perform at or above grade level expectations.

#### Strengthen POSITIVITY

- Ease in – don't leap back into the curriculum right away.
- Ease off – consider dialing back some demands.
- Avoid "Loss of Learning" talk which emphasizes deficits and starting from a negative focus. Instead focus on re-instilling a Love of Learning.
- Help students identify what they *did* learn during the disruption—about themselves and others.

#### PEER STRESS

This comes from anxiety related to re-establishing one's place within a peer group, recognizing that social isolation along with developmental growth, may have led to the reconfiguring and/or disintegration of student social networks. Students who were highly socially isolated during the pandemic are especially vulnerable to this stress, including those who struggled socially before the pandemic.

#### Strengthen BELONGING

- Normalize the student's experience. Talk about how and why peer groups have been disrupted.
- Encourage conversation about what social isolation was like.
- Take a little extra time with students who seem disconnected from others.
- Create group activities to foster connection in class.

#### MARGINALIZATION STRESS

The scholar, Isabel Wilkerson, uses the term marginalization to describe the experience of systemic discrimination and exclusion due to unequal power relationships across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Students who experienced marginalization at school before the pandemic—whether due to differences related to racialization, culture, gender, neurodivergence, temperament, or other factors—may have well-founded concerns of returning to a system that has not always served them well in the past.

#### Strengthen IDENTITY

- Recognize which students you may connect with a little less and re-double your efforts to get to know them.
- Connect with your students' families.
- Rethink curriculum content asking, "How do my students see themselves in it?"
- Rethink instructional strategies asking, "How might I be unintentionally leaving some students out?"
- Reflect deeply on your unconscious biases. We all have them.

#### HOME STRESS

This describes the accumulation of stress resulting from living in a stressful home during the pandemic. School can be a protective environment for many students. Students who are vulnerable to this stress include those that live with food, housing, or financial insecurity, and those exposed to Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction.

#### Strengthen SAFETY

- Be a secure base. Provide structure (with flexibility), be consistent, and reliable.
- Take care not to jump to pathologizing the student. They may not need interventions or counselling. They may just need a safe environment and time spent with compassionate adults.
- Remember that people, not programs, change people.

#### LOSS-RELATED STRESS

This describes the ongoing emotional impact (i.e., grief) of experiencing losses over the course of the pandemic. This includes the loss of loved ones, as well as the loss of friendships, missing of critical milestones (e.g., graduations), the loss of sports and other co-curricular activities, and other important developmental events. Many students will carry this sense of loss, and vulnerability to further losses, as they return to school.

#### Strengthen MEANING

- Talk in class about what it was like to miss school and miss activities.
- Normalize and validate feelings, try not to "fix" them.
- Avoid dismissive statements like, "Other people had it worse".
- Remember that some students may react strongly to everyday "losses" such as separation anxiety or transitions.
- Create regular, shared "milestone moments" for small things like "It's Friday!".

#### RESTRICTION STRESS

This describes the stress that will continue to arise from measures to restrict the spread of COVID, along with anxiety associated with the presence of the virus in general. This may come from wearing masks, social distancing, and the reduction or elimination of other activities at school, as well as generalized fears about COVID. These responses will vary based on student temperament and/or the actions and beliefs of the adults around them.

#### Strengthen REGULATION

- Take care to manage your own stress, know that your emotions are also highly contagious.
- Remember that your students will look to you for how to respond.
- Don't pretend that everything is awesome. Leave room for students to feel sad or frustrated.
- Try not to let the restrictions or worries get in the way of remembering to have fun!