TAKING CARE:

AN EDUCATOR GUIDE TO HEALTHY HABITS FOR STUDENT EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

FIRST BOOK™

The Kids Mental Health Foundation™

BE PROACTIVE & PROTECTIVE

Educators can do a lot to support and improve the mental health and emotional well-being of the students in their classrooms and programs:

- Promote **social and emotional** and competency
- Share effective coping strategies to deal with **stress and anxiety**
- Teach and reinforce self-care habits like **mindfulness**
- Practice, model, and encourage **gratitude**

Sources: What Is Mental Health? | mentalhealth.gov
& For Educators | mentalhealth.gov

The Kids Mental Health Foundation, in partnership with Young Minds Inspired, offers an Emotional Empowerment program for educators to use with students in grades 1-6. Activities and take-home letters are available in English and Spanish. Review the lessons and download the full program here, along with other mental health and wellness curricula.

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

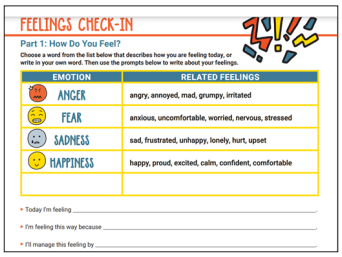
Developing the vocabulary and awareness to talk about feelings is key to social and emotional learning. The Kids Mental Health Foundation identifies five stages of **emotional regulation** for children that are helpful to keep in mind as you incorporate social and emotional learning into your classroom or program:

1. Identify emotions and what they mean
2. Recognize emotions in the moment/as they are experienced
3. Notice emotions in others
4. Express feelings appropriately, even when experiencing strong or difficult emotions
5. Use coping strategies like mindful breathing, exercise, and listening to music to regulate strong emotions

Source: How to Foster a Child's Emotional Development | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Some students, particularly younger children, tend not to talk about their feelings or ask for help if they are struggling. Their silence may be caused by shame, embarrassment, confusion, or simply not having the tools to understand and communicate how they feel. This is why proactively teaching students how to recognize and name their emotions, how to use coping strategies, and how to ask for help when needed is so important.

There are many ways educators can support students' social and emotional development and help them progress through the five stages mentioned above:



FEELINGS CHECK-IN

Part 1: How Do You Feel?

Choose a word from the list below that describes how you are feeling today, or write in your own word. Then use the prompts below to write about your feelings.

EMOTION	RELATED FEELINGS
ANGER	angry, annoyed, mad, grumpy, irritated
FEAR	anxious, uncomfortable, worried, nervous, stressed
SADNESS	sad, frustrated, unhappy, lonely, hurt, upset
HAPPINESS	happy, proud, excited, calm, confident, comfortable

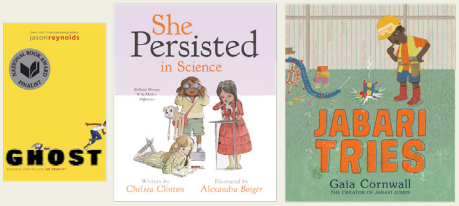
- Today I'm feeling _____
- I'm feeling this way because _____
- I'll manage this feeling by _____

- Incorporate a **feelings check-in** into your morning meeting to help students develop the habit of recognizing feelings and proactively identifying appropriate coping strategies.
- Use **books** to teach about emotions, emotional responses, and empathy.
- Incorporate **teamwork** so students can practice sharing opinions, active listening, and collaborating. First Book's Teamwork Time Saver offers tips for building effective teams.
- Teach **social and emotional vocabulary** and a **growth mindset**. Download this free poster from We Are Teachers that features positive statements to encourage resilience.
- Create a **calm down corner**. Creating a safe, peaceful space with calming materials like art supplies, books, and writing materials offers students a haven when they need a moment to calm down or take a break. Note that time in calm down corners should be limited to 5 to 15 minutes so students do not use them as an opportunity to escape or avoid rather than calm down.

Read advice and explore resources from The Kids Mental Health Foundation and for additional ideas.

Find Books to Support Social & Emotional Learning on the First Book Marketplace

Explore the Social and Emotional Learning page on the First Book Marketplace to find books that are perfect for starting conversations, complementing activities, and engaging students. From helping kids identify and name their feelings to helping you promote empathy and mutual respect, books are excellent tools to model the skills students need to become and remain emotionally and mentally healthy.



> Social skills are suffering.
> Our kids don't know how to work together.
> Having 1.5 years off school has had a major impact on how to interact with others.
>
> *First Book Educator*
> *(Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*

Use the Reflect App to Support Social and Emotional Learning

If you are currently using Teams for Education—available with Microsoft 365 Education and free to educators—you have access to the Reflect app. With Reflect, educators can:

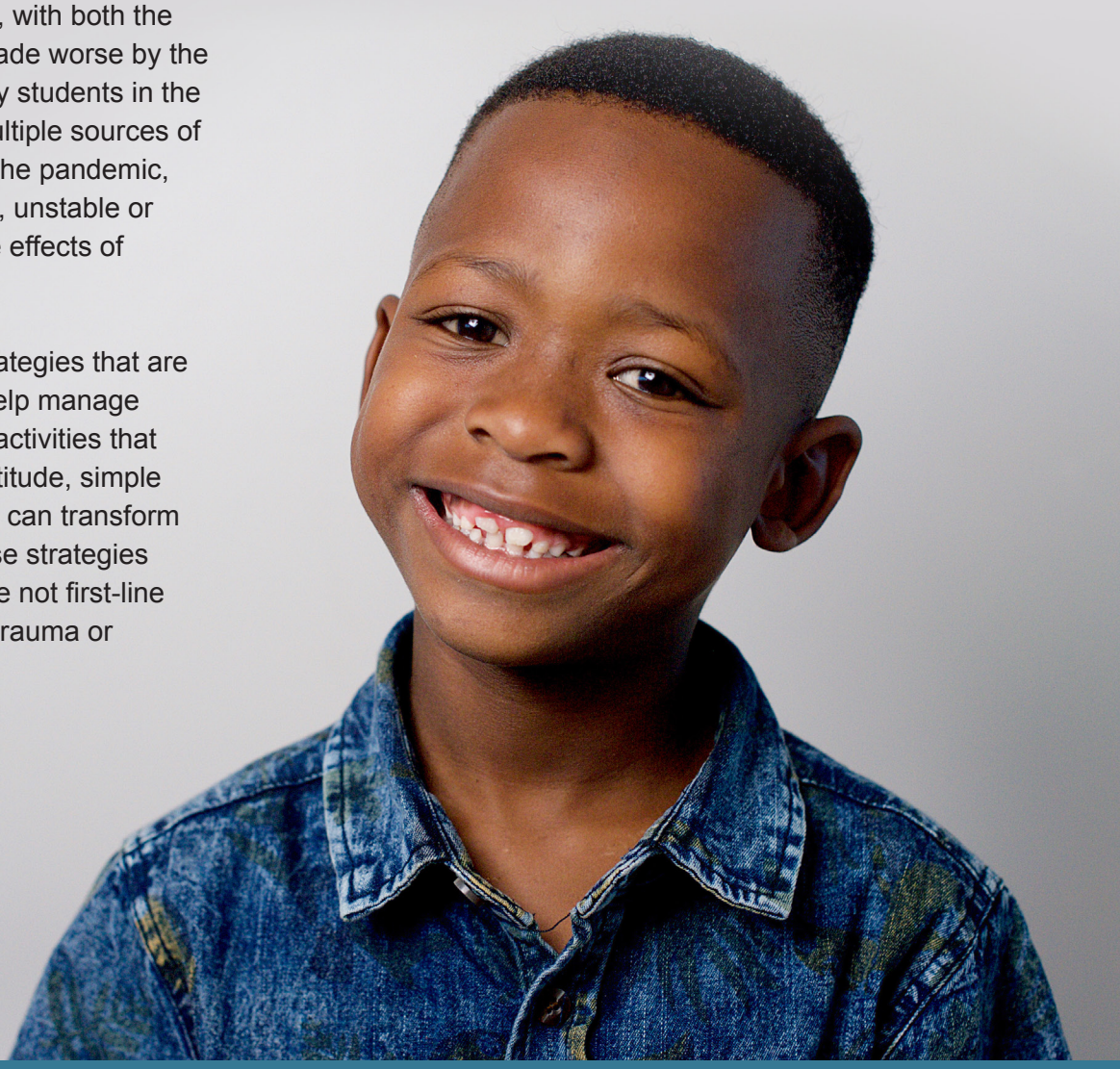
- Expose students to new language to describe complex emotions
- Help students connect facial expressions and body language to social and emotional vocabulary
- Share how students are feeling in the aggregate as a prompt for lessons on empathy and collaborative problem-solving

You can assess your own social-emotional skills and learn how to use Reflect in this 34-minute course.

MANAGING STRESS & ANXIETY

First Book educators report that stress and anxiety are increasingly common struggles for the students they serve, with both the prevalence and severity made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students in the First Book Network had multiple sources of stress in their lives before the pandemic, such as financial insecurity, unstable or unsafe home lives, and the effects of systemic racism.

There are many coping strategies that are free and easy to learn to help manage stress. Below you will find activities that teach mindfulness and gratitude, simple and effective practices that can transform moods and mindsets. These strategies can foster resilience but are not first-line recommendations to treat trauma or toxic stress.



The Different Types of Stress

Stress is the body's reaction to events and experiences that can manifest as physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Most people experience stress throughout their lives, but there are different types, causes, and effects.

Positive Stress: This type of stress is feeling nervous before a test, performance, or game and may actually enhance performance.

Tolerable Stress: This type of stress results from more challenging or unexpected events, such as falling on the playground and getting hurt.

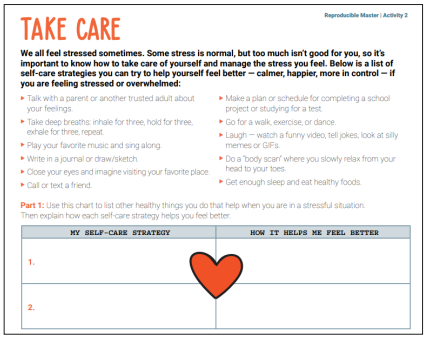
Toxic Stress: This type of stress can result from abuse, neglect, financial insecurity, or exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, or violence.

Children are particularly vulnerable to frequent stressors because their brains and bodies are still developing. Living in a constant state of stress takes a toll on a child's health, affecting their emotional well-being into adulthood and negatively impacting their physical health and development.

Source: Resources for Stress | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Try these activities and suggestions in your classroom or program to help students manage stress and anxiety:

- Share this video from The Kids Mental Health Foundation that offers three tips to deal with stress and pressure.
- Have your students complete the Take Care worksheet created by The Kids Mental Health Foundation, in partnership with Young Minds Inspired. This exercise will help students identify their preferred coping and self-care strategies.
- Challenge your students to a month-long Mental Fitness Challenge and watch how simple habits and activities can improve their mood and general well-being and act as a buffer against stressful moments.



Reproducible Master | Activity 2

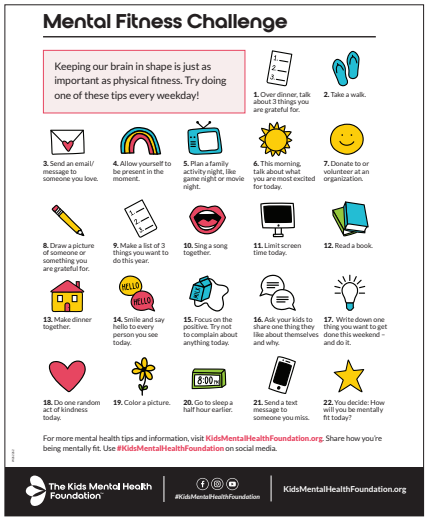
TAKE CARE

We all feel stressed sometimes. Some stress is normal, but too much isn't good for you, so it's important to know how to take care of yourself and manage the stress you feel. Below is a list of self-care strategies you can try to help yourself feel better — calmer, happier, more in control — if you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed:

- Talk with a parent or another trusted adult about your feelings.
- Take deep breaths: inhale for three, hold for three, exhale for three, repeat.
- Play your favorite music and sing along.
- Write in a journal or draw/sketch.
- Close your eyes and imagine visiting your favorite place.
- Call or text a friend.
- Make a plan or schedule for completing a school project or studying for a test.
- Go for a walk, exercise, or dance.
- Laugh — watch a funny video, tell jokes, look at silly memes or GIFs.
- Do a "body scan" where you slowly relax from your head to your toes.
- Get enough sleep and eat healthy foods.

Part 1: Use this chart to list other healthy things you do that help when you are in a stressful situation. Then explain how each self-care strategy helps you feel better.

MY SELF-CARE STRATEGY	HOW IT HELPS ME FEEL BETTER
1.	
2.	



Mental Fitness Challenge

Keeping our brain in shape is just as important as physical fitness. Try doing one of these tips every weekday!

1. Over dinner, talk about 3 things you are grateful for.
2. Take a walk.
3. Send an email/message to someone you love.
4. Allow yourself to be present in the moment.
5. Plan a family activity night, like game night or movie night.
6. This morning, talk about what you are most excited for today.
7. Donate to or volunteer at an organization.
8. Draw a picture of someone or something you are grateful for.
9. Make a list of 3 things you want to do this year.
10. Sing a song together.
11. Limit screen time today.
12. Read a book.
13. Make dinner together.
14. Smile and say hello to every person you see today.
15. Focus on the positive. Try not to complain about anything today.
16. Ask your kids to share one thing they like about themselves and why.
17. Write down one thing you want to get done this weekend – and do it.
18. Do one random act of kindness today.
19. Color a picture.
20. Go to sleep a half hour earlier.
21. Send a text message to someone you miss.
22. You decide: How will you be mentally fit today?

For more mental health tips and information, visit KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org. Share how you're being mentally fit. Use #KidsMentalHealthFoundation on social media.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation | #KidsMentalHealthFoundation | KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org

Your Students Can Earn Free Books by Completing The Kids Mental Health Foundation Mental Fitness Challenge

If your class or program completes this Mental Fitness Challenge, tell First Book about its impact. Email mentalfitness@firstbook.org with your thoughts to be entered into a drawing to earn free books from the First Book Marketplace.

EDUCATORS SHARE

First Book educators share their tips for helping students manage stress and anxiety

Have students write what is stressful or causing anxiety on a small piece of paper or sticky note. Have students **feed the sticky note into the shredder** as they tell themselves, "I am okay. I can do this."

Lisa, School Counselor in Sulphur Springs, Texas

Print FREE mandalas from mondaymandala.com and give students a few minutes to **color these calming designs**.

Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina

Purchase different color molding clay for the class, and have students create a small **worry stone** to rub whenever they need. They can keep the stone in their pocket throughout the day. The clay will need to be baked in order to harden. I have noticed that students who are truly anxious benefit not only from the activity alone, but also carrying the stone around.

Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a protective mental health practice that you can practice with your students and incorporate into your classroom or program. Mindfulness means paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and experiences and accepting them with as little judgment as possible. One of the goals of mindfulness is to observe each thought as it happens and then let it slip away so that you can observe the next thought. When students direct their attention to what they are doing in the moment, they become more absorbed in the present, which helps them spend less time worrying about the past or the future.

Mindfulness offers many benefits for those who practice it regularly:

- Increased focus and attention
- Less regret about the past and worry about the future
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Less depression
- Improved mood, memory, and self-confidence
- Increased optimism and gratitude

Source: How to Help Your Kids Practice Mindfulness | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Use these strategies to incorporate mindfulness into your classroom or program:

Take a mindful moment where you have students focus on the present. One way to do this is by using grounding meditation, which uses all five senses. The Kids Mental Health Foundation provides this video to help you get started.

This **observation activity** will help students learn to focus mindfully on the present moment. Use these instructions to guide them through the process, which can become a daily or weekly practice.

- Sit comfortably and take several deep breaths.
- Choose an object to focus your attention on. It could be a pencil, book, backpack, or anything within eyesight.
- Use all of your senses to observe the object for 5 minutes. Consider its shape, size, color, weight, and any other qualities.
  - What color is the object?
  - Are there multiple colors? Notice how the light reflects off the object.
  - When you touch it, does it have different textures?
  - Is it warm or cool? Notice the weight. Is it heavy or light?
  - Continue to use all of your senses to observe the object.
- Notice any thoughts, feelings, or sensations that arise. If your mind wanders, gently turn your attention back to the object.
- After the 5 minutes are up, reflect on the experience by writing down how your body and mind feel and the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arose.
- This activity takes a lot of practice. You may find it hard to focus for 5 whole minutes at first. Like with any skill, the more you practice the better you get.

Find some time each day to **practice mindful breathing** as a group. Breathwork is a good way to settle nervous energy before tests, presentations, games, and other important or challenging moments. Try these guided relaxations:

- Play the Mindless to Mindful video from GoNoodle, a 3-minute introduction to mindfulness and conscious breathing.
- The Calm app offers a selection of free mindfulness activities for students of all ages. See page 16 of *30 Days of Mindfulness for the Classroom* for guided mindfulness activities and meditations.

By modeling these practices and routinely incorporating these tools into your daily interactions with students, you are teaching them lifelong tools for mental wellness.

Sources: From Mindless to Mindful | GoNoodle, Creating Optimal Learning Environments | The Conscious Classroom Podcast, & 30 Days of Mindfulness for the Classroom | Calm

GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a simple strategy to improve mental and physical health and resiliency. Studies have shown that students who identify and express gratitude feel more connected to their friends, family, schools, and communities. They also feel more optimistic about life and school and have fewer negative emotions. Isolated moments of gratitude can improve a bad experience or day, but it is even better to develop a gratitude-focused mindset. A consistent gratitude practice can positively affect students' attitudes and overall happiness into adulthood.

Sources: A Lesson in Thanks | Greater Good Magazine & How to Foster Gratitude in Schools | Greater Good Magazine

Many gratitude studies focus on upper- and middle-class students, but a study by Mindy Ma explored gratitude among African American youth (ages 12-14) who were living in low-income areas and attending low-performing schools. Ma's study revealed a correlation between students who reported feelings of gratitude and increased academic and extra-curricular engagement and academic performance.

Gratitude means talking about what we are thankful for, showing that we appreciate things in our life, and showing kindness. Here are some tangible ways to incorporate gratitude into your teaching:

- Clearly **identify examples of gratitude** in daily life, books, movies, and the news.
- Have students keep a **Gratitude Journal**. Ask them to write down what they are grateful for before class or at a designated time during the day. You can enhance the practice by asking them to describe *why* they are grateful for the things they list. The Kids Mental Health Foundation provides a series of gratitude worksheets you can download for free from their website.
- Introduce a **Gratitude Jar**. All you need for this activity is paper, pen, and a jar. Put the jar in an accessible spot in your room and encourage students to write down something that made them happy during the day or week. Make time to share some moments of gratitude with the class. This practice is a simple way to focus on the positive moments that often get lost in the busyness of the school day and week. If students need inspiration, they can use these fill-in-the-blank phrases.

Sources: Gratitude in the Classroom | Move This World, How to Foster Gratitude in Schools | Greater Good Magazine & Growing Our Gratitude | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SKILLS & THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The social and emotional skills and mental fitness practices described above fulfill many state-specific social and emotional learning standards and are also prerequisites for achieving many Common Core standards in math and English Language Arts.

Collaboration is a component of many English Language Arts standards, including: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaboration discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

California's Relationship Skills standards include:

- Listening actively, communicating effectively, and self-advocating
- Developing mutually healthy and productive relationships
- Practicing collaborative problem-solving that focuses on the common good
- Showing leadership and contributing productively in groups

Empathy is a critical skill that requires emotional literacy and is addressed in CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3: Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Kansas has several standards related to empathy across various grade levels:

- Demonstrate and practice aspects of a caring relationship by treating others with empathy (grades 3-5)
- Determine when and how to respond to the needs of others, demonstrating empathy, respect, and compassion (grades 6-8)

Resilience and **self-awareness** are required to meet CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP1: Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.

Minnesota's Self-Management standards include goals for students related to problem-solving and perseverance:

- Demonstrate the skills to manage and express their emotions, thoughts, impulses, and stress in more effective ways.
- Demonstrate the skills to set, monitor, adapt, achieve, and evaluate goals.

Sources: Social-Emotional Character Development | Kansas State Department of Education & CA Dept. of Education Social and Emotional Learning

INTERSECTIONALITY & MENTAL HEALTH

> I find resources that intentionally represent the same backgrounds of my students when directly or indirectly discussing mental health. I read books with diverse characters. I also keep in mind the trauma of racism that may come by simply being a member of that community.
>
> *First Book Educator (Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*

Recurring instances of microaggressions, discrimination, and race-related violence can have profound, negative effects on students' mental health. When this type of stress is constant or extreme, students of color can experience racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress. This trauma can manifest with physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, chest pain, and insomnia) as well as depression, anger, and low self-esteem.

Source: Racial Trauma | Mental Health America

The Kids Mental Health Foundation offers a series of tips and resources that acknowledge the unique lived experiences of communities and groups dealing with discrimination.

- Tips for Self-Care for Black Families – Black Americans are disproportionately affected by systemic racism and inequalities. These tips offer ways for children (and adults) to cope with these stressors.
- Obstacles Latine Children Face and How to Help – Latinx children show higher rates of mental illness and suicidal thoughts than other children their age. This resource provides context and explains how parents and caregivers can help.
- How to Teach Kids About Microaggressions – Microaggressions are the expressions of bias that can be intentional or unintentional. These subtle, common behaviors and comments disproportionately affect members of certain groups.
- Kids and Race-Related Violence – Race-related violence is a source of grief and anxiety for many students. This resource provides ways to offer support and guidance.

Additional Resources About Intersectionality & Mental Health

Reimagining Resilience and Celebrating Black Joy | The Kids Mental Health Foundation
Talking to Kids About Racism | The Kids Mental Health Foundation
Mental Health Resources for Young People of Color | onlinecounselingprograms.com
Racial Trauma, Resiliency and Ally Resources | Counseling Services
Racial Trauma | Mental Health America

EDUCATOR SELF-CARE

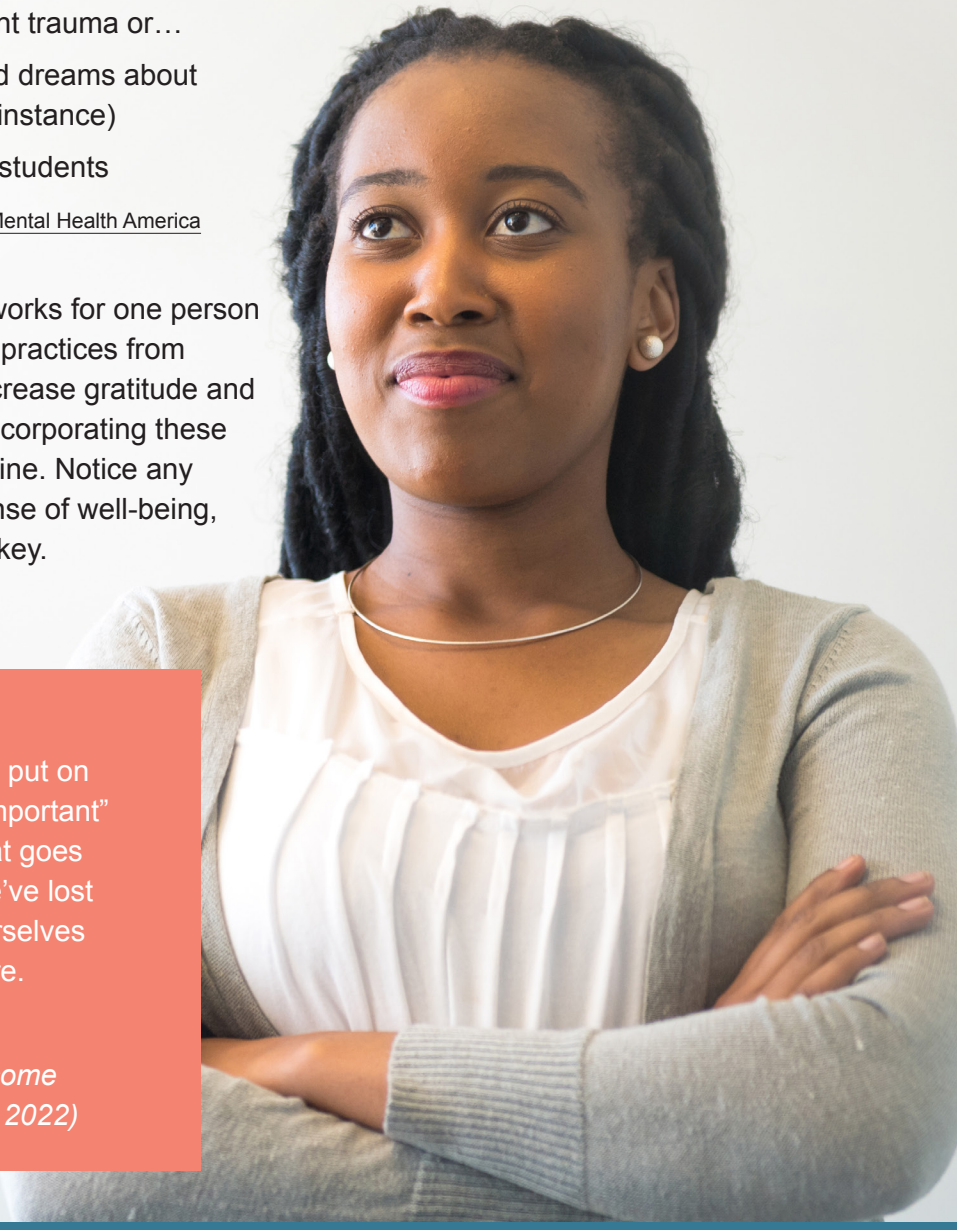
The American Federation of Teachers' 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey found that 61 percent of educators consider their jobs to be always or often stressful—more than double the rate of non-teaching working adults—and 58 percent said they had poor mental health due to stress levels. That was before the pandemic and virtual/hybrid schooling increased existing stressors for students and educators.

Educators are often so focused on taking care of and supporting others that they neglect their own self-care and emotional well-being. This can lead to compassion fatigue, chronic stress, and burnout. Educators with compassion fatigue may experience the following effects:

- Difficulty planning classroom activities and lessons
- Decreased concentration
- Feeling numb or detached about student trauma or…
- Intense feelings, intrusive thoughts, and dreams about student trauma (more than an isolated instance)
- Increased irritability or impatience with students

Sources: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network & Mental Health America

Self-care can take many forms, and what works for one person may not work for another. Below are a few practices from Moving Mountain Academy designed to increase gratitude and focus and reduce stress and anxiety. Try incorporating these practices into your daily and/or weekly routine. Notice any changes in your mood, energy level, or sense of well-being, keeping in mind that consistent practice is key.



> There are so many other priorities put on educators and each one is "more important" than the next. A major priority that goes unnoticed is educator burnout. We've lost touch with how to take care of ourselves and practice our own self-care.
>
> *First Book Educator*
> *(Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*

Is It True? Practice

When you are feeling sad, frustrated, angry, or hopeless, you can try this:

Step 1: Acknowledge to yourself that you are feeling what you are feeling. It's okay to feel this way. All human beings feel negatively sometimes.

Step 2: Find the spot in your body where the feeling most resides. Do you have a headache? Is your chest tight? Is your stomach fluttering? You may have one or more of these things happening at the same time. Again, it's okay to feel this way.

Step 3: Identify the thought that is making you feel negative.

Step 4: Once you have identified the thought that is causing your reaction, notice how you feel the next time you think that thought.

Step 5: Recognize that we do not always choose our thoughts, and we don't have to believe every thought we think. Ask yourself the following question: Is it really true all the time?

Step 6: Ask yourself if it is possible not to believe this thought and what would happen if you no longer believed this thought.

By doing this exercise often, we start to discover for ourselves that our thoughts can play tricks on us. They masquerade as the supreme truth when in fact they are nowhere close to that. Slowly, by practicing this routine, we will find freedom from the negative influence of our thoughts. As a result, the life energy burdened by negative thoughts frees up and becomes available for other parts of our life.

Source: Adapted from The Work of Byron Katie by Moving Mountain Academy

Example: I am feeling angry and sad and hopeless all at once. I am feeling tight in my chest and my stomach is feeling uneasy.

Question: What thought am I thinking that makes me feel this way?

Answers: My students are having a hard time, and I never have enough resources to support them.

So, I ask: Is it really true all the time? Is it really true I never have enough resources to support them?

At first, I am tempted to say *yes* because physical resources are scarce in my school/program. But when I allow myself to take some time with this question, I realize that it is not really true *all the time*.

My evidence against the thought is that I was able to creatively use recycled materials I found in the cafeteria to successfully teach a math concept. And I was able to get a local expert to volunteer their time talk to my kids about habitats.

So, while I may not have access to all the physical materials I need, I am able to make up for it with a little ingenuity and creativity. And that's making a difference for my students' learning.

Additional self-care resources:

How Teachers Can Support Other Teachers from The Kids Mental Health Foundation
Self-Care Guide for Teachers from Calm
Meditation 101 from Headspace for Educators
Self-Care Toolkit for Educators from Inner Strength Education

Make a Friend in Nature Practice

On your commute to school or back home, pay attention to Nature in whatever form it is present—it may be trees, flowers, birds, insects, animals, bushes, clouds in the sky, hills, evening stars, or other beings in Nature.

Do this for a few days.

Then, when you feel comfortable, ask Nature to be your friend. It may be that a specific tree, bird or rock claims your attention and calls out to you, or it may not happen that way. It's okay either way.

See if you can be willing to let Nature come into your life in small ways—invite Nature in. Tell Nature that you wish to share your life with her. Communicate with Nature through private dialogue, by sharing the details of your life. You can communicate by thinking, journaling, drawing, or even through song or dance. Simply speak your heart's truth with Nature.

Before long, you will begin to notice that Nature reciprocates your attention and affection. And you will receive many signals from Nature, such as seeing sights that make you feel more joy, having a greater appreciation for life, or having a greater sense of confidence and clarity. How Nature responds to our friendship can look different for different people. But it always brings peace and joy, and we feel renewed from the inside.

Daily Gratitude Practice

As outlined in the gratitude section above, gratitude is a simple daily practice that can have a powerful, positive impact on our moods and well-being. Reminding ourselves of the moments and experiences that bring us joy and peace is an effective coping strategy when we feel overwhelmed or discouraged. Below are a few statements to think about or say aloud every morning or when you experience a challenging moment or feeling.

Practice being grateful for living, particularly for those elements of life that occur without human intervention. Ask yourself:

- *What would happen if the sun stopped shining? I enjoy the light and the warmth of the sun. I am grateful for it.*
- *I am grateful for my breath, and for the air available to me all the time.*
- *I am grateful that my body works; it digests food, beats my heart, lets me walk, and do the things I love.*
- *I love doing* _____ (fill in the blank). *I am grateful that this activity brings me happiness/ joy/ peace/ comfort.*

BE SUPPORTIVE & RESPONSIVE

While the first section focused on supporting wellness proactively, this section provides guidance about how educators can best support students who are currently impacted by stress, anxiety, and trauma. Included in this section are behavioral warning signs that require a response, a protocol for how to deal with anger and outbursts, information on when students should be referred to mental health professionals, and information about suicide education and prevention.

COMMON BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

First Book educators shared the behavioral challenges they observe most often when students are dealing with stress, anxiety, and trauma. The most common signs included:

> I always reiterate that behavior is communication. We need to approach individuals (students and adults alike) with a trauma-informed lens. Look for withdrawn behavior, change in participation (lowered or not at all), less or no socializing with friends, not turning in work, unresponsive when you try to start a conversation, body language.
>
> *Alice, School Counselor in San Mateo, California*

- Angry or aggressive outbursts
- Inability to focus
- Social withdrawal
- Change in academic performance
- Physical or somatic symptoms
- Change in attendance
- Inability to adapt to changes
- Rule-breaking
- Inability to describe emotions
- Inability to recover from failure
- Inability to sit still
- Hesitation around human contact
- Suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts

Source: Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022

Use these simple techniques to acknowledge and encourage good behavior:

1. Reword your instructions and feedback to **focus on the positive** and the behaviors you want to see. Instead of a rule such as “Don’t hit or kick,” try “Keep your hands and feet to yourself.” Instead of “Don’t run,” try “Use your walking feet only.” The goal is to focus on and reward the desired behaviors.

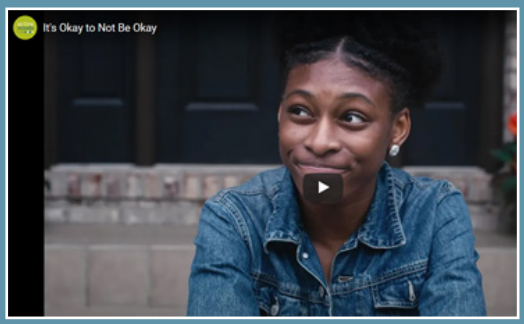
2. **Catch them being good.** Kids respond to frequent reinforcement—midmorning or the end of the day—rather than at the end of the week or month. You can implement a token economy where children earn stickers, tickets, marbles, etc. for behaving well. Be specific in your praise so the student understands what they did well: “Great job using your walking feet on the way to music. Here is your ticket.” They can trade in their tokens at the end of the day for a reward.

3. **Recognize the students who are behaving well** instead of the ones behaving poorly. For example, if you want Johnny to sit down, call out a child who is sitting down: “Maria, great job sitting” instead of “Johnny, sit down.” Children respond to attention. When students observe their peers receiving praise for good behavior, they are motivated to behave well themselves.

   Too often students do not have the tools or desire to express that they are dealing with stress, anxiety, and trauma. As a result, these emotions often show up as behavioral challenges. **In fact, childhood anxiety and depression often look like intense anger and a lack of emotional regulation.** Knowing this, educators should consider the student’s perspective and try to figure out the feelings behind the behavior; curiosity about the “why” will lead to a strategic response or intervention that is both effective and compassionate.

Source: Active Minds & Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022

> After more than 20 years in education, I’ve noticed more younger students are coming in with mental health issues—perhaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
>
> *First Book Educator (Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*



A mental health survey conducted by Active Minds revealed that 74% of high school students report having experienced stress or anxiety as a result of COVID-19. Educators in the First Book Network shared similar findings, reporting that 53% of their students have been struggling with their mental health; 72% of educators say the pandemic has introduced new mental health challenges among students, and 65% say it has exacerbated existing mental health challenges. Sharing this video with older students will help normalize their feelings about the pandemic and let them know their anxiety, stress, regret, and sadness are valid and shared by many other students their age.

DEALING WITH ANGER & OUTBURSTS

Many educators in the First Book Network report that strong emotions and aggressive behavior are increasingly common issues among students. The increase in anger and outbursts may be related to the stress we have all experienced because of the pandemic. The social isolation during quarantine, which meant fewer opportunities to practice conflict resolution and communication skills, also contributed to the interpersonal struggles many students are now experiencing.

One of the most effective ways to prevent angry outbursts is by teaching children how to manage their emotional responses *before* they get out of hand. The goal is not to suppress or deny anger, which is a valid emotion. Rather, the focus should be on how students experience and express anger: recognizing triggers in time to use calming strategies and learning how to communicate the feelings behind the anger—fear, disappointment, frustration, or confusion, for example.

Source: Managing Anger in Kids | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

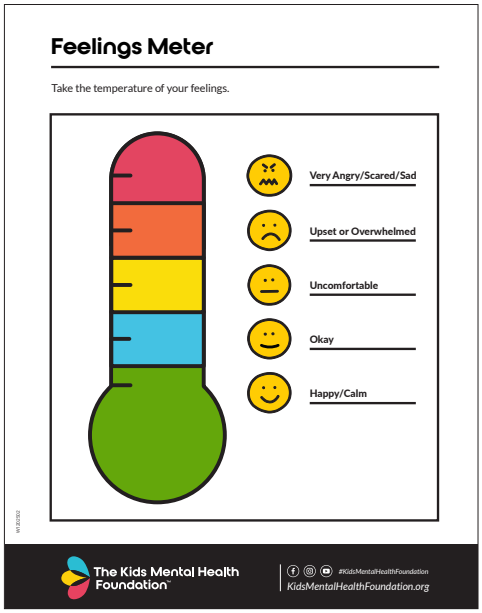
Use this anger thermometer exercise to help kids reflect on what types of experiences make them angry, how their body feels when they are angry, how they express anger through their behaviors, and what coping mechanisms would be most effective in managing their anger.

Print out and distribute an anger thermometer to each student in your class or program.

1. Ask students to complete the left side of the thermometer by listing what their body feels like at each level of anger on a scale of 1-10. For example, at a 1, I may roll my eyes. At 5, my cheeks get hot, or I clench my fists. At 7, my heart beats really fast. At 10, I throw things.

2. Once students have written down what they feel, have them turn their attention to the right side of the thermometer. Here, they can write how they will cope. Possibilities include counting to 10, visiting the calm down corner, and mindful breathing. Encourage students to be creative and identify the coping techniques that will work best for them.

   Students should keep their personalized anger thermometers in their desks or backpacks as a reminder of what to do when they feel their anger getting out of control.



Tips: Give your students space to do the activities that help them manage their anger, such as spending 5-15 minutes in a calm down corner. Older students may be given the freedom to calm down outside of the classroom. For example, middle and high school teachers could print and distribute a card, similar to a hall pass, that students can show when they need to take a break.

EDUCATORS SHARE

First Book educators share their tips for dealing with anger and other strong emotions

Reframe it. Sometimes it helps to draw a picture or write about what students are feeling within a picture frame prompt. Have the students then flip the paper over to the other side and draw something positive they can do, say, or think to make the day better within a second picture frame prompt.

Lisa, School Counselor in Sulphur Springs, Texas

Sometimes students can change their reactions when they have space and time to be by themselves. Having a dedicated **calm down corner** can help in times like these.

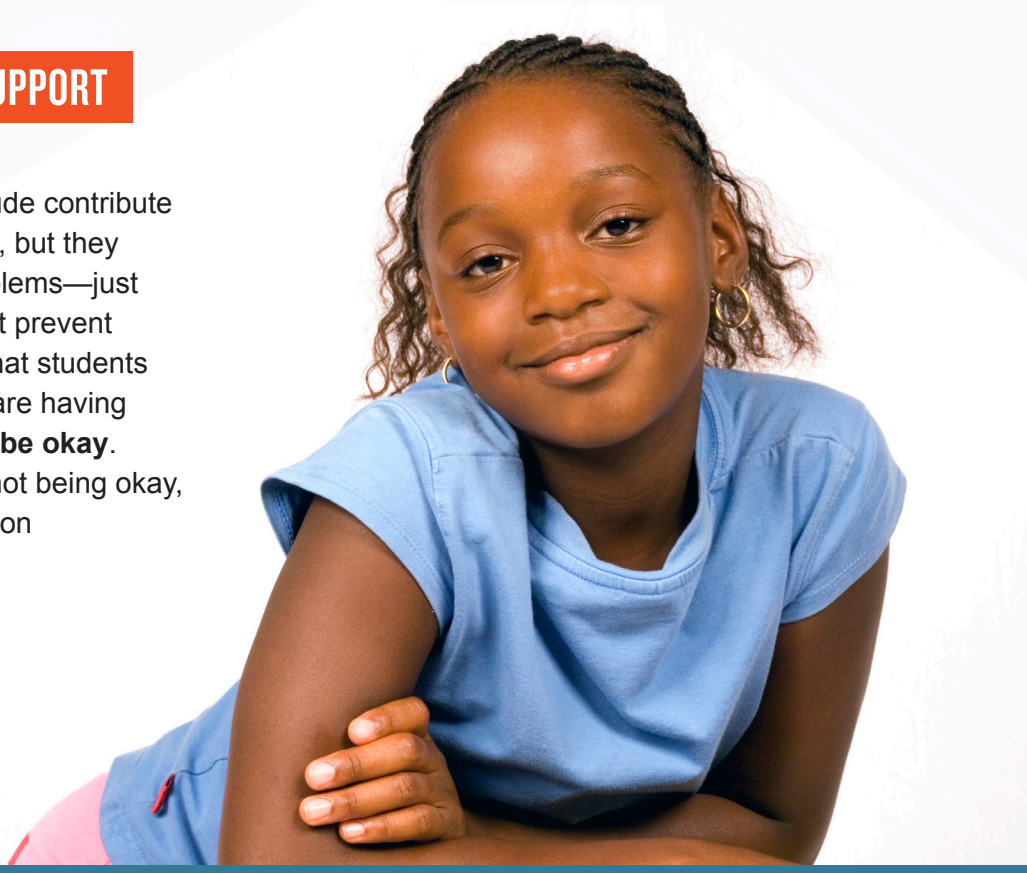
Lauren, School Counselor in Roxboro, North Carolina

Have the student **go on a walk with another trusted classmate** to help process feelings. Students can carry a timer to know when to return to class. If the student cannot handle a walk, have the student call a parent or family member to get a pep talk. Reassure the student they are not in trouble. Share that you want them to have a good day and get some encouragement from someone they love.

Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina

WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Practices like mindfulness and gratitude contribute to optimum mental health and fitness, but they cannot prevent all mental health problems—just as good nutrition and exercise cannot prevent all physical ailments. It is important that students understand it is not their fault if they are having a hard time coping: **It is okay to not be okay**. When a student is showing signs of not being okay, approach the situation with compassion and nonjudgment.



When to seek extra help within your school

Collaborate with a school counselor, psychologist, nurse, or administrator and involve the student's parents if you observe one or more of the following behaviors:

- Sadness or withdrawal that lasts for more than two weeks
- Involvement in fights or a desire to hurt others
- Severe out-of-control behavior that could lead to injury or harm others
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Drastic changes in behavior or personality
- Major changes in academic performance

Source: For Educators | MentalHealth.gov

How to bring up your concerns with a parent or caregiver

Do ✓	Don't ✗
Schedule a time to talk to a parent in private.	Mention your concerns in passing, for example at drop off or pick up. Talk to the parent in a public setting where others may overhear.
Use objective descriptions of the behaviors you have noticed. For example: *"Recently ____ has been running out of the class when I ask him to answer a question."*	Use labels or judgments. For example: *"Your child has been bad and is misbehaving."* Make suggestions of a diagnosis.
Work with the parents and approach the problem as a team: *"Are you aware of anything that is hard on them lately?"* *"Is there anything I can do to support them?"* *"What do you think is the best way to move forward to help them?"*	Blame the parent. Tell them what to do.

Keep in mind it may take multiple conversations before a parent feels ready to seek out further support. They may not see the same behaviors in the home that you see at school, so it is normal for some parents to feel surprised.

SUICIDE EDUCATION & PREVENTION

Educators interact with students regularly and may be the first adults to notice serious changes in their behavior and mood. It is also not uncommon for a student to confide in a teacher rather than a caregiver or relative. For these reasons, teachers are in a good position to watch for warning signs and take appropriate action as needed.

Suicide Awareness Protocol for Educators

1. Know what your district's policy is and what the law requires you to do when you believe a student is in danger of hurting themself. Most districts have a set policy and procedure.

2. Make sure you have the name and contact information for the designated mental health professional at your school or program, such as a guidance counselor or school nurse. Unfortunately, many schools do not have a school-based professional in this role because of budget issues. If this is the case at your school, your administration should be able to point you toward a district-level contact.

3. Above we mentioned the behavioral challenges resulting from stress, anxiety, and trauma. In addition, it is important to familiarize yourself with the signs of immediate suicide risk, such as a student talking about any of the following:

   - A desire to self-harm, including suicide
   - Ways to kill themselves, like guns or pills
   - Feeling hopeless, being a burden to others, or having no reason to live
   - Unbearable emotional or physical pain

   Other signs and symptoms to look for include:

   - A recent disappointment or rejection, such as not making a team or getting a part in a play
   - Change in interactions with friends and classmates
   - Feeling embarrassed or humiliated in front of classmates
   - Being the victim of assault or bullying
   - Talking, reading, or writing about death or suicide in a worrying way

> 100% of the children we serve live in poverty, and most are dealing with disruptive family lives, social isolation, anxiety, and fear, and we have seen an alarming increase in suicide thoughts and plans.
> My staff are feeling under equipped and overwhelmed.
>
> *First Book Educator (Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*

If you have concerns about a student's safety, call the **nationwide Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)** or contact a local crisis center. You can also reach the **Crisis Text Line by texting "START" to 741741**.

4 If you are concerned about a student's safety:

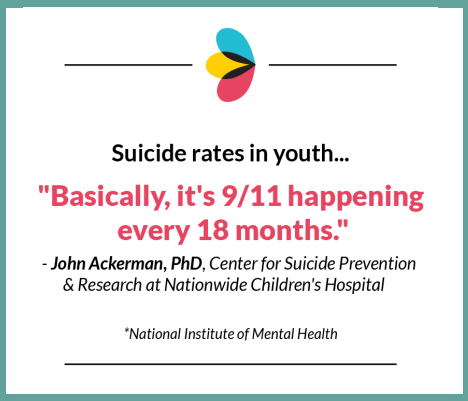
- Do not leave the student alone. If necessary, ask another responsible adult for assistance.
- Do not promise confidentiality you are not able to keep, and explain your role and responsibility to the student.
- Accompany the student to your school's designated mental health professional. Do not send them on their own.
- Tell the mental health professional what you heard and observed, rather than relying on the student to do so. They may downplay the severity of the crisis.
- Assist the mental health professional and/or contact the parents as needed.

Sources: Teachers: Recognize the Warning Signs of Suicide | Community Health Network & What Teachers Need to Know About the Rise in Teen Suicide | weareteachers.com

Facts About Suicide

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34 in the U.S.
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.
- Annual prevalence of serious thoughts about suicide, by U.S. demographic group:
  - 4.9% of all adults
  - 18.8% of high school students
  - 42% of LGBTQ youth
  - 52% of LGBTQ youth who identify as transgender or nonbinary

Source: Mental Health By the Numbers | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness



Source: *The Kids Mental Health Foundation*

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019 | cdc.gov

Community and School Training and Education Around Suicide

Schools can play a significant role in suicide prevention by addressing bullying and other social dynamics that could lead a student to consider suicide. Unfortunately, many educators do not have training in suicide awareness and prevention and feel unequipped to support students who may be at risk. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers free presentations for middle and high school students, school staff, and families that cover the signs and symptoms of mental illness, how to recognize early warning signs, and the importance of responding to those signs.

- Research has shown that NAMI's 50-minute *Ending the Silence for Students* presentation is effective in changing middle and high school students' attitudes towards mental health and seeking help.
- For educators, NAMI offers an hour-long *Ending the Silence for School Staff* presentation that includes information about warning signs and explains how to approach students and work with families.
- For families, NAMI offers an hour-long *Ending the Silence for Families* presentation for the caregivers of middle or high school aged students that covers warning signs, facts and statistics, and how to talk with your child.
- If you would like to host a NAMI *Ending the Silence* presentation at your school, contact your local NAMI Affiliate.

What Educators Should Know About Suicide Contagion

After a high-profile suicide that is widely covered in the national news or a local suicide that intimately affects a school community, educators should be aware of an effect called *suicide contagion*. For some people who are already vulnerable to suicidal thoughts—particularly teens who are still searching externally for meaning and role models—a public suicide can spark suicidal ideation. Some of the principles that inform responsible media coverage also apply to educators:

Do

- Use the opportunity to provide information and remove the stigma. For example, to normalize asking for help, prompt kids to silently name the adult they would go to in a crisis.
- Share resources where students can find support, such as hotlines and connections to school-based and community support.
- Encourage students to seek help for themselves or others if they have concerns.

Don't

- Don't be too specific about methods, which can "fill in the picture" for students who may already have suicidal thoughts.
- Don't frame suicide as an inevitable response to mental health problems.
- Don't use the word "committed" in reference to the act of suicide, as it suggests a crime and contributes to stigma. Instead, say someone "died by suicide" or "took their life."

Source: What Educators Need to Know About Suicide: Contagion, Complicated Grief, and Supportive Conversations (edweek.org)

APPENDIX

Definitions

Additional Resources

Sources

DEFINITIONS

Anxiety is tension, worry, nervousness, and/or fear that is often accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating, dizziness, and a rapid heart rate. Most people experience some level of anxiety, and for some, it may be a chronic problem that requires a diagnosis and treatment plan. People with anxiety disorders tend to have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns that affect their functioning and quality of life.

Emotional Regulation is the ability to understand, express, and regulate our emotions. It is one of the most important life skills and is positively correlated with enhanced resilience, academic performance, interpersonal skills, attention and concentration, decision-making, and long-term mental health.

Gratitude is the ability to be thankful for all the good things in life and to express appreciation for them. Practicing gratitude regularly can train your brain to generate positive emotions automatically.

Intersectionality is the way in which multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) intersect and overlap for certain individuals and communities.

Mental Fitness refers to the process of maintaining and optimizing our mental health and social and emotional functioning. Mental fitness positively affects our self-esteem, resilience, communication skills, and relationships.

Mindfulness is the practice or state of focusing on the present moment while acknowledging and accepting the feelings, thoughts, and sensations that arise.

Mindful Breathing is a mindfulness practice in which the aim is to focus attention on each breath.

Social and Emotional Learning is the process of learning how to understand and manage emotions, maintain relationships, make decisions, and set goals. Social and emotional skills include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Stress is the body's reaction to events and experiences and can manifest as physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Most people experience some stress throughout their lives. Chronic stress can impede healthy functioning and development and contribute to health problems.

Wellness is the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles intended to support and improve holistic health.

Sources: American Psychological Association, Global Wellness Institute, The Kids Mental Health Foundation, The Berkeley Well-Being Institute & CASEL

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Kids Mental Health Foundation: The movement for children's mental health

The Kids Mental Health Foundation is the leading organization promoting mental health for children in the United States. To achieve its vision to build a world where mental health is a vital part of every child's upbringing, nearly 1,000 mental health professionals and researchers at Nationwide Children's Hospital, in partnership with other trusted experts, provide real-world knowledge and expertise to power the Foundation's free educational videos, guides and curriculum. Get free resources at KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org.

- Sign up for the weekly newsletter featuring mental health and wellness education and resources.
- Follow the The Kids Mental Health Foundation YouTube Channel for videos, tips, and reminders.
- Check out their partnership with GoNoodle supporting mental health, along with curriculum.
- Download curriculum for a variety of ages.
- Find mental health resources.

The Child Mind Institute

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. Their website features a series of free, evidence-based video and print resources that caregivers and educators can use to teach children critical mental health and coping skills.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI offers resources for youth and young adults and educational materials, including those designed to better address the needs of underrepresented communities.

MentalHealth.gov

MentalHealth.gov offers an accessible collection of mental health facts and resources, including a section for educators—often the first people to spot mental health issues in students.

The Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is dedicated to supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. There are young people of color who are failing academically, suffering emotionally, and facing serious risk because population-specific factors influencing mental health are too poorly understood and not acted upon.

Minority Mental Health Month – An Expert Interview & Advocacy Guide | counselingschools.com

This Advocacy Guide for Minority Mental Health provides an overview of the connection between the experience of racism and mental health struggles and explores issues that affect certain cultures and ethnicities.

Inner Strength Education for Teen Mindfulness | Amy Edelstein

Amy Edelstein established Inner Strength to share her many years of experience working with methodologies to build inner strength and outer stability in today's youth. Edelstein is also the host of the Conscious Classroom Podcast, which explores trauma-sensitive mindfulness, social and emotional learning, and systems thinking in education. She is the author of several books, including *The Conscious Classroom*, which won an IPPY Award for Excellence in Educational Theory.

APPS

Calm

Cost: Free
Platforms: iOS and Android
Developer: Calm.com
About: Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditation, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.
Learn more here.

Download:

Download on the App Store

or

GET IT ON Google Play

Headspace for Educators

Cost: Free
Platforms: Available from your browser
Developer: Headspace
About: Headspace offers free access to K-12 (primary-secondary) teachers and supporting staff in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia.
Learn more here.

Reflect

Cost: Free (Through Microsoft 365 Education)
Platforms: Microsoft Teams for Education
Developer: Microsoft
About: A free tool in Microsoft Teams, the Reflect app features check-ins designed to support educators in embedding explicit SEL instruction in their classroom routine. Emojis and an expressive "Feelings Monster" bring 50 emotions to life to help students connect facial expressions and body language to emotional vocabulary. Learn more here and here.

Download:

If you already have a Microsoft 365 Education username and password, watch this video for instructions about how to find the Reflect app in Teams. If you would like information about accessing Microsoft 365 Education, go to Microsoft.com.

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This resource was made possible by funding from the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

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