FEBRUARY 2021

Trauma Responsive Educator

Strengthening the capacity of educators to meet the needs of students coping with trauma

The Way Forward With Wellness

TREPEducator.org/magazine

Project Director's Note

Last week much of the southern United States, especially Texas, was hit with an unprecedented reminder that these are winter months. This was a distressing experience that only compounded the challenges of the pandemic, that itself feels like a very long trying winter.

It seems like regardless of the actual weather outside, we are all experiencing an emotional winter, which occurs when the situations in our lives are so overwhelming or prolonged that we feel like all our emotional resources have been drained.

Emotional winter will look and feel different for each of us, but there is a general loss of or reaching to find joy and happiness. You may often feel tired when you wake up, no matter how early you go to bed, or have trouble falling asleep, no matter how tired you are. You may also feel a lack of desire to connect with close friends or experience a general, constant irritation from interpersonal interactions.

Use the remainder of this pandemic induced emotional winter to build your stress management toolbox. Try to learn one new *stress management tool for yourself* and one that you can *teach to your students*.

Now is the time to stoke your slow burning internal emotional fire to weather the remaining months of this pandemic induced emotional winter. Thankfully, the end does appear to be somewhat near.

Micere Keels

In This Issue

Educators Coping with Continuing Anxiety and Uncertainty

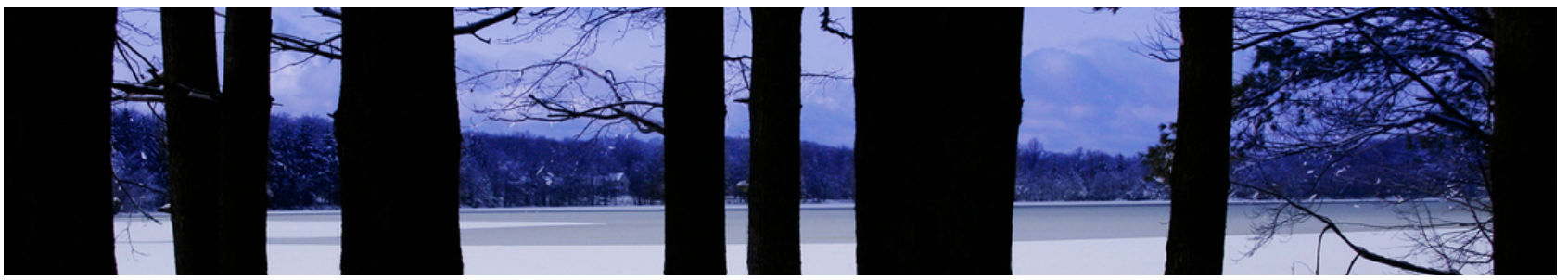
By Jamilah D. Bowden

We are now all too familiar with COVID-19 and have seen, heard, or personally experienced its effects. As school districts have tried to do all they can to ensure the well-being of children, it's evident now, that we need to pay more attention to the adults who care for and educate these children and youth. It seems that many educators have had to simply "drift along with the tide" of varying regulations, as the pandemic persists and we learn more about the burdens of remote and hybrid learning. The uncertainty caused by this continual state of change, alongside each educator's own personal set of stressors, has caused a drastic rise in mental health challenges for educators. We will explore the two most common ones associated with this time: anxiety and depression.

Given the levels of uncertainty around schools during the pandemic, it is no wonder that educators everywhere are experiencing high levels of stress and *anxiety*. There are strong and changing opinions about what's best for children versus what's best for the community at large. Instability of infection rates, steadily growing knowledge about the virus, and citizen push-back have city and state governmental officials altering advisories on safety measures and mandates throughout the pandemic. All of the distress and uncertainty has resulted in a dramatic increase in mental health challenges for educators.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, by spring of 2020, symptoms of anxiety and depression were three and four times higher respectively, as compared with the same period in 2019.

Some cities and states have assessed how teachers are doing. The numbers are staggering. In Louisiana, for example, almost 40% of teachers who responded to a survey reported clinically relevant signs of depression.



Signs that it's Anxiety

Anxious feelings are a common human experience. Anxiety becomes a problem when it impedes your ability to engage in daily functions and/or thrive.

The *symptoms of anxiety* can show up in your body in at least one of three ways:

1. Distressing thoughts that you can't seem to stop
2. Feeling tense and stressed out, or dread that affects how you relate and react to situations and people
3. Intense physical arousal that feels like terror or panic

While the following list of symptoms is not exhaustive, the experiences represent some common ways that anxiety may manifest itself. If you notice these or similar symptoms as ongoing patterns in your daily life, it is time to address it. Even when we don't realize it, anxiety will impact other areas of our life, as our thoughts, emotions, behavior, and body are interrelated.

Note that, many of the symptoms of anxiety occur alongside symptoms of depression.

So, have you recently...

- Noticed signs of frustration or agitation on your face when you catch a glimpse of your image on camera during virtual class sessions?
- Worried about students to the point of having difficulty focusing or accomplishing tasks?
- Noted increased tension in your jaw, shoulders, back, neck, or joints, or even headaches when preparing for the start of class/ school?
- Stayed up night after night, hours past bedtime preparing lessons that you feel must be "perfect", otherwise they are not good enough to present?
- Felt your heart racing or beating hard, your body heat up suddenly, or felt light-headed or dizzy, before class or other work-related tasks?
- Had trouble naming anything positive in your day or in your life?
- Had trouble falling or staying asleep because of worrisome thoughts constantly on your mind?

Signs that it Might be Depression, and Where to Get Help

It's normal to feel down from time to time. In fact, having "the blues'' is to be expected during this time in which we are all experiencing a loss of normal physical connectivity, intellectual and spiritual stimulation, and other experiences that would normally balance out the various *dimensions of well-being*.

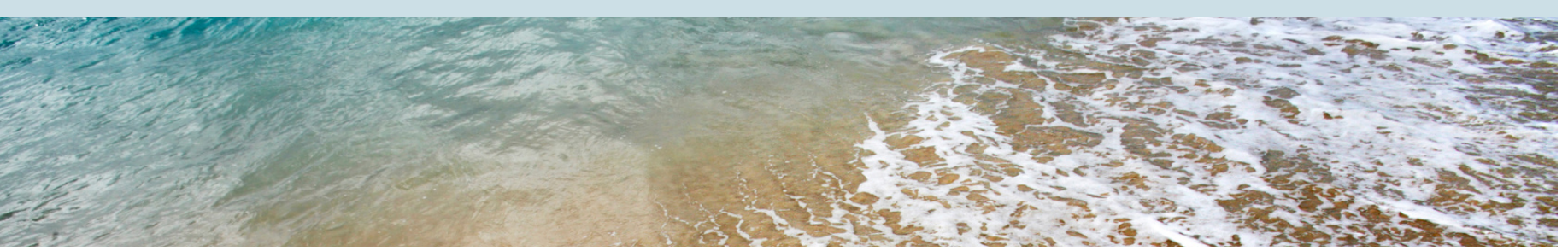
It is when your "blues" are unshakeable or there is a prolonged change in your behavior, temperament, or functioning, that it may be more than just feeling down.

Depression is a common and treatable medical illness that negatively impacts how you think, feel, and act. If you experience any of these feelings for an extended period of time, it may be time to contact a mental health professional:

- You have been intensely sad, angry or irritable
- You have a great deal of trouble staying focused, thinking or making decisions You have trouble sleeping or waking and are more fatigued throughout the day
- Your self-concept is poor or thoughts of guilt are pervasive
- You have changes in appetite/ weight
- You don't have energy or interest to do what once brought you joy

There are many daily activities that you can do to combat depression, but there is no substitute for talking to a mental health professional, who can help you process your thoughts and feelings and guide you in taking small steps toward management or recovery.

Depression is separate from the expected ways that we are all currently grieving the loss of how things used to be.



Sources of professional support:

- Many school districts have an Employee Assistance Program that includes counseling support.
- You can get in-network suggestions from your insurance provider and your doctor can make referrals.
- There are dozens of online therapy options, such as *Betterhelp* and *TalkSpace*.
- Look to places of worship, community organizations, and local universities that offer free or low-cost counseling.
- Calling 311 or its equivalent in your area is likely the fastest way to find free or low-cost local counseling services.
- In the interim (but not as a replacement of a professional), it is helpful to simply talk with a trusted friend or family member, as well as writing down your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Don't Dwell. Focus on What You Can Control.

In simplest terms, depression can be driven by dwelling on the past and present; while anxiety can be driven by worrying about the future. These thoughts can prevent us from productively moving forward in our lives. There are more effective ways of coping. Transactional Theory of Coping offers three helpful categorizations to guide your thinking of what type of strategies to choose:

Problem-based coping is used when the problem or part of it CAN be changed, such as some aspects of how you accomplish your work or taking on too many extra responsibilities. This strategy focuses on taking actions to lessen or remove the source of stress.

Emotion-based coping is used when the source of stress CANNOT be changed. This strategy focuses on reducing the emotional impact of the stressor, by attending to feelings through talking, writing, doing art, physical activity, and the like.

Meaning-based coping focuses on your beliefs, values, and larger life goals to redefine how difficult circumstances are experienced. For example, during the pandemic, instead of focusing on all that we cannot do and do not have, we may try to focus on being grateful that we have technology to help us stay connected.

Teaching in the midst of a crisis is an incredibly heavy burden. Finding ways to unload your burdens will enable you to regularly recharge and refresh. Take charge of and calm anxiety with these management tools, to productively navigate this unprecedented time.

RUMINATING THOUGHTS. The most common symptom of anxiety is a mind that won't stop thinking distressing thoughts. If you experience this symptom, your ruminating mind needs time to rest. You can gain some relief by regularly practicing the following strategies that are to be used in tandem with one another for effectiveness.

THOUGHT REPLACEMENT

When you notice a disruptive or unhelpful thought, replace it with a positive, accurate or affirming thought. Plan ahead by identifying helpful words and putting them on a sticky note, on a note card, or in your phone, for easy reference when needed.

THOUGHT-STOPPING

As unhelpful and disruptive thoughts arise, use "Stop", a visual image, verbal cue, or both, to pause the streaming thoughts. The cues distract you and gradually prevent ruminating thoughts from taking precedence.

MENTAL REST

Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Visualize an open container. Name each of your worries and imagine putting each one into the container. When no more issues come to mind, visualize putting a lid on the container and placing it on a shelf until you need to go back to take care of one of the issues. One at a time, when time allows, take out the most pressing issue and give it the attention it needs. Find one thought that brings you peace regarding the issue. Say it aloud to yourself as you move on.

WORRY APPOINTMENTS

Set worry appointments on your calendar and commit to them consistently convince your mind that when you tell a worry to wait, it will, indeed, be dealt with. When worrisome thoughts come, you can say "I'll deal with you later." When it's time for the worry appointment, take the first 10 minutes to think about everything that has been repeatedly streaming through your mind. Then, write down all issues and circle up to 3 of the most pressing ones. Bring some calm to these by adding a rationale, a solution, or a task on a to-do list to address it. When one of those prioritized worries comes up later, say, "Stop! I've already addressed you." Divert your attention as quickly as possible.

SOLID PLANNING

Concretely identify the problem. List all possible solutions or improvement options that you can think of. Then, narrow down your list based on realistic outcomes of each proposed idea. Select one option and make a plan for it. Become okay with choosing and sticking to an option. Rest knowing that you have done your best.

STRESSED OUT AND WIRED UP. If your anxiety shows up through the "wired" feelings of tension associated with being stressed out, the following strategies can help.

MANAGE YOUR WORRIES

Manage worry by deliberately ignoring its voice and cuing the relaxation response. Do this by telling yourself: "That's just my anxious brain revving up". Begin square or 4-7-8 relaxation breathing, easing the physical tension that triggers the emotional experience of being stressed-out.

ANGER ANALYSIS

Pause and consider, "If I were angry right now, what could I be angry about?" Write down as many answers as possible to this question using single words or brief phrases. This may bring helpful insight into the connection between your anger and your anxiety.

FUN & LAUGHTER

Rediscover fun and laughter by engaging, with an open mind, in things that once brought you joy. Try out new activities that you think could be fun. Turn on a good comedy. Make yourself laugh and be open to allowing it to form into genuine laughter. Run and play, unabashedly, with a child, under their rules only. Laughter has therapeutic effects and helps to release tension and worry.

Terror and Panic. If your anxiety includes the intense physical arousal that feels like terror or panic, try the following strategies to help regain a sense of control of your physical symptoms.

BODY CARE

Too much sugar, caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, or a lack of sleep or exercise can contribute to our physical symptoms of anxiety. Try decreasing or replacing one of these with a healthier alternative.

DEEP BREATHING

Slow down or halt the stress response by taking intentional deep breaths that fully expand and contract the belly for a full minute especially when anxiety tends to be high. Focusing on producing an equal or longer exhale than inhale will help.

CALMING A PANIC ATTACK

A panic attack can feel like a life threatening event, which can further fuel the panic attack. At the first sign of intensifying anxiety, ground yourself by sitting, keeping both feet on the floor, or leaning against a wall. Audibly tell yourself, "This is my body's expected response to my anxious mind. I'm okay. Breeeathe." Focus on taking longer to exhale than to inhale, which will calm the brain's overactive emergency response.

10 Things Children Are NOT Saying, But May Be Feeling

By Jamilah D. Bowden and Stacy Williams

Children often communicate emotions nonverbally because they do not yet possess a full understanding of their feelings or the words to adequately express themselves. It is critical that the adults around them tune in to the ways that children communicate their distress to (1) better understand how they are feeling, (2) help them to understand what is going on inside of them, and (3) effectively support them through their experiences. Below, we highlight some common words that children may use, paired with what they are really trying to get across to you, and suggested ways to address the student's need.

1 **What they say:** "My mind feels out of control."

What they mean: "I have so many thoughts going through my mind, it's difficult to focus my attention."

How to help: Help students develop calming skills that are meaningful to them. Lead students in developing Student Self-Care Plans as one way to support using healthy coping skills.

2 **What they say:** "Are we done yet?"

What they mean: "I need a break."

How to help: Affirm children when they appear to be asking for a moment to stop, step away, or take some time out, as this is an important step in their development of self-awareness. Take a break as a class or suggest a time-limited break for the student.

3 **What they say:** "I'm not even supposed to be here right now!"

What they mean: "I had so many hopes and plans that aren't working out."

How to help: Relate by sharing your own disappointments and ways you are adapting, to give students examples of how to adjust their expectations and adapt. Help shift their focus from loss to gain by teaching the practice of gratitude, perhaps even as a journaling routine.

4 **What they say:** "Can't we just get back to normal?"

What they mean: "I miss my family and friends."

How to help: Help students to find new ways to connect with family and friends, such as card making, letter writing, online social events and clubs that are non-academic for students to have a sense of connection and belonging, or even socially distant meet-ups when appropriate.

5 **What they say:** "I just want to scream!"

What they mean: "I'm overwhelmed."

How to help: Teach and practice calming strategies. Guide student in setting up a calming space at home.

6 **What they say:** "There's nothing you can do anyway, so..." (as they refuse to wear a mask.)

What they mean: "I feel helpless."

How to help: Provide empowering opportunities to be helpful, even in small ways. Remind them that they are not alone. Provide factual information to counter their fears.

7 **What they say:** "I don't think this thing is ever going to be over."

What they mean: Hopelessness is setting in. They are seeking assurance.

How to help: Hope is essential for youth who have not gone through challenges and experienced coming out stronger than before. Sharing your hopefulness coupled with factual information is reassuring.

8 **What they say:** "This work is stupid."

What they mean: "I need help."

How to help: Reassure students that it is normal to have a hard time thinking and learning when stressed. Offer support to assist with homework and task completion; watch for learning gaps that need to be filled.

9 **What they say:** "It's about to be on and popping in here!" (signaling the start of disruptive behavior)

What they mean: "I don't know how to handle what I feel in a healthy way."

How to help: Validate emotions as a normal part of every person's experience. Help them to name their feelings in the moment. Guide them toward healthy and helpful ways of coping.

10 **What they say:** "I hate school and I won't do it!"

What they mean: "I am overwhelmed or anxious and it takes too much effort to focus."

How to help: Adults can guide students: (1) ask questions to uncover sources of stress and anxiety, followed by specific reassurances; (2) planning that helps them to feel more in control; and (3) a gradual and simple re-engagement with school and class work.

Trauma Responsive De-Escalation in Remote Learning

By Stacy Williams

Before the pandemic students socialized with their peers, learned in an academically structured environment, got in-person positive affirmation from educators, and had a fairly regular daily routine. That said, there were aspects of in-person schooling that were difficult for *vulnerable students*, many of whom were coping with traumatic stress. The anxiety of difficult social interactions, struggling to focus in busy classrooms, and being unsure of which adults to trust. The pandemic has increased many of the stressors and the disparities experienced by our most vulnerable students.

Students coping with traumatic stress have low levels of *frustration tolerance*, which is the ability to persist with a task even when it is difficult. A mildly frustrating classroom experience or interaction that could be managed by the average student is overwhelming to the traumatized student and can result in an emotional overreaction.

In our work with schools across the country, we have heard some common concerns about managing student behavior in the remote classroom:

- Students faced with technology issues just go offline
- Students misusing or abusing the chat functions
- Students interrupting teachers or fellow classmates
- Students visibly or audibly expressing frustration in disruptive ways
- Students who refuse to turn on their camera

This new format for teaching and learning brings with it new challenges for all of us. Additionally, this extended period of pandemic stress and daily frustrations has created an atmosphere ripe for increased behavior challenges and escalation. Rather than waiting for an outburst to bring the

simmering tensions to the surface, trauma responsive de-escalation focuses on providing universal supports to prevent problems before they occur. This is particularly important in our current heightened state of stress and the increased likelihood of being triggered. Addressing the on-going stress directly creates a classroom environment where students feel seen and heard and you remain calm and in control, and able to meet your students' academic and emotional needs.

The 4 R's of the Trauma Responsive Educator can help to clarify the principles of trauma responsive de-escalation. Trauma responsive educators **REALIZE** that toxic stress and trauma are very real and present in the lives of our students today, more than ever before. They **RECOGNIZE** the signs and symptoms of the toll the current situation is taking on students and the compounding factors that are increasing the severity for our most vulnerable populations. They **RESPOND** with universal precautions, consistent practices and predictable routines in an effort to support students in developing healthy coping skills. They **RESIST** re-traumatizing students and their families by engaging in mindful self-awareness practices that assess and monitor their own resources and wellbeing.

Trauma responsive de-escalation takes into account the long lead up to an escalated incident by beginning when things are calm before the emotional outburst occurs and is focused on recognizing the early signs of behavioral escalation. The goal of de-escalation is to transfer your calm and centeredness to the agitated student. By maintaining a demeanor of calm, students are reassured that an adult is in control and providing for their safety and they don't need to try to take control or protect themselves in your classroom.

Educator Self-Management and De-Escalation

Effective de-escalation depends on you regulating your emotions in the face of someone else's intense emotions. This is the opposite of our natural reactions. When we are faced with someone exhibiting intense emotions, our internal threat detector is triggered, the part of our brain called the *amygdala*, and our stress response systems known as our "flight or fight response" is instinctively activated. De-escalation requires us to stop our own emotional train from leaving the station and do the opposite of what our instincts are telling us.

For example: A student screams, "This stuff is stupid!" Your internal messengers rush to defend, "How dare you call what I worked on all night to make engaging and relevant stupid!" While this is an understandable and natural reaction, it is a reaction. By slowing down we can **choose** from our trauma responsive tool box to **respond** in a way that looks beyond the surface behavior to meet the need being expressed.

Strengthen your self-awareness by assessing your emotional and physical resources. Begin a regular check-in with yourself at the start of each day and periodically as the day wears on:

- ✓ Am I functioning on little to no sleep?
- ✓ Have I eaten a nutritious meal?
- ✓ Do I need to take a walk or do some stretches?
- ✓ When was the last time I went outside?

The remainder of this article provides some trauma responsive de-escalation strategies to add to your toolbox: (1) depersonalize, (2) self-distance, (3) organize and manage the context, and (4) mindfulness in the classroom.

Depersonalize

Outbursts and disruptive behavior are rarely attempts to annoy or personally attack you. Our natural tendency is to defend ourselves when we perceive we are threatened or being attacked, but training ourselves to resist this tendency and do the opposite is worth the investment. Viewing student behavior from this perspective provides the emotional and cognitive space to assess the situation and respond accordingly.

Mindset: how you think about students' challenging behaviors can empower you to effectively resist taking the emotional or behavioral outburst personally. Start by asking yourself whether the student's behavior could be a result of difficulty with emotional regulation or an attempt to satisfy a need. This mindset shift is the foundation of depersonalization.

Tools: the most effective and efficient tool for de-personalizing is your breath. Pause, take a few deep breaths, in through your nose, out through your mouth blowing like you are whistling and try to exhale slower than you inhale. In less than one minute you can stop the fight or flight reaction, think more clearly, and choose an intentional response. Regularly practice using your breath when you are calm, in order to easily access it when you are stressed. Mindfulness is one pathway to *training yourself to use your breath* as a self-management tool.

Social and emotional competencies: depersonalizing is helped by having strong *adult social and emotional skills*. Are you good at empathetic listening? Do you easily restate what is being said as, "I hear you saying you are frustrated, can you say more about that?" Can you stay emotionally neutral and show very little emotion despite what you may be feeling inside? These are skills that can help you stay emotionally regulated and engaged to find a *win-win* resolution for you and the student.

Organize and Manage the Learning Context

A foundational principle of trauma responsive education is understanding *all behavior is communication* and challenging behavior is communicating a need. This applies to the remote learning environment. Start by reflecting on some common areas that prove challenging for many students.

Consider how you are supporting emotional awareness and regulation. Give students the language they need to identify their emotions and then provide regular check-ins to help students become aware of their emotions. Teach about *how stress manifests in the brain and body*. The *Wheel of Emotions* shows students the role emotions play in assessing how they are coping with stress. Teach students about healthy coping strategies and then together, develop self-care plans as a class activity. They can then refer to these plans often to remind themselves and each other to be mindful of their emotional needs on a regular basis.

Be aware of what you say and how you say it. Noticing the nuances of tone, volume and cadence is an essential part of understanding how you are coming across to students. Paraverbal communication, or the messages that we transmit through the tone, pitch, and pacing of our voices, can have a huge impact on learning. In the remote learning classroom we have lost much of the nonverbal communication that teachers rely on to express themselves and manage student behavior. A nod of approval, a disapproving glance, or a thumbs up in affirmation, are just some of the ways teachers use gestures that are no longer available in the virtual classroom. Students can sometimes pay even closer attention to *paraverbal communication* and may interpret right or wrong a message in a way that causes an escalated reaction. Training yourself to be aware of how you come across is worthwhile.

Self-Distancing

Moments of behavioral escalation in the classroom often leave us replaying the incident over and over in our minds, analyzing the experience, or struggling to think about the event in a helpful or productive way. A more useful strategy for reflecting on an incident of behavioral escalation in the classroom is *self-distancing*. Researchers highlight that one benefit of self-distancing is the decrease in the emotional intensity of the experience.

Self-distancing involves revisiting the experience and stepping outside of it as if you were a third-party.

- Revisit the experience through writing as if you were writing a scene from a play or a movie.
- Verbally describe it in the third person, using pronouns like she/her/hers, or professional title.
- Ask yourself how you might feel about it in a week, month, or year.
- Give yourself understanding, patience, support and care in the way you might for a close friend.

It is important to practice self-compassion when self-distancing. Research shows that this is effective for buffering against anxiety, depression and burn-out.

Consider how you are giving students agency. One way to bring students out of their reactive survival brains and back to their thinking brains is by *offering them a limited number of choices*. When you notice they are unsettled, agitated or beginning to be disruptive, offer two options that are equally acceptable alternatives to allow them to exercise power over themselves to choose. For example, this could be in the way they choose to engage or the assignment they complete to show their learning.

Intentionally avoid power struggles. Students challenge authority to try to have a sense of control. Taking a moment to collect your thoughts is important and having a space ready for students to take a moment to self-regulate is essential. Offering a *virtual calm center* in the remote learning classroom is one way to avoid power struggles and stay out of the *teacher-student conflict cycle*. Some creative solutions teachers have found include having guided breathing and mindfulness practices accessible for students to take a moment away from class while still remaining logged on and in attendance.

Keep student corrections private. Students coping with stress and trauma are highly sensitive to being called on and called out. Students with a history of trauma have a heightened sensitivity to feelings of shame that can be triggered by being reprimanded in front of the class. The feeling of being on stage and needing to defend one's self is amplified in online learning sessions. Simply saying, "We can talk about that later," can de-escalate a situation by removing the audience and a private conversation is better for finding a solution together: "*Praise in public, correct in private*."

Reducing stress in the classroom. Relationships, routines, and resilience are three essential components to *cultivating a classroom that reduces stress*. These are true for both the digital classroom and the physical building. When practiced consistently they strengthen relationships, provide a predictable routine, and build resilience to stress.

Mindfulness in the classroom engages students in building the skill of paying attention on purpose. With more practice, benefits are realized sooner.

Like taking vitamins, starting each school day with a dose of mindfulness is a good idea. Three times a day is a recommended daily dose: first period, after recess/lunch, and before dismissal. Finding other points in the day to add a dose of mindfulness will help students with the ability to manage big emotions and practice self-control.

The uncertainty continues and our resilience continues to grow. We will get through this and on the other side we will be able to look back and see how our creativity, our ingenuity, and our commitment to overcoming opened up new avenues for creating classrooms that support students in ways that support them to be able to learn and grow even in the midst of challenging times.

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About the TREP Project

The TREP Project is a research-practice translation project that works to connect research on the science of trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.