Maintaining Relationships, Reducing Anxiety During Remote Learning

Jessica Minahan

Teachers can play a huge role in helping students with anxiety or trauma issues feel safe—even from a distance.

Americans find ourselves in a stressful time. Multiple crises are hitting us at once, including the pandemic, the resulting economic hardship, and the impact of systemic racism. As the months pass, isolation, fear of infection, sickness, and economic insecurity have taken their toll. Many of us are experiencing increased anxiety and depression. Teachers and school leaders are tackling an impossible task—to figure out how to provide quality education to students while weighing the infection risk and shifting between distance, in-person, and hybrid models of learning. To say many of us are experiencing whiplash, disorientation, and anxiety is an understatement.

Our students feel it, too. Typically, nationwide, one in three teenagers experiences clinically significant anxiety in their lifetime (Merikangas et al., 2010). During a pandemic that heavily effects everyday life, it's probable that children and teens' levels of anxiety are even higher—and the possibility of subsequent trauma greater. Not all students will experience the pandemic crisis as a trauma, but some will. And students with preexisting mental health issues are at greater risk when school is disrupted, because early treatment is important and many services for struggling kids are typically provided *in school*.

Disruption in schooling and heightened anxiety related to COVID-19 makes learning more challenging. Chronic stress impairs students' ability to learn, specifically in the areas of attention, concentration, impulse control, and memory (Raver, 2016). This disruption has uniquely effected students with special needs and learning challenges. The pandemic is also widening the achievement gap for children living in poverty and children of color, who are experiencing higher rates of illness, death, and economic impact (Lewis & Michener, 2020). Black and Latinx parents are more likely to have front line jobs—and thus less likely to help with home learning and more at risk of infection. Racial trauma is also at the forefront of educators' minds. The adverse effects of racism, of viewing videos of police killings (Tynes et al., 2019), and of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children of color *must* be addressed as we return to classrooms.

Clearly, many students will need additional support as they return to physical and virtual classrooms this fall. Teachers are rising to the occasion in creative ways, but even in a traditional classroom, it can be a challenge to support students with anxiety and trauma histories to stay calm and focus on learning. With distance learning, this difficulty is magnified. However, even then, there's much teachers can do to reduce students' anxiety.

During this crisis, I believe we need to prioritize students' mental health over academics. The impact of trauma can be life-long, so what students learn during this school year ultimately won't be as important as whether they feel safe.

Maintaining Connections

In a time of crisis and change, we must help students feel safe, cared for, and connected to their teachers, even when learning remotely. Strong relationships with teachers can insulate anxious students from escalating and can promote academic, emotional, and behavioral growth. Teacher-student relationships can also mitigate the adverse effects of trauma, making relationship-building of utmost importance during the pandemic and in the future (Forster et al., 2017).

This spring, teachers across the country found creative ways to stay connected with students. Providing a recorded video of yourself explaining a concept, posing a challenge question, or doing a read-aloud is a fabulous way to help students feel connected to you and the class. In any video, greeting the students and explicitly telling them you miss being with them and can't wait to see them again is a powerful way to help them feel cared for.

Whenever possible, make the effort to connect with each student individually. One supportive adult can help a student overcome a very difficult home situation and shield them from resultant anxiety (Brooks, 2003). A connection with a caring teacher can be a lifeline for a vulnerable student. For students who don't have internet access, try a cell phone-based messaging communication system like Remind. Other strategies for making individual connections include:

Send individual messages. Instead of sending a group email to students, copy and paste the content and send it individually to each student, using their name in the opening. When communicating individually with a student (through Google Classroom, email, etc.), use the student's name often in the correspondence. It will make them feel special.

Make phone calls. Receiving a call at home can cheer up not only the student, but also the parents, and provides tangible proof that you care. Creating a Google Voice account will allow parents and students to leave voicemails for you. You can also send and receive texts with a family in their home language by using an app like TalkingPoints.

Send letters. In the event of temporary school closures during the year, send a brief letter to each of your students. Include a stamped envelope so they can respond. This is an excellent way to start a dialogue. Jotting a personal note back to a student who responds can mean the world to that student if she's feeling isolated and anxious. You can do a similar thing via email, but sending letters through the mail can ensure equity for students who may not have consistent computer access. A letter is also something concrete a student can save and refer to when feeling stressed.

Use a folder in Google Classroom or other file-sharing program for students to share art and other work. This allows you to provide positive personal feedback, which is essential for students who don't receive acknowledgment from their caregivers.

Leave voice comments on written work. Recording your voice communicating feedback can almost mimic the feedback you'd give in person. (There's a voice notes program called Mote on the Google Chrome browser that allows you to do this.)

Create routines. Consistency helps students feel safe and calm. Having something like a recorded video morning greeting or a Zoom help session at the same time each day gives structure to the day.

Hold "office hours." Provide opportunities during which students and caretakers can check-in through messaging, a conferencing app, or a phone call to ask for help or to connect. For older learners, you might schedule small-group Zoom, Skype, or Google Hangouts meetings for students who need help with content, creating another opportunity to provide more individual attention.

Establish daily check-ins. Have students show you how they are feeling. For young students, this might mean sending an emoji during morning meeting, (see this app) with the option of sharing publicly or just with you. Or at any age, students can signal a thumbs up or thumbs down before a distance-learning lesson. Students in upper elementary through high school could use a private Google form to check in each day.

Responding to Anxiety, Fear, or Panic

As we keep lines of communication and connection open, educators must be prepared to respond to difficult questions from stressed students. Students with anxiety and trauma histories tend to think negatively and may magnify scary information. School leaders might provide staff a readily available cheat sheet on how to respond to student distress, with suggestions like these:

Validate feelings. Before you make any suggestions, reflect back something like, "It sounds like you're scared" or "I'm sorry you are so worried." Tell the student it's normal to feel anxious when routines have changed. Make sure to mirror the student's emotions while speaking.

Stay calm. Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it. When reassuring students, have the cadence, intonation, and volume of your voice—on the phone or video—mimic the way you would read a story to a youngster. Students are watching us. If we seem anxious, it could confirm their worst fears.

Be truthful. Being vague or minimizing the facts can be unsettling to young children—and send older kids searching online for more information, which sometimes creates greater anxiety. We want to make sure they don't overestimate the danger or underestimate their ability to protect themselves—or the need to do so. Tell them the basic facts, including that young people don't typically get very sick with the virus and that wearing masks, washing hands, and

social distancing are the best courses of action. Be optimistic, but don't overpromise when asked about COVID-19. "I can't wait until we can reduce precautions" is more appropriate than "We will only have to wear masks for a little while."

Reframe negative comments. When a student makes an inaccurate or overly negative comment like "I will get sick," respond with an accurate and more positive reframe: "You are washing your hands and social distancing. You are taking steps to prevent that." It is helpful in the reframe to remind them they do have some control over what they fear (Minahan, 2019).

Remind students to look for the helpers. Mr. Rogers famously said that when frightening information is on the news, children should look for the helpers. This positive focus helps deter negative thinking. After students talk about an upsetting news story, ask them to count the helpers mentioned, focusing them on the good that often far outnumbers the bad. Young students can be asked to list five helpers supporting people at this time. Teens might write a letter to— or an essay about—a helper they find on a positive news outlet, such as goodnewsnetwork.org.

Notify a caretaker if a student expresses serious fear and anxiety. If you have significant concerns regarding panic, self-harm, or aggressive behaviors, you may want to—with the guidance of the school counselor—recommend a parent seek the help of a therapist for their child (many are practicing remotely).

Giving Students a Sense of Control

One of the most terrifying aspects of the pandemic is that much of it is out of our control. Typically, people have a baseline belief that bad things (like car crashes) are unlikely to happen to them, which stops us from being in a constant state of anxiety. When a crisis affects us all, we can feel that any bad thing is now possible and experience catastrophic thinking ("Everyone I love could die!"). Particularly for anxious students and students with trauma histories, maintaining a sense of even limited control can ease this pervasive anxiety. Here are several ways teachers can empower students.

Remind them of what they can control. Remind students that by following health guidelines like washing hands, taking vitamins, and practicing social distancing, they are protecting themselves and others—sacrificing for others, which is what heroes do.

Suggest journaling. Students of all ages can be empowered by keeping a journal about their experience of this unprecedented time, as a journal could conceivably become a historical artifact.

Encourage helping others. A focus on helping others is empowering and can help students feel better in times of crisis. "Distance" volunteering ideas include starting a story and sending it to an elderly neighbor to finish, creating posters to combat racism resulting from COVID-19, reading to younger children via video chat, and making birthday cards for foster children who are celebrating in isolation. (Dosomething.org is a great place to find structured online volunteering opportunities for youth.) It would be therapeutic to do volunteer activities as a whole class, such as sending drawings or essays to local senior citizens who are shut in.

Remember, Behavior Is Communication

Many students will communicate their feelings through changes in behavior. Not all children and teens react to stress the same way, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) list common behavior changes to look out for during this crisis, when interacting with students:

  Excessive crying or irritation in younger children.

  Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (like bedwetting).

  Excessive worry or sadness.

  Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits.

  Irritability and "acting out" behaviors in teens.

  Difficulty with attention and concentration.

  Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past.

Unexplained headaches or body pain.

Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

When you see students disengage from activities, mention alcohol use, or write an irritable note, respond with compassion. Their behavior is their way of telling you, "I'm scared, nervous, or uneasy." Share this information with caretakers, who may misunderstand the student's behavior as just having an attitude.

Curriculum Considerations

COVID-19 isn't the only heightened stressor students face now. Many kids will feel the increase in racial trauma. We need to be careful about how we communicate racial injustice in lessons, so students aren't retraumatized.

Be thoughtful about specific fear-inducing topics. If the class typically reads a book where the main character's mother dies, be aware this can retraumatize some students. Teaching teams should be thoughtful about whether that particular book is necessary and when in the school year it should be taught, taking into account what's happening with the rate of COVID infections locally, and whether there's been a spike.

Be cautious of implying racism experienced by students is exaggerated or imagined. For example, in reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it's tempting to say, "That's how things were back then," but this could invalidate some student's current experiences of being discriminated against or racially profiled (Gaffney, 2019). Consider using high-quality anti-racist curricula for ideas and activities on productive ways to address issues of racial injustice.

Differentiate instruction. Students living in poverty, students of color, and students with special learning needs have been disproportionately impacted by school disruptions. Differentiating curriculum, including homework policies, can ensure students receive what they need academically. Homework policies also need to be equitable to avoid punishing students already struggling domestically.

Promote fun and joy throughout the day. Remind kids school is a positive part of their life.

Teach Emotional- and Behavioral-Regulation Strategies

Even when we aren't physically with students, teachers can provide much-needed instruction in emotional-regulation strategies. Students with anxiety and those who are experiencing trauma require specific instruction on how to manage anxious feelings. Their feelings are too big for them to regulate without such guidance, and the student may not have a supportive caretaker.

Share strategies. In a recorded video greeting or letter, mention strategies that *you* used that day. Create a shared folder on Google Classroom so students can share their own emotional-regulation strategies, like distracting themselves with an engrossing movie. Sharing experiences normalizes needing strategies or support.

Give reminders. At the end of a lesson, remind students of a strategy they can use if they're feeling overwhelmed. Tell them you can't wait to connect again tomorrow.

Limit exposure to news, including news or discussions about the pandemic on social media. Suggest parameters around watching or reading the news, such as not more than 20 minutes per day, or only watching the evening news with your family. To shield younger students from scary information, provide caretakers links on how to set up parental controls on devices.

Teach media literacy. Help students develop skills in evaluating information they read or hear. Teens can complete an assignment about distinguishing fake news from facts (about COVID-19 specifically, or more broadly). Younger students can listen to podcasts on the subject (such as this four-part series from Brains On).

Teach "channel switching." Teach students that their brains are like a remote control that they can use to "switch the thought channel" to calm down when they're feeling anxious. Cognitive distractions or thought breaks are incompatible with negative thinking and can break the cycle of anxiety. Suggest listening to an audiobook or a "find the picture" book for younger children, or Mad Libs or trivia for older ones.

Strengthen independent work skills. We're asking a lot of our anxious students—to work in a whole new way at a time when negative thoughts and worry may be flooding them. Self-pacing, organizing materials, initiation, and persistence are challenging tasks for anxious students under typical circumstances. They may actually be dependent on teachers to support them in getting work done. For ideas on how to teach these skills explicitly, see my earlier *Educational Leadership* article on helping students with anxiety (Minahan, 2018).

Encourage grounding and mindfulness. Mindfulness practices can protect students from being overcome with anxiety. Being outdoors can be a grounding experience. So whenever possible, embed outdoor activities in science and math lessons and remind students that while they are working on the assignment, outdoors is a great place to practice mindfulness activities.

Focus on gratitude, which increases well-being. Have students keep a gratitude journal or prompt them to write five things they're grateful for as an assignment.

Develop emotional identification. Giving young students activities that help them identify the emotions they may be feeling makes the internal experience less scary and more normalized. Whenever possible, provide read-alouds, online games, and videos that involve emotional identification and emotional-regulation strategies. Give all students productive ideas on how to express their feelings, such as drawing or talking to a close friend.

Prioritizing Safety and Support

During this crisis, teachers must perform a critical role in combatting trauma and anxiety. While academics are important, our most important task is supporting students' mental health, especially our most vulnerable students. By maintaining connections, teaching key coping strategies, listening and responding to students' behavior, and helping students feel in control, we can help them come through this time feeling resilient and supported. When the crisis is over, students won't remember what you taught them—they'll remember that you made them feel safe and cared for.

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