

Supporting Students Experiencing Mental Health Challenges in School

When Should You be Concerned:

Signs that a student may be struggling with mental health problems emerge during ongoing development and can be mistaken for misbehavior when:

- A student exhibits behaviors or moods that are not age appropriate
- Their behaviors are much more dramatic than in their peers
- Their behaviors continue for longer than usual

These behaviors would indicate a need for closer examination. Consider three things if you are concerned that one of your students may be struggling with a mental health concern:

1. **Frequency:** How often does the student exhibit the behaviors of concern?
2. **Duration:** How long do they last?
3. **Intensity:** To what extent do the behaviors interfere with the child's activities?

Signs Your Student May Be Experiencing a Mental Health Concern:

Mood Signs

- Overly withdrawn, quiet or does not engage
- Low self-esteem, feelings of failure or worthlessness
- Increased irritability, which can appear as disobedience or aggression
- Feeling hopeless or overwhelmed
- Has unstable moods so other students will not know what to expect from them
- Has a short fuse and lashes out when frustrated
- Extreme worries or fears that interfere with friendships, schoolwork or play
- Severe mood swings affecting relationships with others
- Drastic changes in personality or behavior
- Extreme sadness lasting two weeks or more
- Refusal to go to school on a regular basis

Academic Signs (when accompanied by mood signs)

- 'Always on the go' fidgeting, or constantly moving around
- Poor grades in school despite trying very hard or a noticeable decline in school
- Poor attention to detail and makes careless mistakes in schoolwork
- Does not appear to be listening when spoken to directly
- Does not follow instructions or finish tasks
- Has difficulty organizing tasks and activities
- Is easily distracted
- Is forgetful in daily activities
- Has a hard time staying focused on one thing
- Becomes bored easily
- Loses or forgets things often
- Difficulty attending to individual work or class activity
- Dreamy or unable to pay attention
- Afraid to participate in class or answer questions
- Difficulty managing free time unsupervised or in larger groups

Communication/Social Skills Signs (when accompanied by mood and academic signs)

- Spends most of their time alone

- Goes on and on about a subject and takes over conversations
- 'Acts silly' in a group to get attention but does not fit in
- Other students may feel their schoolmate is bossy or too rough
- Speaks without thinking

Suggestions for Supporting a Student with **Depression**:

- Being successful and accomplishing tasks increases self-esteem so find ways to ensure the student has chances to achieve, even at their lower energy level and reduced ability to concentrate.
- Eliminate less important work until the child is in recovery.
- Make positive statements that reflect their own past successes.
- Make special contact with the student each day – maybe a specific greeting at the door followed by a question about something that has been of interest to the student.
- Get directions from the counselor or principal if the student expresses suicidal thoughts.
- Give more time, break assignments into smaller pieces, offer extra help in setting up schedules or study habits, or pair the student with others who express an interest in helping,
- Depression can impair students' ability to learn and concentrate. They may work more slowly than other students. Shorten assignments or allow more time for them to be completed.
- Adolescents who are depressed can be more sensitive to criticism. Corrections should be put in the context of a lot of praise and support.
- Depressed students often feel as if they have little to contribute. It is helpful to show confidence, respect, and faith in the student's abilities.
- Ask open-ended questions in class for which there is clearly no correct answer. These kind of questions minimize any chances for embarrassment.

Suggestions for Supporting a Student with **ADHD**:

- Break goals down into many smaller goals.
- Provide encouragement.
- Use checklists.
- Provide a specific, organized place for all activities.
- Create a self-monitoring system, like counting the number of times in and out of seat, etc.
- Give smaller assignments, less homework.
- Break down tasks or assignments into manageable parts.
- Record each day's homework in a journal or notebook for the student to take home.
- Write the assignment on the board and repeat the assignment aloud to appeal to multiple senses.
- Keep to a student's regular schedule as much as possible.
- Ask your student's parents what works at home.

Suggestions for Supporting a Student with **Anxiety**:

- Check in with the student at the beginning of the day.
- Slow steps are the key to sustaining progress.
- Learn what situations the student can handle and how you can respond when they are unable to cope.
- Avoid 'buying into' the anxiety, but on the other hand, do not push too hard.
- For school refusal, formulate a plan for when the student first arrives at school – providing an immediate recognition for coming.
- Have the student check with the teacher to make sure that assignments have been written down correctly.
- Reduce schoolwork load or homework when necessary.
- Keep to a regular schedule when possible.
- Ask your student's parents what works at home to relieve the students anxiety.

- Recognize and reward small improvements such as finishing an assignment on time without continual erasing to make it perfect.
- Provide a learning environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process.
- Encourage and reward all steps in fighting anxiety.
- Provide advance warning of changes in routine.
- Reward brave, non-anxious behavior. Seeing they can fight fear with help build their confidence and make them feel better about themselves.
- By avoiding feared situations, students learn they are not able to cope with the situation or their worry. Encourage them to take small steps toward accomplishing the feared task.

Suggestions for Supporting a Student with Bipolar Disorder:

- Check in upon arrival to see if the student can success in certain classes that day. Where possible, provide alternatives to stressful activities on difficult days.
- Allow more time to complete certain types of assignments.
- Adjust the homework load to prevent the student from becoming overwhelmed.
- Adjust expectations until symptoms improve. Helping a student make more attainable goals when symptoms are more severe is important, so the student can have the positive experience of success.
- Set up a procedure that allows the child to leave an overwhelming situation quickly and safely.
- Ask about their medications and side effects.
- Learning and cognitive difficulties can vary in severity from day to day. Despite normal or high intelligence, many children with bipolar disorder have processing and communication deficits that hinder learning and create frustration.
- Because transitions may be particularly difficult for these children, allow extra time for moving to another activity or location.
- Use strategies at school that are consistent with those used at home.
- Encourage the child to develop interventions. Enlisting the student will lead to more successful strategies and develop the student's ability to problem solve.

Suggestions for Supporting a Student Who is Self-Injuring:

What is Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

Non-suicidal self-injury refers to deliberate attempts to physically injure oneself. The self-injurer does not intend to die as a result of their acts. People engage in self-harm as a way of coping with problems and emotional distress. Although cutting is the most common type of self-injury, it can also include habits like self-poisoning, burning, scalding, banging and hair pulling.

How You Can Help a Student Experiencing Psychosis Succeed in the Classroom

- Prevention efforts can include helping students to express and identify their feelings, while also developing healthy behavioral coping skills.
- Simply be available, whenever possible, to talk to a child who self-injures can make all the difference, as feelings of isolation are often part of the problem.
- Consult with the school counselor or social worker.
- Let the student know that self-injury is common and that they are not alone.
- Make sure the student knows who they can go to in your local area for professional help.
- Encourage the student to think about what changes they would like in their life and environment in order to stop harming themselves.
- Help the student to understand triggers of self-harm and techniques they can use if they feel the urge to hurt themselves.

- Encourage students to let you know if someone in their friend group is in trouble, upset or showing signs of harming themselves. Help them to understand that their friend is in danger of seriously harming themselves and it is okay to tell someone.

Suggestions for Supporting a Student Experiencing **Psychosis**:

What is Psychosis

The term psychosis refers to a loss of contact with reality, resulting in changes in mood, thinking and abnormal ideas. The student may have false beliefs (delusions) or see, hear, smell or feel things that are not real. They can have confused thoughts, difficulty concentrating or remembering things. Changes in behavior also often occur as response to dealing with symptoms of psychosis.

The young person may not understand what is happening to them and symptoms can be very distressing to them. It is easy to mistake signs of psychosis as normal challenges that many young people go through. However, psychosis is a serious sign and early intervention is needed.

Early Warning Signs of Psychosis

- Emotional signs such as irritability, suspiciousness or paranoia, anxiety, depression, anger.
- Loss of motivation, difficulty concentrating, mood swings.
- Noticeable change in activity level; school performance deteriorates.
- Withdrawing into a world of their own.
- Severe problems making and keeping friends.
- Vivid and abnormal thoughts and ideas.
- Perpetual changes – student feels things around them have changed or are somehow different; their thoughts are sped up or slowed down.

How You Can Help a Student Experiencing Psychosis Succeed in the Classroom

- Help to create a non-stigmatizing environment by raising awareness about mental health and encouraging students to be supportive.
- Teach students about symptoms of brain disorders such as psychosis.
- Be alert that changes in a student may be signs of impending psychosis.
- Refer students showing early warning signs of psychosis to school counselors or social workers.
- Understand that a student dealing with psychosis may require modifications in their school program.
- Be aware that symptoms can fluctuate.
- Capitalize on a students' strengths to enhance their learning; educational testing may help to clarify these strengths.
- Break tasks down into smaller pieces, minimize distractions, have a plan to redirect the student to help them return to the task at hand.
- Give short, concise directions.

*Adapted from the **Orientation to Child + Youth Mental Health Services: A Guide for Teachers** published by The F.O.R.C.E.(Families Organized for Recognition and Care Equality), Society for Kid's Mental Health*