



Optimal Treatment for Anxiety & Mental Health

What To Do If Students Are Struggling in School?

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Outline



Signs a student may be struggling



How to respond when a student is struggling



What can you do to help prevent struggles in school?

Mental Health in Children and Adolescents

Prevalence of Most Common Mental Health Conditions (2013-2019 CDC Report)

- ADHD: 9.8%
- Anxiety: 9.4%
 - *Most common in adolescence (ages 12-17)*
- Behavioral Problems: 8.9%
 - *Most common in childhood (ages 6-11)*
- Depression: 4.4%

Mental Health in Adolescents

According to the CDC, the prevalence of mental health concerns in adolescents ages 12-17 was significant:

- 15% had a major depressive episode
- 36.7% had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- 4.1% had a substance use disorder
- 18.8% considered attempting suicide

Linehan, 2015

Signs of A Student in Distress

- ❖ **Mood Changes:** Feelings of helplessness, depression, social isolation and withdrawal.

Suicidal thoughts may be indicated by some seemingly nonchalant statement like, "it just doesn't seem worth it anymore."

- ❖ **Problems with Academics:** Poor classroom performance or erratic attendance. Little or no work completed (especially if this is inconsistent with a student's previous record)

- ❖ **Anxiety and Worry:** Being easily distracted, nervous, fidgety, shaky; having memory distortions or lapses, having trouble sleeping, appearing more tired than usual, "zoning out"

Signs of A Student in Distress

- ❖ **Behavioral Disruption:** Verbal or physical aggression, being "out of control," difficulty communicating or relating to others, demanding so much of your time and attention that you feel uncomfortable or irritated.
- ❖ **Change in Physical Appearance, Mood or Behavior:** These include sudden weight gain or loss, marked change in personal hygiene, and mood changes, including a sudden lifting of depression.
- ❖ **Alcohol or Other Drug Abuse:** Indications of excessive drinking, drug abuse or drug dependence.
- ❖ **Remember:** we need to look out for the kids who are quiet, not just those who are disrupting the classroom with their behavior.

MORE SPECIFIC SIGNS OF DISTRESS

Academic Problems

- Excessive procrastination
- Uncharacteristically poor preparation or performance
- Repeated requests for extensions or special considerations
- Disruptive classroom behavior
- Career or course indecision
- Excessive absence or tardiness
- Avoiding or dominating discussions
- References to suicide or homicide in verbal statements or writing

Interpersonal Problems

- Asking teacher for help with personal problems
- Dependency on advisor
- Hanging around your office or eating by themselves
- Avoidance of teacher or administrator
- Disruptive Behavior
- Inability to get along with others
- Complaints from other students

Behavioral Problems

- Change in personal hygiene
- Dramatic weight gain or loss
- Frequently falling asleep in class
- Irritability
- Unruly behavior
- Impaired speech
- Disjointed thoughts
- Tearfulness
- Intense emotion
- Inappropriate responses
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physically harming self

General Guidelines for Responding to Students in Distress

- Talk to the student privately to help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.
- Be straightforward about what you have to share and do not have to share with parents, particularly for teens
- Begin by describing the facts of what you've observed (e.g. "I've noticed you haven't turned in your homework this week") then express your concerns and perceptions (e.g. "I'm worried something might be going on since this isn't typical for you")
- Be curious—don't assume you know what they're thinking or feeling or what their intent was behind the behavior

General Guidelines for Responding to Students in Distress

- Listen carefully to what the student is saying, giving them a chance to share their side of things
- Use active listening skills and "I" statements rather than "you" statements.
- Avoid making promises to keep information shared confidential if you're not sure if you can
- Listen carefully to the student and respond to both the content and the emotion of the situation.
- Express your concern in a non-judgmental way. Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.

General Guidelines for Responding to Students in Distress

- Help the student identify options for action and explore the possible consequences.
- Be frank with the student about the limits of your ability to help them and let them know that you can listen and support and get them connected to those who can help more specifically
- If you've noticed a student has been lonely or isolated, seek opportunities to connect them with other students
- Encourage leadership from quieter students who don't volunteer as much

Practicing Box Breathing





Do's and Don'ts

Responding to Anxious Students

DO:

- Let them discuss their feelings, thoughts and worries even if you aren't planning to change the outcome (e.g. they don't get to have an extension on a project they're stressed about)
- Validate their experience so they feel heard and understood
- Reassure when appropriate
- Remain calm and be clear and explicit
- If they're in the classroom, suggest they take a break from what they're doing and engage in something different for a few minutes (take a walk, do a coloring picture or word search)

Responding to Anxious Students

DON'T:

- Just tell them “don’t worry, it’ll be fine”
- Begin providing solutions or ideas when they’re in an emotional state
- Make things more complicated
- Overwhelm with information

Responding to Withdrawn, Depressed, and Socially Isolated Students

DO:

- Approach the student and tell them you're concerned, particularly if this is a change in functioning for them
- Follow-up with them and reach out
- If they aren't willing to talk to you, ask if they have somebody who they're talking to or if they need help getting connected

Responding to Withdrawn, Depressed, and Socially Isolated Students

DON'T:

- Tell them they'll feel better the next day
- Only focus on pointing out the ways they are externally doing well
- Be afraid to ask if they are considering hurting or killing themselves

What Not to Do



Risk Factors for Suicide and What to Look For

- Feelings of hopelessness
 - *Phrases such as “I can’t do this anymore,” “What if things never get better for me?” “This is all pointless”*
- Social isolation and alienation
- History or current drug or alcohol abuse
- History of a previous attempt by the individual, a friend, or a family member
- Comments that imply death is an option or they might not be around in the future

How to Respond to the Suicidal Student

- 1) Don't be afraid to ask if they've had thoughts of suicide
- 2) Remember that having thoughts about suicide not mean the student intends to kill themselves or have a plan to do so. Be sure to remain calm and ask follow up questions around if they've thought of a plan for hurting themselves and if they have access to the means to follow through
- 3) Take them seriously—do not just assume it will pass and things will be better tomorrow
- 4) Be honest about what you can and cannot keep private and involve parents or other administrators after supporting the student (school psychologist/counselor etc.)
- 5) Follow-up with the student to check back in on how they're doing

A Little Bit About Prevention

- Learn more about signs of students struggling (like taking this training)
- Infuse information about social and emotional competency into curriculums and build resilience for students
- Set classroom norms around mutual respect, inclusion, and no tolerance for bullying or exclusion
- Focus on giving attention to positive behaviors rather than punishing and calling out negative or disruptive ones
- Consider building in screeners for mental health in schools and follow-up with students who are at risk
- Be aware of local crisis resources as well as national resources such as the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

How Teachers Make Students Feel Welcome



Resources for Educators

- Videos From Students: <https://www.classroomwise.org/video-library>
- Well-Being Information and Strategies for Educators: <https://www.classroomwise.org/>
- <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/how-to-talk/educators>
- Crisis Resources and Information on Suicide: <https://988lifeline.org/chat/>
- <https://mhtcnetwork.org/sites/mhttc/files/2021-10/MHTTC%20NCO%20SMH%202-Pager.pdf>
- Active Listening Skills: <https://www.bulbapp.com/u/active-listening>
- School-Wide Screening: <https://mhtcnetwork.org/sites/mhttc/files/2020-07/Mental%20Health%20Screening%20in%20Schools.pdf>

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