

ConnectEd

Mental Health Services for Schools

COVID-19 Response

Supporting students' wellbeing as they return to school Ideas, resources & activities for secondary schools

1) Introduction

This document provides advice and suggested resources/activities that will help promote students' emotional wellbeing as we transition out of the lockdown.

Many young people will have experienced trauma as a result of the Coronavirus, whether due to separation, anxiety or bereavement. There is emerging evidence that quarantine conditions themselves can have negative psychological effects. As children and young people return to school, promoting students' emotional resilience will be central to their recovery and longer-term wellbeing.

Below we have outlined how schools can adopt a whole school, trauma informed approach to supporting young people at this challenging time.

A Trauma Informed Approach: Young peoples' responses to trauma are different to adults and can impact many areas of their development, leading to complex and difficult to understand behaviours.ⁱ Yet by understanding how traumatic experiences and stress can affect young people, schools can begin to design early intervention approaches to help them to recoverⁱⁱ.

A Whole School Approach: This approach helps young people flourish, learn and succeed; it does this by providing opportunities for students, and the adults around them, to develop the strengths and coping skills that underpin resilience.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this document:

- *Section two* outlines five key areas in which schools can promote young people's wellbeing and resilience.
- *Section three* sets out some whole school behavioural strategies for working with trauma impacted students.
- *Section four* provides examples of some behaviours which indicate a young person is not settling down well and may need individual or specialist support.
- *Section five* provides details of organisations you can signpost young people to, as well as useful resources and further reading.

2) Building emotional resilience in the school community: Ideas, activities and resources

Below we have listed five key areas in which schools can make a difference to young people's wellbeing following the distressing events of recent months^{iv}. The advice, activities and resources detailed can help your school to build a whole school, trauma informed approach to supporting students' wellbeing.

The role of the adults in the school is critical in promoting recovery through early intervention. It is important to ensure that the adults in school are receiving the support they need in order to successfully manage returning to school.

1. Promoting safety: Students have experienced a disruption of their protective shield and this may result in stress, anxiety and problems like sleep disturbance.

Advice

- Create relative safety in school by reminding students school is a safe place and giving a clear explanation of how and why (i.e. physical distancing and handwashing).
- Ensure an accurate and organised sharing of information and voice across the staff body; be aware of the influence of the media and address any rumours where information is lacking.
- Restore attachment networks: Think about students and staff who may not yet be back and let each other know how everyone is.
- Engage parents and carers in your approach and share learning and advice.

Resources/Activities

- **Anti-Stress Relaxing Games (Play Store):** Encourage students to play a game that reduces anxiety e.g. https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.JindoBlu.Antistress&hl=en_GB
- **Watch quality news bulletins or analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic:** Watch these in small groups and discuss the facts. Reassure students that their feelings are valid but enable the facts to be contextualised and risks to be properly understood. Allow for discussion and for students to process information. The following website has excellent information for young people on Covid-19 (although some of the advice on permitted activity may differ slightly as it is a Scottish resource) <https://young.scot/get-informed/national/coronavirus-your-frequently-asked-questions-answered>

- **Quiet space:** Provide a quiet and safe space for students to go to if they feel overwhelmed or anxious. Ensure this is a comfortable and calm space with access to trusted adults.

2. Promoting a sense of calm: Heightened levels of emotional arousal or numbness may be observed in students (i.e. panic or dissociation) and problems sleeping, eating and performing tasks.

Advice

- Reassure students that emotional reactions are normal and an ordinary part of a difficult experience.
- Use physical/muscle relaxation techniques and relaxation through music and art based activities.
- Use problem solving tasks to support students to build skills to break down their difficulties into small manageable pieces.
- Give guidance to students and families on sleep hygiene, media exposure and relaxation.

Resources/Activities

Art based activities for individuals or groups

- **Picture for calm:** Take a large piece of paper and write the word CALM on it so it is big enough to be coloured in. Then let the student to colour it in with colours they like or find calming. Then invite them to draw images or symbols of things that bring them calmness or peace. Suggest they find somewhere in their room or working space to have it visible at all times.
- **Zentangles:** Zentangle is an easy-to-learn, relaxing, and fun way to create beautiful images by drawing structured patterns. This helps calm the mind and promote a meditative state: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyBeN9RCh7k>
- **Keep a diary/journal once a day or week:** This can be a digital diary or a notebook. Put in it:
 - *One thing you liked about each day/week
 - *One thing you didn't like
 - *One thing you can control (e.g. I can control how I breathe, read, draw, sing, dance, write a letter/story, wash my hands)

Muscle relaxing and relaxing exercises for individuals or groups

- **Quiet Listening:** Close your eyes and stay as still as possible. Spend some time listening to all the sound inside the room. Stay very still and quiet and listen to any sounds outside the room. The more still and quiet you are, the more you will be aware of the sounds around you.
- **Melting Butter:** Imagine you are a tiny piece of butter lying on warm toast. Imagine that the floor is warm like toast and you are slowly melting into the toast. Feel your whole body becoming soft and gooey as you melt and relax into the warm toast. How long can you lie there for?
- **Find your chill switch:** Remember a time or place when you felt really good. Maybe laughing with friends or doing something that made you feel really proud or being close to somebody that you care about. Or a place that was really relaxing. Close your eyes and imagine you are there again. Remember the colours, smells, noises, tastes. Imagine these getting even brighter and louder. Imagine you are there. Take a good look around. Squeeze your thumb and finger together while you think about that memory. Next time you feel worried or sad, squeeze your thumb and finger together and remember your good memory. This is your Chill Switch! You can use it whenever you want to go to this place in your mind to feel good.

Breathing exercises for individuals or groups

(N.B. Due to the links to the symptoms of Covid-19, breathing exercises should be used with caution for students who are at high risk of trauma)

- **Bubbles:** Imagine you are blowing bubbles of peace or happiness or love into the room. Take in a breath and imagine you have a pot of liquid bubbles. Slowly and gently blow bubbles into the room. As you blow out the bubbles, imagine they are filled with peace and the whole room is filling up with peace.

3. Promoting a sense of self and collective efficacy: Recovery is improved where a person believes they, and the group they belong to, are generally likely to experience positive outcomes.

Advice

- Remind yourself and the school community that you have all coped and can cope – it is important that students see that their protective figures can cope.
- Make the individual the expert on what they need – give students skills to express and achieve their goals.
- Teach emotional regulation skills and enhanced problem-solving skills. Recognise and congratulate each other on the learning skills that the Covid-19 experience has led to (e.g. learning via the internet).

Activities/Resources

- **Emotional Regulation and How the Brain Works:** A short video which can be shared with students explaining to them how their brains work and using that knowledge to help regulate their emotions.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc>
- **Triangle Tangram (Play Store):** Tangram is a great puzzle game that helps focus the mind. This can also be done with paper and is suitable for all ages.
<https://filefolderfun.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TangramPack.pdf>
- **Something to show you:** Ask a student to choose an item, subject, piece of music etc that is important to them. They say 'I have something to show you...' and the rest of the group then tries to find out what this item means to them by asking questions. This can be done either via video, chat or in the classroom.
<https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2020/04/17/supporting-every-teacher-4-activities-to-encourage-social-connectedness-in-teenage-learners/>
- **Survival guide:** Encourage students to share their tips on what has helped them in recent months. This can be listening to a song, watching a TV series or film, playing a game or reading a book or wearing a particular clothing.

4. Promoting connectedness: Rebuilding attachment and mutual coping support, as well as sharing experiences, will support the early recovery process.

Advice

- Encourage the sharing of experience to help the processing and normalising of individual experience.
- Consider the use of language such as '**physically distanced**' rather than 'social distanced'.
- Encourage storytelling via books, poetry, music and games etc.
- Used shared language for feelings to enable quick access for young people and adults in the community
- Assist in restoring existing and recruiting new social connections across the student and staff body, even when students may be unable to return to school. Build skills for this where necessary. Be aware that negative and undermining connections can have the opposite impact to recovery.

Activities/Resources

- **Spoken word:** Writing poetry or lyrics is a powerful way of expressing self and understanding and processing what is happening around us. There are some useful apps such as **Lyric Notepad** on play store that can support student to do this. Encourage students to share their poetry with their peers or to do this in groups – discovering shared themes and experiences.
- **Online Scrabble:** This can be done via the digital classroom or the Scrabble app that enables games with friends.

5. Promoting hope: Hope itself can become a victim of trauma with catastrophising, futility and hopelessness being experienced.

Advice

- Acknowledge the feelings but challenge exaggerated thinking; encourage looking to and thinking about the future. Focus on accurate risk assessment, positive goals and building strengths.
- Remind students of their strengths and hopes which they may have shared previously.
- Move from labelling and self-blame to problem solving.

Activities/Resources

- **Goal Setting Activities:** Encourage students to design 'vision boards' or a 'wheel of fortune' to focus on future goals. <https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/5-fun-goal-setting-activities-children>
- **Community Goals:** Agree small group challenges and work together in achieving them. For example, our class will write a piece of poetry and post it on the school website.

3) Behavioural strategies for trauma impacted students

- **Create a predictable environment:** Ensure expectations and structure are clear and well communicated.
- **Provide a safe space:** Designate a quiet, safe place for students to go when they feel overwhelmed. The space should be comfortable and away from others.
- **Promote active listening and demonstrate empathy:** Maintain consistent expectations and behaviour plans that are based on rewards systems (not punishment); promote collaborative problem-solving with students.
- **Work with the whole community:** Involve parents and carers in their child's education and strive to understand young people from a systemic perspective, understanding the whole of their lives.^v

4) Presentations which indicate a young person is not settling down well and may need individual or specialist support^{vi}

The majority of students will settle back into the school community with time and support. However, some may need additional or specialist support. Further support should be sought where the following symptoms become present and persistent:

- Changes in sense of identity, future, safety and connection e.g. diminished sense of future
- Self-harm
- Suicidality
- Substance misuse
- Conduct problems
- School refusal
- Withdrawal
- Unusual sensory experiences or beliefs
- Loss of contact with reality

5) Signposting/ Useful resources/Further reading

Signposting: Organisations offering free support for young people

Samaritans

Samaritans is a national confidential emotional support service that is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It also provides resources for schools and others regarding suicide and emotional wellbeing.

www.samaritans.org

Childline

Childline is a national confidential support line that offers children and young people a range of ways to get in touch about anything they are concerned about, any time of the day or night.

www.childline.org.uk

Kooth

Kooth is an online mental wellbeing community which provides free, safe and anonymous support.

<https://www.kooth.com/>

National Self-Harm Network

National Self-Harm Network supports and provides information for individuals who self-harm as well as their family and carers.

www.nshn.co.uk

PAPYRUS

PAPYRUS is dedicated to the prevention of young suicide, offering confidential suicide prevention advice and training.

www.papyrus-uk.org

Shout

Shout is the UK's first 24/7 text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere. It is a place to go for immediate help.

<https://www.giveusashout.org/>

Young Minds

Young Minds is a national charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional wellbeing of all children and young people. This site is full of multi-media resources and advice for professionals, young people and families.

www.youngminds.org.uk

The Royal College of Psychiatrists

The Royal College of Psychiatrists provides practical and up-to-date information about emotional and psychiatric disorders for young people as well as teachers and parents, including MindEd (<https://www.minded.org.uk/>)

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyouthinfo.aspx>

'STOP Suicide'

'STOP Suicide' campaign website includes a range of resources to help increase suicide awareness.

www.stopsuicidepledge.org

Government advice on reporting domestic abuse

www.gov.uk/report-domestic-abuse

N.B. When signposting young people please be aware of the opportunities and risks offered by the internet.

Organisations offering useful resources for young people, schools and families:

Anna Freud Centre

<https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/>

Catholic Children's Society/ConnectEd

<https://www.cathchild.org.uk/covid-19-support-for-secondary-schools/>

Dan Siegel on Understanding the Teenage Brain

<https://heartmindonline.org/resources/daniel-siegel-the-teenage-brain>

Mentally Healthy Schools

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/>

Place2Be

<https://www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/services-for-schools/mental-health-resources-for-schools/return-to-school-resources/>

Maudsley Charity – Families Under Pressure

<https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>

Relax Kids

<https://www.relaxkids.com>

References

ⁱDe Thierry, B.2017.The Simple Guide to Child Trauma. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

ⁱⁱhttps://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/CentreforMentalHealth_Briefing56_Trauma_MH_Coronavirus_2.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/whole-school-approach/>

^{iv}These five areas are based on Hobfall, et al. 2007. Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Interventions: Empirical Evidence. Journal of Psychiatry.

^v<https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2017/12/05/trauma-informed/>

^{vi} City and Hackney CAMHS Alliance. 2020. Promoting Resilience When Re-Integrating Students and Staff Post Covid-19.