Supporting Teens This School Year: Reemergence Guide for Educators

This year, teens are returning to school after more than a year of interruption and uncertainty due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Teens may be experiencing academic loss and lack of engagement in school, social isolation, anxiety and depression, grief and loss, race-related trauma, and family challenges such as economic hardship.

In response, the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health has created guides for families and educators with practical tips and tools to best support teens this school year. By fostering resilience in school settings, educators can help teens meet these challenges.

These guides were informed by surveys of educators and teens. Results from the educator survey suggest that students with significant deficits in learning and students with anxiety about returning to in-person learning will face the greatest challenges this school year. Additionally, educators are concerned about students who have endured economic hardships, those with pre-existing emotional and behavioral challenges, and students from marginalized groups (including racial minorities, students with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community).

Most educators said that information and training on a) motivating students; b) supporting social and emotional learning; and c) actively supporting students with emotional challenges would be useful in preparing them for the school year. This guide is broken down into the following topics:

1   **Understanding Reemergence and Its Effect on Teen Mental Health**

2   **Helping Teens Feel More Connected**

3   **Balancing Academic and Mental Health Needs**

4   **Identifying and Supporting Teens and Families in Crisis**

5   **Supporting Youth and Families of Color**

About the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health

The Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health brings together key leaders in the children's mental health space and combines the resources and reach of Morgan Stanley and its Foundation with the knowledge and experience of its distinguished nonprofit member organizations, including the Child Mind Institute, the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, The Jed Foundation, New York-Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital and the Steve Fund in the U.S. The Alliance helps address strategically children's mental health concerns and the far-reaching challenges of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Understanding Reemergence and its Effect on Teen Mental Health

How can school administrators and teachers assess, support and respond to students' mental health challenges this year?

The initial excitement of returning to school can mask vulnerabilities and challenges that have yet to surface.

What to look for

It is helpful for educators to be aware of common mental health challenges teenagers may face after more than a year of coping with the pandemic and racial reckoning, such as:

· Anxiety, especially social anxiety

· Depression

· Grief and bereavement

· Traumatic stress, including trauma related to race and identity

Anxiety

Heightened anxiety in times of uncertainty is normal; however, it's a problem if a teen's anxiety is preventing them from doing the things they need or want to do. Here are some signs of anxiety:

· Recurring fears and worries

· Trouble concentrating

· Extreme self-consciousness

· Tiredness

· Disruptive behavior

· Substance use

· Refusal to go to school, lack of participation, drop in grades

Depression

Depression in teens is sometimes written off as "just teenage angst." However, depression is more than moodiness and can lead to serious consequences, including self-harm. Here are some signs of depression:

· Change in mood, including long periods of sadness and/or irritability

· Loss of interest in people and activities that they once enjoyed

· Isolation

· Trouble concentrating

· Sluggishness

· Change in grades

· Negative self-talk ("I'm no good")

· Feeling worthless or hopeless

Grief and bereavement

Teens who lost friends or loved ones over the past year may be grieving as they return to school. Many may also be grieving the loss of time with friends and rites of passage that they missed during the pandemic. There is no one way to express grief. Take all feelings of grief seriously and avoid comparing students' experiences.

Traumatic stress

This year has also led to experiences where students' sense of safety was threatened. They may have experienced scary or disturbing events related to the pandemic and to racism and racial injustice. Traumatic stress occurs when students experience a real or perceived threat of harm that overwhelms their coping abilities and affects their daily functioning. Signs of traumatic stress include:

· Hypervigilance

· Change in mood and thoughts, including feelings of anxiety, depression, and negative world view

· Difficulty concentrating

· Irritability

· Avoiding people, places, and things that remind the student of the upsetting event

· Avoiding thinking about the event

· Change in sleep and/or nightmares

How to help

Educators can't and shouldn't be expected to diagnose mental health challenges, but they are uniquely positioned to spot red flags. Identify your school's designated mental health or crisis contacts. Then, if a teen's mental health challenges are persistent and impairing, educators can encourage teens and caregivers to connect with school resources.

Educators can create space for students to check in and opportunities to validate teens' emotions. There is no perfect thing to say or do, but here are some guidelines:

· Ask how students are doing before jumping into a lesson.

· Check in when you notice a change in behavior.

· Take time to listen before jumping to a response or a solution. Often, a student who is struggling just wants to be heard.

Lastly, educators need to prioritize their own well-being and set aside time for self-care, including seeking support from peers and, when appropriate, mental health professionals. Practicing self-care is not only beneficial for educators but models effective coping for students.

RESOURCES

The Child Mind Institute: Supporting Students' Mental Health

The Child Mind Institute: Helping Children Cope With Grief

The Child Mind Institute: A Teachers' Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom

Steve Fund: Video on Supporting the Mental Health of Students of Color in the Transition from High School to College

Steve Fund: Supporting the Mental Health of High School Students of Color

Helping Teens Feel More Connected

What can educators do to help students feel connected to each other and to the school environment in general?

Connectedness is a protective factor for student mental health. But while many students will be eager to resume social connections, others may be uncomfortable. Make space and time for reacquaintance and social connection activities — both among students and between students and staff.

Building a school community

Educator relationships with students are paramount to creating a positive and inclusive school community. Building positive educator-student relationships requires coming from a place of non-judgmental support, understanding and care. Here are important tips to consider:

- Be proactive, make space for communication, and ask students how they are doing.
- Ask questions, listen, and validate.
- Remain (or appear) calm even during hard conversations.
- Focus on the student perspective.
- "Empathy over education": Respond to feelings before trying to teach a lesson.
- Ask how students would like to approach challenges What do you want to do? What do you need?

Understanding teens' social development

In building social connectedness it's important for educators to understand teen social development so they can support it. Here are factors to keep in mind:

- Identity development is crucial during this stage. And relationships are a lens teens use to understand themselves: Who am I? What do I need? What do I like?
- Before the teenage years, kids' primary relationships are with their family. But during the teenage years, relationships with peers and friends become more important. These deeper peer connections provide:

  - Opportunities to practice independence
  - Opportunities to make decisions and manage consequences
  - Opportunities to make mistakes
  - Opportunities to take responsibility for actions and mistakes
  - Opportunities for teens to reflect on their values, and those of their family and community

Building positive peer relationships

Because peer bonds are so crucial for teens, nurturing these relationships is critical. Here's how you can help build positive peer relationships at school:

- Create space for discussion and sharing in classrooms. Students can come together to share and support one another.
- Build empathy through perspective-taking. Take opportunities to highlight moments of "seeing the other side" and allow space for perspectives to be shared and reflected.
- Help students practice solving social problems rather than avoiding or escalating them.
- Discuss what supportive relationships look like. What can students do to be supportive?
- Acknowledge that students' experiences will differ depending on the identities they hold.

RESOURCES

The Child Mind Institute: Using Mindfulness Techniques

The Jed Foundation: Seize the Awkward

The Jed Foundation: COVID-19 Resource Guide for Caregivers

Steve Fund: Workshop on Well-Being in Color

Balancing Academic and Mental Health Needs

How can administrators and teachers address academic challenges and deficits in the context of mental wellness and social-emotional learning?

Practice self-compassion

The need to balance academic losses with students' mental heath needs poses real and multiple challenges. Educators face an incredibly important, taxing, and demanding job. They can do this best by creating small achievable goals for themselves and their students to build momentum and success.

Set the stage for success

Creating an environment of stability, consistency and safety helps classroom communities meet academic and social-emotional needs. Providing students with a consistent routine and schedule is helpful. Allow for scaffolding academic tasks and consider curricular and instructional modifications when needed. Be clear about classroom and academic expectations and model flexibility and adaptability.

Integrate social and emotional well-being with academics

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is often presented as self-care strategies, or techniques to teach kids to manage their emotions. But SEL also includes building relationships within the school community. The goal of SEL is for students to feel safe and supported in schools.

Educators can utilize SEL to open up opportunities for discussion, reflection and validation of students' thoughts and feelings. SEL provides coping strategies for students to manage difficult and stressful situations and teaches them who they can rely on for support. Some tips:

· Discuss characters' thoughts and emotions when discussing books.

· Facilitate a two-minute mindfulness exercise before math.

· Integrate a social problem-solving goal during a group science activity.

· Take breaks throughout the day to practice 3–5 paced belly breaths.

Don't do it alone

In navigating the needs of teenagers this coming year, coming together as a school community will be important to create resilience and wellbeing. Create peer supports for one another to listen to different ideas, to help each other out, and to know you are not in it alone.

RESOURCES

The Child Mind Institute: School and Community Programs

The Jed Foundation: COVID-19 Resource Guide for High School Professionals

The Jed Foundation: College Search and Stress During COVID-19

Steve Fund: Video on Supporting the Mental Health of Students of Color in the Transition from High School to College

Identifying and Supporting Youth and Families in Crisis

How can administrators and educators recognize and support students and families who may be experiencing economic hardship or other crises?

Create a safe environment

- Take student concerns seriously and acknowledge and validate whatever feelings your students are experiencing.
- Promote positive peer and teacher relationships.
- Give lots of positive reinforcement.
- Provide as much structure and routine as possible during the day. This can help to ensure stability for your students during times of instability outside of school.

Talk about mental health

- When students feel listened to when they raise concerns, this is a protective factor for mental health.
- Encourage and destigmatize talking about feelings.
- Avoid negative techniques (punishment, sarcasm, disparaging remarks)
- Make adjustments or accommodations in assignments or tasks when necessary to support students' mental health.
- Provide opportunities for leadership and positive attention.
- Reduce stigma by increasing conversations about mental health challenges.
- Be prepared to ask questions about suicide and safety.

Learn skills and teach them

- Seek out and request more training: When staff are trained in mental health issues, they are more confident in supporting students.
- Create space in your classroom to teach and practice coping skills together (deep belly breathing, mindfulness exercises, journaling, etc.).
- Integrate mental health into your curriculum.
- Help students recognize mental health challenges in themselves.

Use your school community

Speak with school-based mental health professionals to ensure students and their families are receiving assistance and/or referrals for services as needed.

RESOURCES

The Jed Foundation: Love Is Louder

The Child Mind Institute: How to Talk About Mental Health (for Teens)

Steve Fund: Workshop on Well-Being in Color

Supporting Youth and Families of Color

What can administrators and teachers do to acknowledge and honor students' race-related pain and trauma?

Acknowledge and address systemic racism

Thoughtful, balanced, transparent conversations about race and racism in schools are important for teenagers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Talk frankly and acknowledge that systemic racism exists in schools. Focus on teens' questions and listen more than you speak:

· Acknowledge inequities in schools based not only on race but also on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
· Keep in mind that teenagers will have disparate experiences based on different identities.
· Create meaningful interactive opportunities for kids to process feelings and build community, such as:
  - Visual art, creative writing and movement
  - Circle work
  - Self-care and mindfulness strategies

Address racial trauma and stress experienced by students of color

Initiating discussions about racism and racial stress that teens may have experienced sends the message that it's okay to talk about racism and that you are there to support students who experience it.

· Learn about the experiences of students of color and normalize them.
· Provide forums: Classroom discussions, small groups, individual conversations. Avoid burdening students and staff of color with the need to facilitate discussions or speak on behalf of racial groups to which they belong.
· Identify staff within the community who are trained and prepared to support students.
· Sample questions that school staff can ask when addressing racial trauma:
  - Can you tell me what happened?
  - Why do you think this happened?
  - How did this affect you?
  - How are you feeling now?
  - Is there anything you would like to do about this?

Create more supportive environments

Healing-centered education is a whole school process that acknowledges both the harm children and families have suffered as a result of experiencing racism and the resources within individuals and communities. Healing is facilitated by providing different avenues for students to respond to their experiences of racism, including self-care and political action or activism.

Examining school culture is key to supporting students of color. Ask yourself, colleagues and administrators questions like:

· Do your curriculum and staff reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of the student population?
· Do students see themselves in the books they read?
· Is the curriculum focused not only on oppression but also on achievement?
· What supportive resources exist for students of color within the school?

RESOURCES

Steve Fund: Checklist for Thoughtful and Critical Teachers

DISCLOSURES