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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Helping Students Manage the Stress of COVID-19
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Helping Students Manage the Stress of COVID-19

by Kristi Lewis

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, stress, fear and anxiety—which students were already experiencing in record numbers—has only increased. According to [Conrad and colleagues \(2020\)](#), public health emergencies can be even more stressful for those already battling a mental health condition. During these times of uncertainty, it can be a challenge for us to help students. [Nevins \(2020\)](#) recommends the following (loosely adapted) tips:

1. Validate the experience. Students, like all of us, have endured a lot of change in a short period of time. Most students transitioned from traditional face-to-face courses to online with little notice. Many rapidly moved from living with roommates and friends to living back home. They also have seen the closures and cancellations of most of their regular activities and venues. This is a major transition. Like us, students are facing uncertainty. There is so much unknown. For many seniors, this includes graduation and future plans around graduate school or employment. They may have overall concerns about health and wellbeing for family, friends, and themselves. Let students know that you are aware of their stress, fear, and anxiety, and that you are feeling similarly. We are all in it together.

2. Maintain some sense of structure. With little notice, life took a sudden turn in early March. Events were canceled or postponed. A change in routine is not easy. Many of us are creatures of habit. Students operate in the same manner. Prior to the pandemic, they had routines that involved attending class, going to work, and hanging out with friends. They were used to engaging in various activities in different spaces, which helped break up and also add rhythm to their days. Recommend that students to adopt a new routine. This routine will hopefully involve making healthy choices, such as exercising and getting enough sleep.

3. Limit exposure to the news. While it is important to stay informed, it is also easy to become overwhelmed by 24/7 access to the news. This can exacerbate stress, fear, and anxiety. Nevins recommends engaging in activities such as going for a walk or reading a book instead. It's also good to have someone to talk to about this ever-changing event. For the most accurate information, check (on occasion) the [Center for Disease Control and Prevention website](#) for updates on COVID-19. While it is important to stay informed, encourage students to limit exposure to the news and to seek reliable sources to get the most up-to-date, accurate information.

4. Stay connected with others. Practicing social distancing does not mean that students (or we) need to disconnect from others. I recently read someone describing social distancing as physical distancing, while still being connected socially to those in your life (family, friends, colleagues, etc.). So, while students may not be in close proximity to others, including their peers, they can still stay connected socially through technology. The great thing about technology is that students can easily “reach out” via phone, social media, or with videoconferencing tools such as Google Hangouts, Zoom, or WebEx. Checking in with students and creating or strengthening a support network is more

important now than ever. Another way that students can connect to JMU is through the [Student Affairs Virtual Programming Hub](#), which lists virtual events such as [Madison Meditates](#) and [UREC group fitness classes](#). Motivate students to connect and seek out those support networks.

5. Make it easy for students to reach out for support. Let students know they can connect with you if they have questions regarding their course work. You may want to encourage students to check in to let you know how they are doing during this time, especially if they are ill or someone in their family becomes ill. For students who are currently seeking help for their mental health, many providers are now offering remote counseling. The [JMU Counseling Center](#) is also still available. If you feel that a student needs help, recommend that they contact the center. If you have questions regarding a student in need, there are professionals who can answer your questions and provide assistance in getting the student the help they need. Encourage students to reach out. Recommend that they seek assistance at the counseling center if you are concerned for their wellbeing.

In closing, please take care of yourself and your loved ones. [Self-care](#) is the first step in helping others. While we came to JMU to work with and help students, sometimes we have to put ourselves first. Dr. Magali Laitem, at the [JMU Counseling Center](#), shared an article with me entitled “[Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure](#)” (Ahmad 2020), which provides suggestions around adapting to this “new normal” as we teach our classes, work toward our scholarship goals, help with homework, and try to get dinner on the table. Magali also suggested the [Coronavirus Anxiety Handbook \(2020\)](#), by [The Wellness Society](#), an organization that develops self-help toolkits around mental health concerns. Finally, [Michele Kielty](#), in Graduate Psychology, and I recorded a [podcast](#) for the CFI Teaching Podcasts on Mindfulness in early spring prior to the COVID 19 pandemic. While the mindfulness podcast focused on how to incorporate mindfulness in a traditional face-to-face course, there are some tips that you still might find helpful as you continue to navigate this unusual semester.

I hope you find these suggestions helpful as you continue to assist students and establish a new workflow. Take care.

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