

Setting the Stage

CONNECTING MENTAL HEALTH & BEHAVIOR IN THE CLASSROOM

Responses to Stress



Fight

Aggressively moving towards perceived threat



Flight

Anxiously moving away from perceived threat



Freeze

Stuck and unable to react to perceived threat



Flock

Seeking safety in a group from perceived threat



Fawn

Stabilizing others and trying to please perceived threat to avoid conflict or criticism

All Behavior is Communication

All behavior is a child's best attempt at meeting their needs in the best way they know how, with the tools they have. Lack of vocabulary to describe discomfort and lack of previous experiences can result in emotional reactions that might not seem aligned with the root problem. **Be curious rather than judgmental.**

Henley, C. (2021). Planning of Movement. In *Foundations of Neuroscience* (p. 314) MSU Libraries.

Stress Responses in Kids

FIGHT	FLIGHT	FREEZE
Irritable, Angry, Offended, Aggressive	Anxious, Panicked, Scared, Overwhelmed	Shutting Down, Zoned Out, Bored/Apathetic
Hitting, Kicking, Biting	Trying to Escape	Isolates Self, Hides
Blaming, Defensive	Unfocused, Preoccupied	Verbally Unresponsive
Demanding, Controlling	Fidgeting, Hyperactive	Difficulty Finishing Tasks
Yelling, Screaming	Procrastinating, Avoidant	Depressed, Numb

Adapted from Fight Flight Freeze Poster by *WholeHearted School Counseling* wholeheartedschoolcounseling.com/.

H

Hungry



A

Angry



L

Lonely



T

Tired



H.A.L.T.

Teach students to use the H.A.L.T. method to be mindfully checking basic needs when feeling anxious & before acting impulsively.

Adapted from Futter, C. (2020). Courage to HALT. *Equip For Life Coaching* <https://equipforlifecoaching.com/2020/courage-to-halt-before-a-bad-decision/>.

Resources

- 1 NCTSN School Resources**
Child trauma toolkits, educator fact sheets [CLICK HERE](#)
- 2 Echo Training**
Trauma-informed school graphics, tip sheets [CLICK HERE](#)
- 3 Fostering Resilient Learners**
Handouts, study guides, children's book [CLICK HERE](#)
- 4 Child Mind Institute**
How Anxiety Affects Teenagers (Article) [CLICK HERE](#)
- 5 Nemours Kids Health**
Depression Factsheet for Schools [CLICK HERE](#)
- 6 Trauma-Sensitive Schools**
Tools, resources, guidebooks, videos [CLICK HERE](#)

Signs of Potential Mental Health Concerns in Young Children*

- 1 Excessive crying
- 2 Clinginess
- 3 Extra argumentative
- 4 Tantrums, outbursts
- 5 Mute or withdrawn
- 6 Unable to focus/ sit still during preferred activities

* Each of these **must be considered within the context of normal child development**, looking at milestones & reasonable expectations

Signs of Anxiety in the Classroom

- 1 Worry, social anxiety, performance anxiety (might look like perfectionism/sensitivity to criticism)
- 2 Physical symptoms/complaints (stomachaches, headaches, racing heart, sleep issues)
- 3 Trouble concentrating, withdrawal from activities
- 4 Drop in grades, change in school/sports performance
- 5 Irritability, anger
- 6 Panic Attacks
- 7 Substance abuse to cope

Resource for Anxiety:

<https://childmind.org/article/signs-of-anxiety-in-teenagers/>

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Signs of Depression in the Classroom

- 1 Tired, lack of energy (can be difficult to distinguish from lack of sleep)
- 2 Sudden change in youth's regular mood/demeanor
- 3 Not turning in work, change in grades or effort
- 4 Irritability, anger
- 5 Less interested in peers, activities, or hobbies
- 6 Mentioning death or suicide out loud or in classwork
- 7 Missing school and/or coming in late

Resource for Depression:

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/depression-factsheet.html>

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Ideal Reaction



I'm noticing that this child is struggling. How can I support them and be curious to learn more about the roots of their symptoms & behaviors?

Important Reminder

It is **NOT** the teacher's job to try to diagnose, especially since there is a lot of overlap between different mental health issues. It's more important to just recognize that the child is struggling and can't learn if they feel unsafe. **It doesn't matter what the cause is in the moment because all support responses are similar.**

How to Support Students

- Establish **physical, emotional, & social safety** in the classroom. Remember that students can't learn if they feel unsafe.
- Students need **caring & consistent adults** at school.
- Establish a shared language between adults about trauma/stress. Have a clear **plan for unsafe situations** & behavior expectations.
- Look at the whole child's well-being. Are their basic needs met?
- **Teach new skills** & give students **time to practice** them.
- Students need to be **fed in order to function**.
- Establish **peer support** for the adults who work in the school.
- Make sure the adults in the child's life are talking to each other! Child's **trusted adults should communicate** concerns and observations to create a net of support.

Adapted from Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative <https://traumasensitiveschools.org>

Behavioral Therapies

DBT TECHNIQUES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Distract w/ ACCEPTS

A

Activity

Do something! Play an instrument, listen to music, go on a walk, etc.

C

Contribute

Be outward-facing & do something to care for or help others

C

Comparison

Think about a time in the past when you did get through challenging times

E

Emotions

Creating a different emotion (example: imagine something funny or a calming place)

P

Pushing Away

In a crisis it can help to visualize a wall between you & the stressful feeling

T

Thoughts

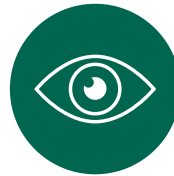
Replace thoughts with more concrete ones by noticing things in your body & room

S

Sensations

Use the six senses to ground & recenter yourself in the moment (see self-soothing)

Self-Soothe w/ 6 Senses



Look

Look at photos, people, out windows, notice what you see



Listen

Listen to music, nature, sing, meditate, play an instrument



Smell

Put on lotion, perfume, smell coffee, cookies, or a candle



Taste

Taste your favorite foods & drinks, notice what you're eating



Touch

Pet a dog or cat, brush your hair, hold an ice pack, use sensory tools



Move

Stretch, walk, do yoga, run, dance, go outside and move your body

What is DBT?

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is an evidenced-based therapeutic intervention designed to provide skills for **managing intense emotions and negotiating social relationships.**

Its underlying emphasis is on helping individuals learn to **regulate and to tolerate their own emotions.**



Skill Building for Distress Tolerance

- 1 Psychoeducation**
Explain to kids how the body reacts to emotional stress or discomfort & **share that these feelings are totally normal.**
- 2 Emotion Identification**
Students who don't know how to identify what they are feeling experience more distress. **Introduce descriptive emotion vocabulary** & encourage communication.
- 3 Validate Without Solving**
Acknowledge the kid's feelings and simply be with them. Solutions, even if well-intentioned, can feel invalidating. Simply listen & acknowledge that this is difficult for them.
- 4 Strength-based Accommodations**
Build skills & exercises into support plans to ensure more long-term success. Check in after an accommodation is used & implement mindfulness activities during breaks.

Pros & Cons Exercise

Pros & cons can help with accepting reality and doing things we don't want to do.

RESPONSE	PROS	CONS
Old response: Acting impulsively, leaving class or being removed	Distraction (Short Term) Avoid Pain (Short Term) Feel Better (Short Term)	Miss work & fall behind (Long Term) Feel guilt/shame (ST/LT) Reality returns (ST/LT) Might not graduate (Long Term)
New response: Tolerating distress by applying coping skills	Better chance of understanding work (LT) Increase pride (ST/LT) Develop life skills (Long Term)	Don't get to escape hard feelings (ST/LT) Pain isn't immediately resolved (ST) Requires work/effort (Short Term)

Resources

- 1 DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents (book)**
by Jill H. Rathus and Alec L. Miller
ISBN 9781462515356

[CLICK HERE](#)

Remember

Use distraction in moments of crisis.

Learn & understand in moments of calm.

APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING MENTAL WELLNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

How to Provide Student Support

- 1 Help the student **identify with their role** as a student
- 2 **Set expectations** to ensure student success
- 3 **Provide structures** that will support the desired outcome
- 4 Build & consistently maintain a **meaningful relationship** with students
- 5 Use **Restorative Practices** of “harm & repair” over “shame & punishment”

Restorative Practices Toolkit:

<https://schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices/>

CLICK
HERE

Student Success



All Behavior is Communication

When a student's mental health is suffering, **you'll see it far before it can be articulated.**



When students FEEL better, they DO better

Offering a transparent & vulnerable space for students to express what they need to get out in order to move forward can make a big difference.

Become aware of...

RELATIONSHIPS

STUDENT IDENTITY

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Build Relationships

- 1 **Inquire & Listen**
Inquire, listen, inquire again, get them to talk & hear them
- 2 **Validate Feelings**
How the student FEELS is valid & important, tell them
- 3 **Set Clear Expectations**
Set expectations & teach students how to reach them
- 4 **Be Consistent**
Kids need consistency, set boundaries and stick to them
- 5 **Require Vulnerability**
Be vulnerable yourself & expect the same in return

Develop Student Identity

- 1 **No Judgement Zone**
Keep things positive and focus on progress, not perfection
- 2 **Brainstorm Roles**
Consider the role of “student” & “teacher” and make a list of attributes together with the class
- 3 **Choose Three**
Independently choose 3 aspects of the roles that can be achieved. Write them down, make action plans, & check-in consistently
- 4 **Accountability**
Define ways to hold yourselves & each other accountable. With a strong relationship, it will feel like a conversation, not an attack

Use Restorative Practices

- 1 **Use Affective Statements**
State the feeling, name the behavior, identify the impact of the behavior, and state the action you'd rather see
- 2 **Ask Affective Questions**
Ask open-ended questions to help elicit emotion, introspection, and response

Gain Perspective:

“What happened?”

Reflection:

“What were you thinking at the time?”

“What have you thought since?”

Accountability:

“Who was affected by what you did?”

“How were they affected?”

“What do you think you need to do to make things right?”

Gauge Yourself Honestly

Where you land for each of these?

Severely Lacking

Strongly Skilled



Relationships

Building relationships is the single-most important piece to the puzzle when it comes to providing support. Having a solid foundation with students allows for both laughter and celebration, as well as a safe place to land when tough conversations need to be had. This goes for parents as well.

Student Identity

You cannot assume that students know how to be students today. As silly as it sounds, due to multiple factors (including COVID, life in front of a screen, the way the world is modeled for them, parental influence, & more) students are struggling with “how to do school”. **Helping kids gauge where they are at now & where they want to go as a student** can open up a whole new world.

Restorative Practices

With a focus on “harm & repair” rather than “shame & punishment”, Restorative Practices provides a way to truly **maintain relationships you’ve built** w/ your students **while providing much-needed accountability** when things go awry. Restorative Practices is also a fantastic tool that can be used proactively to build community & develop a stronger bond. **A STRONG BOND = SAFETY**

Advice for Faculty & Staff

Self-Care

You Are Important!

Attending to your own self-care and mental health is key! If necessary, seek guidance.

Speak Up

You Are Not Alone!

Sometimes it feels like we are on an island. That’s simply not true! Be vulnerable & speak up if things feel heavy or overwhelming.

Practice Positive Intent

Your Best Is Enough!

Practice assuming positive intent with yourself and with others.

“Everyone is doing the best they can with the resources they have available.”

Regulation Strategies

SENSORY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Factors Increasing Deregulation

LACK OF RELATIONSHIPS

LACK OF STUDENT IDENTITY

LACK OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

What to Do

1 Realize

Realize, AS THE ADULT, when you, yourself, are dysregulated. **Awareness is KEY!**

2 Gather the Troops

You are a TEAM - Identify as a class what is lacking & talk about it together. Lead with vulnerability.

3 Take Action

Take action that day on at least one of 3 areas that may be lacking.

Is there a lack of consistency?

Are there boundaries needing to be set?

Are they aware of what it means to be a student & are they identifying with that?

Important Considerations



SENSORY

ENVIRONMENTAL

Sensory Strategies



Deep Breathing



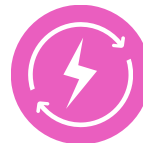
Lighting Change



Sound/Noise Level



Movement



Energetic Shift



Fidgets



Scents/Smells



Meaningful Walking Break



Decreased Screen Time

Environmental Strategies



Light Filters & Lamps



Fairy Lights & Book Lights



Plants & Greenery!!!



Water Feature



Comfy Alternative Seating



Breathing Station



Motor/Movement Station



Pleasing Aesthetic



Change Up Room Layout

Classroom Climate

Developing the climate within your own classroom or workspace **is essential** to the success of your desired outcome.

Boundaries & Consistency

Set boundaries & STAY CONSISTENT. Clear boundaries are kind & consistency builds safety & is the greatest gift.

Awareness

Truly KNOW your students. Become fully aware of when and how they work best & try to provide that most of the time.

Create Your Space

Create a space that feels great to YOU. Change it up when needed. Try to have fun with the process!

Language & De-escalation Dartmouth Health Children's

LANGUAGE & STRATEGIES FOR DE-ESCALATION IN THE CLASSROOM



Low & Slow (T. Bolick)

Communicate safety & calmness by moving low & slow. Get down on the floor to get at their eye level, lower your volume & slow your pace of speech, slow your body movements and provide a non-intimidating, relaxed posture.

Lower Volume



Slow Pace of Speech

Lower Posture



Slow Body Movements



Regulate Over Educate

Learning cannot occur until students are regulated. The only goals are safety & regulation, learning will follow. When under stress, they can't problem-solve.

Validation & recognition are everything! Empathy is a primary regulator.

"I can see that you are struggling, I know this is hard."



Connection Over Isolation

Be with the dysregulated student(s) **physically and with your language.** **Don't push them away** by sending them out or putting them in the corner. Use "we" rather than "you" statements.

"I'm here with you"

"I'll sit with you here for a minute"

"We will get through this together"

"We will find a way through this"



Name It to Tame It (D. Siegel)

New feelings can be overwhelming, especially since kids often don't know what they mean & haven't learned how to put them into words.

Having language/names for emotions is regulating & gives a sense of control.

Naming the feeling separates it from ourselves & our self-worth. Name theirs & your own to demonstrate. Keep it simple & short to externalize it.

"I can see that you're really sad right now"

angry
scared
worried
frustrated
disappointed

Perceived Threats



Stress Response Triggers

Anything they perceive as scary or overwhelming, **regardless of whether the actual thing is a true threat**, triggers a stress response in the brain & body.



Perception is Everything

A child's perception is based on their own childhood **events/environment/trauma** that you might not know about. They detect the trigger as a threat for a reason that **isn't within their control**.

Remind Yourself...

Children might cope by re-enacting trauma & adversity through their interactions.

Humans often choose the "familiar" of misery & negative behavior over the unfamiliar.

It's not personal!

Types of Stress Response



Hyper-sensitive

Very responsive, sensitive, hostile, sense of urgency



Desensitized

Numbed out, careless, withdrawn, lack of urgency

The Pair of ACEs

Adverse Community Environments & Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) can impact a child's development, emotional stability, resilience, & distress tolerance.



Adverse Childhood Events

Emotional & Sexual Abuse

Homelessness
Domestic Violence

Divorce
Mental Illness
Incarceration

Physical & Emotional Neglect

Adverse Community Environments

Lack of Opportunity,
Economic Mobility
& Social Capital

Discrimination
Poverty
Violence

Poor Housing
Quality &
Affordability

Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017). A New Framework: The BCR Model. [Link to View](#).

Resources

1 TIC to Build Resilience (Website)

Child Trends | J. Bartlett & K. Steber

[CLICK HERE](#)

2 Childhood Trauma & Health (Video)

TED Talk - TEDMED | Nadine Burke Harris

[CLICK HERE](#)

3 Calming & De-escalation (Video)

Dartmouth Trauma Interventions Research Center | Erin Barnett

[CLICK HERE](#)

Books

4 Fostering Resilient Learners:

Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom, by Kristen Souers

5 Trauma Stewardship:

An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others, by Lauren van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk

Systems, Policies, & Families

HOW TO NAVIGATE SCHOOL POLICIES, COMMUNICATE, & ENGAGE FAMILIES

Understanding Policies in Schools



Be Aware of Policies

Schools have specific policies governing student behavior, communication, & family engagement.



Best Practice

Consult with your principal or administration before implementing strategies.



Every District is Different

Identify how you are allowed to communicate. Be aware of district policies & handbooks.



Consent

Secure necessary releases to communicate with doctors & therapists. Identify how often they need to be renewed.

Tip: *Gather information in advance* on who the student is connected with outside of school (doctors, therapist, etc).

Request waivers & forms in advance and get them signed prior to an issue occurring. This allows for more open conversations moving forward. Just make sure to *renew them* each year!

Parents Under Pressure

Parental mental health is crucial to children's well-being, yet parents are under increased stress at home.

It's essential for schools to support parents & caregivers to effectively support the student.

Tip: *Ask how the parents are doing* to gather insight prior to discussing the student's behavior.

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, *Parents Under Pressure*. [Link to Findings](#).

Family Engagement



Keep Families Involved

Keep parents informed & include them in the conversation when implementing strategies. You'll have a better chance of success when the parents are on-board and you work as a team.



Share Strategies

Ask the parents what they have tried at home & identify what is working that could be tried in the classroom. If you find a strategy that works in the classroom, offer it as an idea for home, too.

Addressing Behavioral Concerns



Early Intervention is Key

Identify concerns & engage families. Contact families proactively to discuss student behavior and build relationships.

Implementing an Effective Plan



Develop Strategies

Develop strategies that involve both school and home environments.



Ensure Alignment

Collaborate to ensure alignment with family expectations & routines.



Adapt to Input

Adapt plans based on student needs and family input.



Keep Admin Involved

Consult with administration when implementing strategies & include them in communications (ex: Cc or Bcc on emails)



Wraparound Meetings

If you can, plan wraparound meetings where everyone's voice is heard. This can make parents feel more comfortable & result in more effective solutions.

Clear Communication



5 Positives: 1 Negative

5 Positives to 1 Negative Approach: Reinforce good behavior more often than correcting negative behavior.



Solution-Focused Language

Use clear, positive, & solution-focused language.

Problem-focused: *"Your child can never transition between classes & causes issues."*

Solution-focused:

"Here are some ways your child is doing well. We wanted to connect with you because we have been noticing that they often struggle with transitions between classes. Here are some solution ideas we were considering trying to help the student succeed. What are your thoughts?"



Talking Points

Utilize free tools like [TalkingPoints](#) to facilitate communication by texting WITHOUT having to give out your real phone number. It can also help with multilingual communication & more!

Resources

1

Parents Under Pressure

U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory

[CLICK HERE](#)

2

TalkingPoints

<https://talkingpts.org/teachers/>

[CLICK HERE](#)