

Care for the Caregivers: Wellness Strategies for Student Support Service Providers

June 2020

Understanding the Issue

In order to help our students do their best despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to ensure that student support service providers have the personal skills, resources, and strategies to navigate stressful circumstances.

During this time of pervasive stress, loss, and grief, the [ability to recognize signs of trauma](#) in oneself and in others is critical. In addition to individual personal stressors, student support service providers are at a heightened exposure to secondary trauma—which, in the current pandemic, might range from grief of losing a loved one or supporting families who are struggling with financial strain—in their work with others, compounding the stressors on [one's own wellness](#).

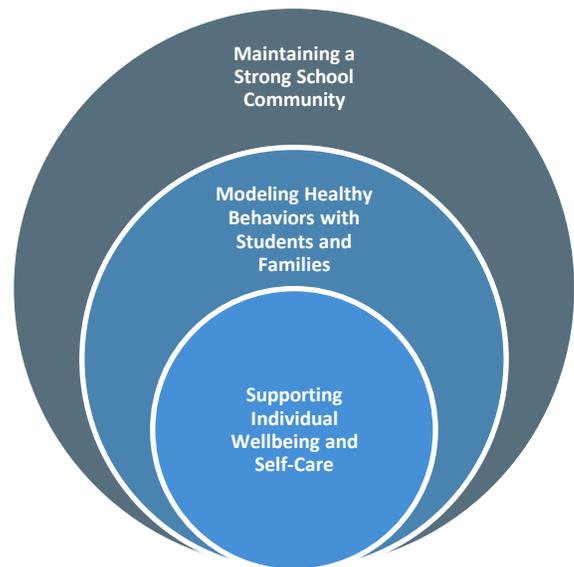


Figure 1. The Ripple Effects of Wellness

The Ripple Effects of Wellness

Individual well-being and self-care are central to modeling healthy relationships for students and families. The following sections provide wellness strategies for student support service providers, based on the understanding that their own wellbeing affects students, families, and the broader school community.

Supporting Individual Wellbeing and Self-Care

Changes in daily routines, the inability to maintain in-person social connections, or limitations to their regular physical activities may result in dysregulation for both children and adults.

- » School-based professionals can use [this snapshot of the spectrum of stress](#) to understand the current effects of stress, as well as a [self-assessment tool](#) that offers a quick way to gauge risks to wellbeing.
- » The American Psychological Association reminds caregivers of [simple steps](#), such as limiting exposure to news and focusing on things within one's control, that can help individuals better face current uncertainties.
- » Writing a [weekly self-care plan](#) that includes two or three specific and attainable strategies—such as setting a time limit on your social media use, saying “no,” or going to bed early—that can build habits supportive of well-being and mindfulness.



Stress reduction and mindfulness techniques can be used to calm the nervous system.

- » [This list of eight mindfulness practices](#) focuses on stress-management techniques that are particularly helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic
- » Try out some [chair yoga poses](#) or [simple movements](#) to relieve tension and pain in your neck.
- » Executive function and self-management practices, like reflection, prompts regularly noting your gratitude, becoming aware of your mindset, and managing expectations.
- » Staying tuned in to one’s own “[ABCs of wellness](#)”—awareness, balance, and connection—can be a regular part of your commitment to self-care.

Modeling Healthy Behaviors with Students and Families

Student support service providers *are uniquely positioned to help students and families understand the science of stress and how pervasive anxiety can impact the brain.*



- » [This short video](#) explains the symptoms of stress and introduces a relaxation response that can quiet the nervous system when activated.
- » Facilitate mindfulness techniques and activities, such as those described in [this resource](#).
- » Adaptive coping strategies can help students and families reduce stress and improve functioning. Teaching students [self-regulation strategies](#) can help them build their agency and articulate their needs.
- » Consider using the strategies and methods of the [Skills for Psychological Recovery](#) framework to support your work with students and families during this unprecedented time.

In the absence of regular, in-person consultation with students and families as well as the teachers who support them, students who are most acutely at risk of feeling disconnected, isolated, or otherwise facing pandemic need even more support. Student support service providers can:

- » Work with school leaders on an agreed-upon system to prioritize support for students with the highest need in the current circumstances.
- » Check in with students frequently to provide emotional support and reliable information. Help youth to access programs and funds that can assist in meeting emergency needs, including housing, and create [student-friendly materials](#) to explain about COVID-19.
- » Talk with students about stress and how they can self-manage at this time. Help them build their own toolbox of healthy coping strategies and self-regulation skills using lessons and materials found [here](#).

How to Know When to Get Help

Student support service providers may have increased risk of mental health challenges right now, because of their exposure to others’ hardship in the current pandemic, compounded with personal challenges and lead to feelings of overwhelm. If fear or hopelessness is disrupting your daily functioning, or if you suspect that another adult in your community of care/school community needs help, you can use the SAMHSA [confidential national helpline](#) and [behavioral health treatment locator](#), 24/7, 365 days a year, to get help. The Connecticut Commission on Women, Children and Seniors has also compiled [this list of websites and numbers](#) to call for specific services and needs (see page 3). United Way 211 is a multilingual helpline where you can access community services, crisis intervention and referrals to health and human services. Refer parents or caregivers to a hotline for COVID-19-specific children’s health needs, the Connecticut Children’s Hotline, at 1-833-226-2362, provides 24/7 access.

Student support service providers *will need to consider how best to set new boundaries and expectations for interactions with students and families.*

- » Set realistic expectations for yourself and form a new baseline of productivity. Meeting students' needs looks different at this time. Identify [ways you can provide](#) services within new constraints.
- » Establish healthy boundaries and norms for your interactions with families. Make decisions about how you will manage your time, including doing your best to manage others' expectations of your responses to requests for assistance.
- » Empower parents to support themselves and their children, by introducing them to [simple tools](#) and materials that are straightforward, accessible, and easy for them to use on their own.

Maintaining a Strong School Community

Student support service providers *can introduce other adults in the school community to new mechanisms for self-care and community connection.*

- » Modeling compassion and receptivity to the [unique challenges of others](#) can contribute positively to community health. See [this primer on developing the habits of compassion](#).
- » Encourage others to [build their resilience](#) and manage their stress proactively.
- » [Practice active listening](#) and show empathy by hearing about others' experiences, even if you don't have the answers that they are seeking.
- » Support the coordination of proactive and preventative measures for [school and district pandemic teams](#) to ensure resource allocation that prioritizes those in emergency situations.
- » The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has published a set of resources in response to COVID-19, including a [fact sheet focused on how to support children](#) and a [parent/caregiver guide](#) that offers guidance on how COVID-19 might affect their families' physical and emotional health and what they can do to cope.
- » Student support service providers can help colleagues in their school community connect with others facing feelings of loss, such as through [this Facebook group](#) that offers live grief support daily at 4 p.m. Eastern time, moderated by grief expert David Kessler.



This publication is in the public domain. While permission to reprint is not necessary, publication should be cited. The publication was prepared by the Region 2 Comprehensive Center under Award #S283B190057 for the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) of the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by WestEd. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the PGSS or OESE or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. © 2020 WestEd.