

Managing Student Stress during Distance Learning: How Faculty Can Support Their Students

USC Upstate Counseling Services

864-503-5195

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You and your students are facing significant change. Across the world, students are transitioning to online education, socially distancing from peer groups and most likely hunkering down in their family homes. We know that change creates stress, but we also know that stress is a normal and even necessary part of life. As everyone makes this new journey through life, greatly affected by the coronavirus pandemic, here are some ideas for how to help students, and yourself, with the transition:

Most importantly, know that as a professor your calm and sure presence will set the course for students to also remain calm. Seeing someone calm will induce calmness in others.

As Courses Transition to Online:

- Relationships with professors play a key role in student's retention. Relationships matter more than ever now. Sometimes as professors, you are the sole point of contact for many of our students.
- Consider addressing the normal stress of this transition right from the start.
 - "This spring and summer have been trying for all of us. We have all been through a lot as we move our classes online but I am here to reassure you that we will be ok."
- Normalize and validate their experiences:
 - Experiencing loss of in-person connections
 - Time zones may impact participation
 - Uncertainty of duration
 - Fear of infection – for self and loved ones
 - Frustration and boredom
 - Grief : –Loss of career opportunities, sports competition & rituals – Loss of loved one or public figure to whom one feels connected
 - Inadequate or contradictory information
 - Distrust of those with perceived authority and/or power
 - Challenged by unique life circumstances
 - Distractions due to microaggressions
 - Access to care more difficult
 - Lack of knowledge about where & how to find help
 - How do I know if I am at-risk?
 - Fear confidentiality is compromised
 - Access to culturally responsive care

- Shift in procedures and response systems
- Finances
- Stigma
- New normal as whole world recovers
- Remind students what is at stake.
 - “We are doing this to flatten the curve and to protect our most vulnerable people. Thank you for helping with this effort. I’m proud of all of you.”
- Be patient with students AND yourself.
 - “This may take a little time to get all the kinks worked out.”
 - “I don’t know the answer to that but I will email you all later.”
- Be reassuring and encourage positivity.
 - “I know this seems like a lot right now but I know that you can do it.”
 - “We will all get the hang of this very soon.”
- Explain any strategies you have for how to be an online student:
 - “Ensure that you have a private space, free from distraction.”
 - “Let others at home know that you will be busy when courses are taught.”
 - “Work to develop a schedule much like the one you had when you were on campus”

If the Entire Class Seems to be Getting Riled Up, Consider:

- “Let’s all take a moment and take a few deep breaths.” Count it out: “inhale, 1, 2, 3, 4...exhale 1, 2, 3, 4”.
- “I want everyone to stand up, take a quick walk around the room and come back.”
- Consider ending the tutorial session. While this may seem like the “easy way out”, it sends the message to students that poor behavior will not be tolerated. You could then follow-up individually with the offending students, if desired.

If an Individual Student Seems Distressed:

- Notice - it’s the noticing that is crucial, just recognize that your student is in distress
- Find a *private* time to communicate.
- Ask how they are doing or describe what you are observing, e.g. “you have made quite a few comments about your mood being down. Are you struggling yourself?”
- The student may explain things in a way that leads you to feel no other action is needed.
E.g., they may say they are already in treatment or that it just felt good to talk.
- Let all students know about:
 - [Mental Health Screener](#): Free, anonymous, online screening tools to help you assess yourself in the following areas: Depression, Anxiety, Trauma, Alcohol or Substance Use Concerns, Eating Concerns, and Mood Concerns
 - [sharpenUP](#): USC Upstate’s free sharpenUP app provides information on coping skills, mindfulness, resiliency and other information regarding mental health concerns.

- If you remain concerned, have them call Counseling Services at 864-503-5195, Option #1 and speak with the Clinician of the Day.
- Follow up later and ask if they got help or need anything else.
- Any student who mentions suicidal thoughts should talk to Counseling Services as soon as possible! If it is after hours, please know that they can also speak with a trained crisis counselor by calling 864-503-5195, Option #2. If they are experiencing a life threatening emergency, please have them or you call 911 or they need to visit their local emergency room.
- Counseling Services will continue with distance counseling into the fall semester. Please feel free to call us for more information if you or a student needs assistance, 864-503-5195, Option #1.
- Complete an [RU Ok Form](#)
- Send the student a referral to Counseling in Starfish
- When do you refer a student to [Counseling Services](#)?
 - When your efforts to manage a behavioral issue have not resolved the problem
 - When you are concerned about the welfare of a student, yourself, and/or others
 - When a student asks for help in dealing with personal issues that are outside of your role as a faculty or staff member
 - When you have referred a student in the past but there seems to be no improvement or things are getting worse
 - When you are feeling overwhelmed

Tips to Support Students at a Time of Transition:

1. Survey students about tools and platform
2. Co-construct your class with giving students some input
3. Finds ways to accommodate students who can't join the class at the specified time due to work or family obligations
4. Go low tech and mobile friendly
5. Temper your expectations for your students and yourself (let go of your lesson plan)
6. Be vulnerable, share with them how coronavirus has been disruptive to your life and invite them to do the same. This shows that you care for them as an individual
7. Offer support and resources, our students should know that you are a safe person for them to talk to
8. Create opportunities for students to process the moment
9. Don't forget about students with disabilities, which means some students will require different accommodations with online teaching (captioning videos and accessible format for screener readers)
10. Assign self-care and model it (start a lecture with a mindful/wellness moment). Grace and Compassion goes along way during these unprecedented times.
11. Integrate empathy and compassion into your coursework, some students biggest obstacle may be access, so offering many pathways is crucial for completing assignments
12. Everyone will have to embrace flexibility

13. Restoring as much connection as possible is critical to the continuity of your course and build a sense of community
14. Ask your students what they need from you? How can you lower their stress/anxiety? Can you dispense with coursework that is really more about keeping students busy? Can you break complex concepts into smaller modules? Would daily updates be helpful, or would weekly digests be better? Do students need multiple ways to complete assignments? Can you be transparent about your own struggles so students trust that you're all in this together? Are you being clear about when and how students can interact with you now that you aren't on campus?

Students Who May be More Vulnerable During Quarantine:

- International Students
- Students of Color
- Students from lower SES
- LGBTQIA Students
- Students Dealing with Violence in the Home
- Students challenged with Housing/Food/Resource-Insecurity
- Students who are caregivers to Children or Elders
- Students with Disabilities
- Students Managing Anxiety, Depression, Etc.
- Students who are military-connected

Attending to Your Own Self-Care:

- Sleep, healthy nutrition, exercise
- Know your healthy and unhealthy coping strategies
- Create new structures for your days and weeks
- Setting up appropriate space for learning; privacy
- Setting limits – Times to complete school work, social media presence; media coverage
- Managing demands from others – peers, instructors and administration – Children, spouses, partners all working/learning at home – Care & concern for other family members, neighbors, friends
- Reasonable expectations – New for us all. Perfection is not possible
- Taking space and time for self
- Feel free to call Counseling Services and speak with Liz Jodoin if you need a consult regarding a student, or even a consult regarding your own mental health. She will keep your personal concerns private and can help assist you in finding resources.
- Educate yourself: [Recognizing Emotional Distress PDF](#)
- USC Upstate [Employee Assistance Program](#) (1-800-633-3353 or 704-529-1428)