TAKING CARE: AN EDUCATOR GUIDE TO HEALTHY HABITS FOR STUDENT EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

ON OUR SLEEVES
The Movement for Children's Mental Health
Mental health difficulties are a barrier to learning and can negatively affect students’ social and emotional development and well-being into adulthood. A recent survey of First Book’s Network revealed that most educators believe the pandemic has introduced new mental health challenges among students—making this already significant issue even more pressing.

Developed in response to these concerns, this guide contains best practices and activities to optimize mental fitness and emotional resilience and decrease stress and anxiety.

This resource has two main sections:

- **Proactive & Protective:** The first section focuses on measures educators can take, such as teaching emotional literacy and introducing evidence-informed stress management and coping strategies. These best practices are appropriate for all students in grades 3 through 8 and will build self-esteem, self-awareness, and resilience.

- **Supportive & Responsive:** The second section discusses how educators can manage students’ behavioral concerns and strong emotions, including when to seek a referral to a mental health professional and important information about suicide prevention.

First Book educators shared their concerns about students’ mental health and well-being:

- 98% of educators say mental health challenges act as a barrier to children’s education.
- 85% of educators believe addressing mental health is a high or emergency priority in relation to other classroom or program priorities this year.
- On average, educators report that over half (53%) of their students struggle with mental health.
- 72% of educators say the pandemic has introduced new mental health challenges among their students.
- 65% of educators believe class/income is the most relevant social factor that impacts children’s mental health.

Source: Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022
Throughout, we include tangible advice and insights from educators and mental health practitioners in the First Book Network, who are familiar with the many and varied challenges experienced by children in low-income communities. This resource also includes information about intersectionality and mental health because many students experience different stressors and triggers because of their identity, race, or culture.

As an educator, you play an important role in supporting your students’ mental health. Although you cannot control all the stressors and sources of trauma affecting your students, you can foster healing and wellness in your classroom or program and work to remove the stigma around mental health concerns.

Created in Partnership with Leading Behavioral Health Experts and Wellness Specialists

This resource was developed in collaboration with On Our Sleeves, the movement for children’s mental health powered by the behavioral health experts at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, America’s largest network of pediatric behavioral health treatment providers and researchers. Included are resources and best practices from their behavioral health experts.

First Book recognizes that educator mental health is also important, yet often overlooked. Therefore, this guide also includes tips for educators to support their own emotional wellness, courtesy of Moving Mountain Academy, an organization designed to support, encourage, and inspire new ways of being and belonging in our world that are more personally fulfilling.

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BE PROACTIVE & PROTECTIVE

Educators can do a lot to support and improve the mental health and emotional well-being of the students in their classrooms and programs:

- Promote **social and emotional** and competency
- Share effective coping strategies to deal with **stress and anxiety**
- Teach and reinforce self-care habits like **mindfulness**
- Practice, model, and encourage **gratitude**

Sources: What Is Mental Health? | mentalhealth.gov
& For Educators | mentalhealth.gov

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Developing the vocabulary and awareness to talk about feelings is key to social and emotional learning. On Our Sleeves identifies five stages of **emotional empowerment** for children that are helpful to keep in mind as you incorporate social and emotional learning into your classroom or program:

1. Identify emotions and what they mean
2. Recognize emotions in the moment/as they are experienced
3. Notice emotions in others
4. Express feelings appropriately, even when experiencing strong or difficult emotions
5. Use coping strategies like mindful breathing, exercise, and listening to music to regulate strong emotions

Source: How to Foster a Child’s Emotional Development | On Our Sleeves

On Our Sleeves, in partnership with Young Minds Inspired, offers an Emotional Empowerment program for educators to use with students in grades 1-6. Activities and take-home letters are available in English and Spanish. Review the lessons and download the full program here, along with other mental health and wellness curricula.
Some students, particularly younger children, tend not to talk about their feelings or ask for help if they are struggling. Their silence may be caused by shame, embarrassment, confusion, or simply not having the tools to understand and communicate how they feel. This is why proactively teaching students how to recognize and name their emotions, how to use coping strategies, and how to ask for help when needed is so important.

There are many ways educators can support students’ social and emotional development and help them progress through the five stages mentioned above:

- **Incorporate a feelings check-in** into your morning meeting to help students develop the habit of recognizing feelings and proactively identifying appropriate coping strategies.

- **Use books** to teach about emotions, emotional responses, and empathy.

- **Incorporate teamwork** so students can practice sharing opinions, active listening, and collaborating. First Book’s Teamwork Time Saver offers tips for building effective teams.

- **Teach social and emotional vocabulary and a growth mindset.** Download this free poster from We Are Teachers that features positive statements to encourage resilience.

- **Create a calm down corner.** Creating a safe, peaceful space with calming materials like art supplies, books, and writing materials offers students a haven when they need a moment to calm down or take a break. Note that time in calm down corners should be limited to 5 to 15 minutes so students do not use them as an opportunity to escape or avoid rather than calm down.

Read advice and explore resources from **On Our Sleeves** and **We Are Teachers** for additional ideas.
Use the Reflect App to Support Social and Emotional Learning

If you are currently using Teams for Education—available with Microsoft 365 Education and free to educators—you have access to the Reflect app. With Reflect, educators can:

- Expose students to new language to describe complex emotions
- Help students connect facial expressions and body language to social and emotional vocabulary
- Share how students are feeling in the aggregate as a prompt for lessons on empathy and collaborative problem-solving

You can assess your own social-emotional skills and learn how to use Reflect in this 34-minute course.

MANAGING STRESS & ANXIETY

First Book educators report that stress and anxiety are increasingly common struggles for the students they serve, with both the prevalence and severity made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students in the First Book Network had multiple sources of stress in their lives before the pandemic, such as financial insecurity, unstable or unsafe home lives, and the effects of systemic racism.

There are many coping strategies that are free and easy to learn to help manage stress. Below you will find activities that teach mindfulness and gratitude, simple and effective practices that can transform moods and mindsets. These strategies can foster resilience but are not first-line recommendations to treat trauma or toxic stress.
The Different Types of Stress

Stress is the body's reaction to events and experiences that can manifest as physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Most people experience stress throughout their lives, but there are different types, causes, and effects.

**Positive Stress:** This type of stress is feeling nervous before a test, performance, or game and may actually enhance performance.

**Tolerable Stress:** This type of stress results from more challenging or unexpected events, such as falling on the playground and getting hurt.

**Toxic Stress:** This type of stress can result from abuse, neglect, financial insecurity, or exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, or violence.

Children are particularly vulnerable to frequent stressors because their brains and bodies are still developing. Living in a constant state of stress takes a toll on a child’s health, affecting their emotional well-being into adulthood and negatively impacting their physical health and development.

*Source: Toxic Stress Response in Kids | On Our Sleeves*

Try these activities and suggestions in your classroom or program to help students manage stress and anxiety:

- Share this video from *On Our Sleeves* that offers three tips to deal with stress and pressure.
- Have your students complete the Take Care worksheet created by *On Our Sleeves*, in partnership with Young Minds Inspired. This exercise will help students identify their preferred coping and self-care strategies.
- Challenge your students to a month-long Mental Fitness Challenge and watch how simple habits and activities can improve their mood and general well-being and act as a buffer against stressful moments.
EDUCATORS SHARE

First Book educators share their tips for helping students manage stress and anxiety

Have students write what is stressful or causing anxiety on a small piece of paper or sticky note. Have students feed the sticky note into the shredder as they tell themselves, “I am okay. I can do this.”

Lisa, School Counselor in Sulphur Springs, Texas

Print FREE mandalas from momaymandala.com and give students a few minutes to color these calming designs.

Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina

Purchase different color molding clay for the class, and have students create a small worry stone to rub whenever they need. They can keep the stone in their pocket throughout the day. The clay will need to be baked in order to harden. I have noticed that students who are truly anxious benefit not only from the activity alone, but also carrying the stone around.

Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a protective mental health practice that you can practice with your students and incorporate into your classroom or program. Mindfulness means paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and experiences and accepting them with as little judgment as possible. One of the goals of mindfulness is to observe each thought as it happens and then let it slip away so that you can observe the next thought. When students direct their attention to what they are doing in the moment, they become more absorbed in the present, which helps them spend less time worrying about the past or the future.

Mindfulness offers many benefits for those who practice it regularly:

• Increased focus and attention
• Less regret about the past and worry about the future
• Reduced stress and anxiety
• Less depression
• Improved mood, memory, and self-confidence
• Increased optimism and gratitude

Source: How to Help Your Kids Practice Mindfulness | On Our Sleeves
Use these strategies to incorporate mindfulness into your classroom or program:

**Take a mindful moment** where you have students focus on the present. One way to do this is by using grounding meditation, which uses all five senses. *On Our Sleeves* provides this video to help you get started.

This observation activity will help students learn to focus mindfully on the present moment. Use these instructions to guide them through the process, which can become a daily or weekly practice.

- Sit comfortably and take several deep breaths.
- Choose an object to focus your attention on. It could be a pencil, book, backpack, or anything within eyesight.
- Use all of your senses to observe the object for 5 minutes. Consider its shape, size, color, weight, and any other qualities.
  - What color is the object?
  - Are there multiple colors? Notice how the light reflects off the object.
  - When you touch it, does it have different textures?
  - Is it warm or cool? Notice the weight. Is it heavy or light?
  - Continue to use all of your senses to observe the object.
- Notice any thoughts, feelings, or sensations that arise. If your mind wanders, gently turn your attention back to the object.
- After the 5 minutes are up, reflect on the experience by writing down how your body and mind feel and the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arose.
- This activity takes a lot of practice. You may find it hard to focus for 5 whole minutes at first. Like with any skill, the more you practice the better you get.

Find some time each day to practice mindful breathing as a group. Breathwork is a good way to settle nervous energy before tests, presentations, games, and other important or challenging moments. Try these guided relaxations:

- Play the Mindless to Mindful video from GoNoodle, a 3-minute introduction to mindfulness and conscious breathing.
- The Calm app offers a selection of free mindfulness activities for students of all ages. See page 16 of *30 Days of Mindfulness for the Classroom* for guided mindfulness activities and meditations.

By modeling these practices and routinely incorporating these tools into your daily interactions with students, you are teaching them lifelong tools for mental wellness.

Sources: From Mindless to Mindful | GoNoodle, Creating Optimal Learning Environments | The Conscious Classroom Podcast, & 30 Days of Mindfulness for the Classroom | Calm
Gratitude is a simple strategy to improve mental and physical health and resiliency. Studies have shown that students who identify and express gratitude feel more connected to their friends, family, schools, and communities. They also feel more optimistic about life and school and have fewer negative emotions. Isolated moments of gratitude can improve a bad experience or day, but it is even better to develop a gratitude-focused mindset. A consistent gratitude practice can positively affect students’ attitudes and overall happiness into adulthood.

Sources: A Lesson in Thanks | Greater Good Magazine & How to Foster Gratitude in Schools | Greater Good Magazine

Many gratitude studies focus on upper- and middle-class students, but a study by Mindy Ma explored gratitude among African American youth (ages 12-14) who were living in low-income areas and attending low-performing schools. Ma’s study revealed a correlation between students who reported feelings of gratitude and increased academic and extra-curricular engagement and academic performance.

Gratitude means talking about what we are thankful for, showing that we appreciate things in our life, and showing kindness. Here are some tangible ways to incorporate gratitude into your teaching:

- Clearly identify examples of gratitude in daily life, books, movies, and the news.
- Have students keep a Gratitude Journal. Ask them to write down what they are grateful for before class or at a designated time during the day. You can enhance the practice by asking them to describe why they are grateful for the things they list. On Our Sleeves provides a series of gratitude worksheets you can download for free from their website.
- Introduce a Gratitude Jar. All you need for this activity is paper, pen, and a jar. Put the jar in an accessible spot in your room and encourage students to write down something that made them happy during the day or week. Make time to share some moments of gratitude with the class. This practice is a simple way to focus on the positive moments that often get lost in the busyness of the school day and week. If students need inspiration, they can use these fill-in-the-blank phrases.

Sources: Gratitude in the Classroom | Move This World, How to Foster Gratitude in Schools | Greater Good Magazine & Thank You | On Our Sleeves
SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SKILLS & THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The social and emotional skills and mental fitness practices described above fulfill many state-specific social and emotional learning standards and are also prerequisites for achieving many Common Core standards in math and English Language Arts.

**Collaboration** is a component of many English Language Arts standards, including: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaboration discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

California’s Relationship Skills standards include:

- Listening actively, communicating effectively, and self-advocating
- Developing mutually healthy and productive relationships
- Practicing collaborative problem-solving that focuses on the common good
- Showing leadership and contributing productively in groups

**Empathy** is a critical skill that requires emotional literacy and is addressed in CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3: Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Kansas has several standards related to empathy across various grade levels:

- Demonstrate and practice aspects of a caring relationship by treating others with empathy (grades 3-5)
- Determine when and how to respond to the needs of others, demonstrating empathy, respect, and compassion (grades 6-8)

**Resilience** and **self-awareness** are required to meet CCSS.MATH.PRACTICE.MP1: Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.

Minnesota’s Self-Management standards include goals for students related to problem-solving and perseverance:

- Demonstrate the skills to manage and express their emotions, thoughts, impulses, and stress in more effective ways.
- Demonstrate the skills to set, monitor, adapt, achieve, and evaluate goals.

Sources: Common Core State Standards Initiative, Kansas Social, Emotional and Character Development Standards & CA Dept. of Education Social and Emotional Learning
Recurring instances of microaggressions, discrimination, and race-related violence can have profound, negative effects on students’ mental health. When this type of stress is constant or extreme, students of color can experience racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress. This trauma can manifest with physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, chest pain, and insomnia) as well as depression, anger, and low self-esteem.

Source: Racial Trauma | Mental Health America

On Our Sleeves offers a series of tips and resources that acknowledge the unique lived experiences of communities and groups dealing with discrimination.

- **Tips for Self-Care for Black Families** – Black Americans are disproportionately affected by systemic racism and inequalities. These tips offer ways for children (and adults) to cope with these stressors.

- **How to Help Latinx Children Face Mental Health Obstacles** – Latinx children show higher rates of mental illness and suicidal thoughts than other children their age. This resource provides context and explains how parents and caregivers can help.

- **How to Teach Kids About Microaggressions** – Microaggressions are the expressions of bias that can be intentional or unintentional. These subtle, common behaviors and comments disproportionately affect members of certain groups.

- **Kids and Race-Related Violence** – Race-related violence is a source of grief and anxiety for many students. This resource provides ways to offer support and guidance.

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**INTERSECTIONALITY & MENTAL HEALTH**

I find resources that intentionally represent the same backgrounds of my students when directly or indirectly discussing mental health. I read books with diverse characters. I also keep in mind the trauma of racism that may come by simply being a member of that community.

*First Book Educator (Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)*

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**Additional Resources About Intersectionality & Mental Health**

- How Exposure to Community Violence Impacts Youth | *On Our Sleeves*
- Talking to Kids About Racism | *On Our Sleeves*
- Mental Health Resources for Young People of Color | onlinecounselingprograms.com
- Racial Trauma, Resiliency and Ally Resources | Counseling Services
- Racial Trauma | Mental Health America
EDUCATOR SELF-CARE

The American Federation of Teachers’ 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey found that 61 percent of educators consider their jobs to be always or often stressful—more than double the rate of non-teaching working adults—and 58 percent said they had poor mental health due to stress levels. That was before the pandemic and virtual/hybrid schooling increased existing stressors for students and educators.

Educators are often so focused on taking care of and supporting others that they neglect their own self-care and emotional well-being. This can lead to compassion fatigue, chronic stress, and burnout. Educators with compassion fatigue may experience the following effects:

- Difficulty planning classroom activities and lessons
- Decreased concentration
- Feeling numb or detached about student trauma or...
- Intense feelings, intrusive thoughts, and dreams about student trauma (more than an isolated instance)
- Increased irritability or impatience with students

Sources: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network & Mental Health America

Self-care can take many forms, and what works for one person may not work for another. Below are a few practices from Moving Mountain Academy designed to increase gratitude and focus and reduce stress and anxiety. Try incorporating these practices into your daily and/or weekly routine. Notice any changes in your mood, energy level, or sense of well-being, keeping in mind that consistent practice is key.

There are so many other priorities put on educators and each one is “more important” than the next. A major priority that goes unnoticed is educator burnout. We’ve lost touch with how to take care of ourselves and practice our own self-care.

First Book Educator
(Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)
Is It True? Practice

When you are feeling sad, frustrated, angry, or hopeless, you can try this:

**Step 1:** Acknowledge to yourself that you are feeling what you are feeling. It’s okay to feel this way. All human beings feel negatively sometimes.

**Step 2:** Find the spot in your body where the feeling most resides. Do you have a headache? Is your chest tight? Is your stomach fluttering? You may have one or more of these things happening at the same time. Again, it’s okay to feel this way.

**Step 3:** Identify the thought that is making you feel negative.

**Step 4:** Once you have identified the thought that is causing your reaction, notice how you feel the next time you think that thought.

**Step 5:** Recognize that we do not always choose our thoughts, and we don’t have to believe every thought we think. Ask yourself the following question: Is it really true all the time?

**Step 6:** Ask yourself if it is possible not to believe this thought and what would happen if you no longer believed this thought.

By doing this exercise often, we start to discover for ourselves that our thoughts can play tricks on us. They masquerade as the supreme truth when in fact they are nowhere close to that. Slowly, by practicing this routine, we will find freedom from the negative influence of our thoughts. As a result, the life energy burdened by negative thoughts frees up and becomes available for other parts of our life.

Source: Adapted from *The Work of Byron Katie* by Moving Mountain Academy

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**Example:** I am feeling angry and sad and hopeless all at once. I am feeling tight in my chest and my stomach is feeling uneasy.

**Question:** What thought am I thinking that makes me feel this way?

**Answers:** My students are having a hard time, and I never have enough resources to support them.

**So, I ask:** Is it really true all the time? Is it really true I never have enough resources to support them?

At first, I am tempted to say *yes* because physical resources are scarce in my school/program. But when I allow myself to take some time with this question, I realize that it is not really true *all the time*.

My evidence against the thought is that I was able to creatively use recycled materials I found in the cafeteria to successfully teach a math concept. And I was able to get a local expert to volunteer their time talk to my kids about habitats.

So, while I may not have access to all the physical materials I need, I am able to make up for it with a little ingenuity and creativity. And that’s making a difference for my students’ learning.

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**Additional self-care resources:**

- How Teachers Can Support Other Teachers from *On Our Sleeves*
- Self-Care Guide for Teachers from Calm
- Meditation 101 from Headspace for Educators
- Inner Strength Education: COVID-19 Stress Supports for Teachers from Inner Strength Education
- Self-Care Toolkit for Educators from Inner Strength Education
**Make a Friend in Nature Practice**

On your commute to school or back home, pay attention to Nature in whatever form it is present—it may be trees, flowers, birds, insects, animals, bushes, clouds in the sky, hills, evening stars, or other beings in Nature.

Do this for a few days.

Then, when you feel comfortable, ask Nature to be your friend. It may be that a specific tree, bird or rock claims your attention and calls out to you, or it may not happen that way. It’s okay either way.

See if you can be willing to let Nature come into your life in small ways—invite Nature in. Tell Nature that you wish to share your life with her. Communicate with Nature through private dialogue, by sharing the details of your life. You can communicate by thinking, journaling, drawing, or even through song or dance. Simply speak your heart’s truth with Nature.

Before long, you will begin to notice that Nature reciprocates your attention and affection. And you will receive many signals from Nature, such as seeing sights that make you feel more joy, having a greater appreciation for life, or having a greater sense of confidence and clarity. How Nature responds to our friendship can look different for different people. But it always brings peace and joy, and we feel renewed from the inside.

**Daily Gratitude Practice**

As outlined in the gratitude section above, gratitude is a simple daily practice that can have a powerful, positive impact on our moods and well-being. Reminding ourselves of the moments and experiences that bring us joy and peace is an effective coping strategy when we feel overwhelmed or discouraged. Below are a few statements to think about or say aloud every morning or when you experience a challenging moment or feeling.

*Practice being grateful for living, particularly for those elements of life that occur without human intervention. Ask yourself:*

- **What would happen if the sun stopped shining? I enjoy the light and the warmth of the sun. I am grateful for it.**
- **I am grateful for my breath, and for the air available to me all the time.**
- **I am grateful that my body works; it digests food, beats my heart, lets me walk, and do the things I love.**
- **I love doing ____________ (fill in the blank). I am grateful that this activity brings me happiness/joy/peace/comfort.**
BE SUPPORTIVE & RESPONSIVE

While the first section focused on supporting wellness proactively, this section provides guidance about how educators can best support students who are currently impacted by stress, anxiety, and trauma. Included in this section are behavioral warning signs that require a response, a protocol for how to deal with anger and outbursts, information on when students should be referred to mental health professionals, and information about suicide education and prevention.

COMMON BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

First Book educators shared the behavioral challenges they observe most often when students are dealing with stress, anxiety, and trauma. The most common signs included:

- Angry or aggressive outbursts
- Inability to focus
- Social withdrawal
- Change in academic performance
- Physical or somatic symptoms
- Change in attendance
- Inability to adapt to changes
- Rule-breaking
- Inability to describe emotions
- Inability to recover from failure
- Inability to sit still
- Hesitation around human contact
- Suicidal ideation and/or suicide attempts

Source: Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022

I always reiterate that behavior is communication. We need to approach individuals (students and adults alike) with a trauma-informed lens. Look for withdrawn behavior, change in participation (lowered or not at all), less or no socializing with friends, not turning in work, unresponsive when you try to start a conversation, body language.

Alice, School Counselor in San Mateo, California
Use these simple techniques to acknowledge and encourage good behavior:

1. **Reword your instructions and feedback to focus on the positive** and the behaviors you want to see. Instead of a rule such as “Don’t hit or kick,” try “Keep your hands and feet to yourself.” Instead of “Don’t run,” try “Use your walking feet only.” The goal is to focus on and reward the desired behaviors.

2. **Catch them being good.** Kids respond to frequent reinforcement—midmorning or the end of the day—rather than at the end of the week or month. You can implement a token economy where children earn stickers, tickets, marbles, etc. for behaving well. Be specific in your praise so the student understands what they did well: “Great job using your walking feet on the way to music. Here is your ticket.” They can trade in their tokens at the end of the day for a reward.

3. **Recognize the students who are behaving well** instead of the ones behaving poorly. For example, if you want Johnny to sit down, call out a child who is sitting down: “Maria, great job sitting” instead of “Johnny, sit down.” Children respond to attention. When students observe their peers receiving praise for good behavior, they are motivated to behave well themselves.

Too often students do not have the tools or desire to express that they are dealing with stress, anxiety, and trauma. As a result, these emotions often show up as behavioral challenges. In fact, childhood anxiety and depression often look like intense anger and a lack of emotional regulation. Knowing this, educators should consider the student’s perspective and try to figure out the feelings behind the behavior; curiosity about the “why” will lead to a strategic response or intervention that is both effective and compassionate.

**Source:** Active Minds & Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022

*After more than 20 years in education, I’ve noticed more younger students are coming in with mental health issues—perhaps due to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

First Book Educator (Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022)

A mental health survey conducted by Active Minds revealed that 74% of high school students report having experienced stress or anxiety as a result of COVID-19. Educators in the First Book Network shared similar findings, reporting that 53% of their students have been struggling with their mental health; 72% of educators say the pandemic has introduced new mental health challenges among students, and 65% say it has exacerbated existing mental health challenges. Sharing this video with older students will help normalize their feelings about the pandemic and let them know their anxiety, stress, regret, and sadness are valid and shared by many other students their age.
DEALING WITH ANGER & OUTBURSTS

Many educators in the First Book Network report that strong emotions and aggressive behavior are increasingly common issues among students. The increase in anger and outbursts may be related to the stress we have all experienced because of the pandemic. The social isolation during quarantine, which meant fewer opportunities to practice conflict resolution and communication skills, also contributed to the interpersonal struggles many students are now experiencing.

One of the most effective ways to prevent angry outbursts is by teaching children how to manage their emotional responses before they get out of hand. The goal is not to suppress or deny anger, which is a valid emotion. Rather, the focus should be on how students experience and express anger: recognizing triggers in time to use calming strategies and learning how to communicate the feelings behind the anger—fear, disappointment, frustration, or confusion, for example.

Source: Managing Anger in Kids | On Our Sleeves

Use this anger thermometer exercise to help kids reflect on what types of experiences make them angry, how their body feels when they are angry, how they express anger through their behaviors, and what coping mechanisms would be most effective in managing their anger.

Print out and distribute an anger thermometer to each student in your class or program.

1. Ask students to complete the left side of the thermometer by listing what their body feels like at each level of anger on a scale of 1-10. For example, at a 1, I may roll my eyes. At 5, my cheeks get hot, or I clench my fists. At 7, my heart beats really fast. At 10, I throw things.

2. Once students have written down what they feel, have them turn their attention to the right side of the thermometer. Here, they can write how they will cope. Possibilities include counting to 10, visiting the calm down corner, and mindful breathing. Encourage students to be creative and identify the coping techniques that will work best for them.

Students should keep their personalized anger thermometers in their desks or backpacks as a reminder of what to do when they feel their anger getting out of control.

Tips: Give your students space to do the activities that help them manage their anger, such as spending 5-15 minutes in a calm down corner. Older students may be given the freedom to calm down outside of the classroom. For example, middle and high school teachers could print and distribute a card, similar to a hall pass, that students can show when they need to take a break.
Reframe it. Sometimes it helps to draw a picture or write about what students are feeling within a picture frame prompt. Have the students then flip the paper over to the other side and draw something positive they can do, say, or think to make the day better within a second picture frame prompt.

*Lisa, School Counselor in Sulphur Springs, Texas*

Sometimes students can change their reactions when they have space and time to be by themselves. Having a dedicated calm down corner can help in times like these.

*Lauren, School Counselor in Roxboro, North Carolina*

Have the student go on a walk with another trusted classmate to help process feelings. Students can carry a timer to know when to return to class. If the student cannot handle a walk, have the student call a parent or family member to get a pep talk. Reassure the student they are not in trouble. Share that you want them to have a good day and get some encouragement from someone they love.

*Dorothy, School Counselor in Summerville, South Carolina*

Practices like mindfulness and gratitude contribute to optimum mental health and fitness, but they cannot prevent all mental health problems—just as good nutrition and exercise cannot prevent all physical ailments. It is important that students understand it is not their fault if they are having a hard time coping: It is okay to not be okay. When a student is showing signs of not being okay, approach the situation with compassion and nonjudgment.
When to seek extra help within your school

Collaborate with a school counselor, psychologist, nurse, or administrator and involve the student’s parents if you observe one or more of the following behaviors:

- Sadness or withdrawal that lasts for more than two weeks
- Involvement in fights or a desire to hurt others
- Severe out-of-control behavior that could lead to injury or harm others
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Drastic changes in behavior or personality
- Major changes in academic performance

Source: For Educators | MentalHealth.gov

How to bring up your concerns with a parent or caregiver

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do</th>
<th>Don’t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schedule a time to talk to a parent in private.</td>
<td>Mention your concerns in passing, for example at drop off or pick up.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talk to the parent in a public setting where others may overhear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use objective descriptions of the behaviors you have noticed. For example: “Recently ____ has been running out of the class when I ask him to answer a question.”</td>
<td>Use labels or judgments. For example: “Your child has been bad and is misbehaving.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with the parents and approach the problem as a team: “Are you aware of anything that is hard on them lately?” “Is there anything I can do to support them?” “What do you think is the best way to move forward to help them?”</td>
<td>Blame the parent. Tell them what to do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind it may take multiple conversations before a parent feels ready to seek out further support. They may not see the same behaviors in the home that you see at school, so it is normal for some parents to feel surprised.
Educators interact with students regularly and may be the first adults to notice serious changes in their behavior and mood. It is also not uncommon for a student to confide in a teacher rather than a caregiver or relative. For these reasons, teachers are in a good position to watch for warning signs and take appropriate action as needed.

**Suicide Awareness Protocol for Educators**

1. **Know what your district’s policy is and what the law requires you to do when you believe a student is in danger of hurting themselves.** Most districts have a set policy and procedure.

2. **Make sure you have the name and contact information for the designated mental health professional at your school or program, such as a guidance counselor or school nurse.** Unfortunately, many schools do not have a school-based professional in this role because of budget issues. If this is the case at your school, your administration should be able to point you toward a district-level contact.

3. **Above we mentioned the behavioral challenges resulting from stress, anxiety, and trauma.** In addition, it is important to familiarize yourself with the **signs of immediate suicide risk**, such as a student talking about any of the following:
   - A desire to self-harm, including suicide
   - Ways to kill themselves, like guns or pills
   - Feeling hopeless, being a burden to others, or having no reason to live
   - Unbearable emotional or physical pain

   **Other signs and symptoms to look for include:**
   - A recent disappointment or rejection, such as not making a team or getting a part in a play
   - Change in interactions with friends and classmates
   - Feeling embarrassed or humiliated in front of classmates
   - Being the victim of assault or bullying
   - Talking, reading, or writing about death or suicide in a worrying way

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If you have concerns about a student’s safety, call the **nationwide Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)** or contact a local crisis center. You can also reach the **Crisis Text Line by texting “START” to 741741.**
If you are concerned about a student’s safety:

• Do not leave the student alone. If necessary, ask another responsible adult for assistance.
• Do not promise confidentiality you are not able to keep, and explain your role and responsibility to the student.
• Accompany the student to your school’s designated mental health professional. Do not send them on their own.
• Tell the mental health professional what you heard and observed, rather than relying on the student to do so. They may downplay the severity of the crisis.
• Assist the mental health professional and/or contact the parents as needed.

Sources: Teachers: Recognize the Warning Signs of Suicide | Community Health Network & What Teachers Need to Know About the Rise in Teen Suicide | weareteachers.com

Facts About Suicide

• Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34 in the U.S.
• Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.
• Annual prevalence of serious thoughts about suicide, by U.S. demographic group:
  - 4.9% of all adults
  - 18.8% of high school students
  - 42% of LGBTQ youth
  - 52% of LGBTQ youth who identify as transgender or nonbinary

Source: Mental Health By the Numbers | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness

Suicide rates in youth...

“Basically, it’s 9/11 happening every 18 months.”

- John Ackerman, PhD, Center for Suicide Prevention & Research at Nationwide Children’s Hospital

Source: On Our Sleeves

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual U.S. high school students were more likely to report a suicide attempt during the last year

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019 | cdc.gov
Community and School Training and Education Around Suicide

Schools can play a significant role in suicide prevention by addressing bullying and other social dynamics that could lead a student to consider suicide. Unfortunately, many educators do not have training in suicide awareness and prevention and feel unequipped to support students who may be at risk. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers free presentations for middle and high school students, school staff, and families that cover the signs and symptoms of mental illness, how to recognize early warning signs, and the importance of responding to those signs.

- **Research** has shown that NAMI’s 50-minute *Ending the Silence for Students* presentation is effective in changing middle and high school students’ attitudes towards mental health and seeking help.
- For educators, NAMI offers an hour-long *Ending the Silence for School Staff* presentation that includes information about warning signs and explains how to approach students and work with families.
- For families, NAMI offers an hour-long *Ending the Silence for Families* presentation for the caregivers of middle or high school aged students that covers warning signs, facts and statistics, and how to talk with your child.
- If you would like to host a NAMI *Ending the Silence* presentation at your school, contact your local NAMI Affiliate.

What Educators Should Know About Suicide Contagion

After a high-profile suicide that is widely covered in the national news or a local suicide that intimately affects a school community, educators should be aware of an effect called *suicide contagion*. For some people who are already vulnerable to suicidal thoughts—particularly teens who are still searching externally for meaning and role models—a public suicide can spark suicidal ideation. Some of the principles that inform responsible media coverage also apply to educators:

**Do**
- Use the opportunity to provide information and remove the stigma. For example, to normalize asking for help, prompt kids to silently name the adult they would go to in a crisis.
- Share resources where students can find support, such as hotlines and connections to school-based and community support.
- Encourage students to seek help for themselves or others if they have concerns.

**Don’t**
- Don’t be too specific about methods, which can “fill in the picture” for students who may already have suicidal thoughts.
- Don’t frame suicide as an inevitable response to mental health problems.
- Don’t use the word “committed” in reference to the act of suicide, as it suggests a crime and contributes to stigma. Instead, say someone “died by suicide” or “took their life.”

Source: [What Educators Need to Know About Suicide: Contagion, Complicated Grief, and Supportive Conversations (edweek.org)](https://www.edweek.org)
APPENDIX

Definitions
Additional Resources
Sources
**DEFINITIONS**

**Anxiety** is tension, worry, nervousness, and/or fear that is often accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating, dizziness, and a rapid heart rate. Most people experience some level of anxiety, and for some, it may be a chronic problem that requires a diagnosis and treatment plan. People with anxiety disorders tend to have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns that affect their functioning and quality of life.

**Mental Fitness** refers to the process of maintaining and optimizing our mental health and social and emotional functioning. Mental fitness positively affects our self-esteem, resilience, communication skills, and relationships.

**Mindfulness** is the practice or state of focusing on the present moment while acknowledging and accepting the feelings, thoughts, and sensations that arise.

**Mindful Breathing** is a mindfulness practice in which the aim is to focus attention on each breath.

**Social and Emotional Learning** is the process of learning how to understand and manage emotions, maintain relationships, make decisions, and set goals. Social and emotional skills include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

**Stress** is the body's reaction to events and experiences and can manifest as physical, emotional, or psychological strain. Most people experience some stress throughout their lives. Chronic stress can impede healthy functioning and development and contribute to health problems.

**Wellness** is the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles intended to support and improve holistic health.

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**Sources:**
American Psychological Association, Global Wellness Institute, On Our Sleeves, The Berkeley Well-Being Institute & CASEL
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

On Our Sleeves: The movement for children’s mental health

Children don’t wear their thoughts on their sleeves. With 1 in 5 children living with a significant mental health concern and half of all lifetime mental health concerns starting by age 14, we need to give them a voice. On Our Sleeves®, powered by behavioral health experts at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, America’s largest network of pediatric behavioral health treatment providers and researchers, and collaborating partners, aims to provide every community in America with free resources necessary for breaking child mental health stigmas and educating families and advocates, because no child or family should struggle alone.

Since the inception of On Our Sleeves® in 2018, more than 3 million people in every state across America have interacted with the movement’s free pediatric mental health educational resources at OnOurSleeves.org, and educator curricula have reached more than four of five classrooms across the United States.

• Sign up for the weekly newsletter featuring mental health and wellness education and resources.
• Follow the On Our Sleeves YouTube Channel for biweekly videos, tips, and reminders.
• Download Supporting Kids in Classroom for additional activities and strategies.
• Download curriculum for a variety of ages.
• Learn about mental health conditions.
• Find mental health resources.

The Child Mind Institute

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. Their website features a series of free, evidence-based video and print resources that caregivers and educators can use to teach children critical mental health and coping skills.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

NAMI is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI offers resources for youth and young adults and educational materials, including those designed to better address the needs of underrepresented communities.

MentalHealth.gov

MentalHealth.gov offers an accessible collection of mental health facts and resources, including a section for educators—often the first people to spot mental health issues in students.
The Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is dedicated to supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. There are young people of color who are failing academically, suffering emotionally, and facing serious risk because population-specific factors influencing mental health are too poorly understood and not acted upon.

Minority Mental Health Month - An Expert Interview & Advocacy Guide | counselingschools.com

This Advocacy Guide for Minority Mental Health provides an overview of the connection between the experience of racism and mental health struggles and explores issues that affect certain cultures and ethnicities.

Inner Strength Education for Teen Mindfulness | Amy Edelstein

Amy Edelstein established Inner Strength to share her many years of experience working with methodologies to build inner strength and outer stability in today’s youth. Edelstein is also the host of the Conscious Classroom Podcast, which explores trauma-sensitive mindfulness, social and emotional learning, and systems thinking in education. She is the author of several books, including The Conscious Classroom, which won an IPPY Award for Excellence in Educational Theory.

APPS

Calm

Cost: Free
Platforms: iOS and Android
Developer: Calm.com
About: Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditation, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music. Learn more here.

Headspace for Educators

Cost: Free
Platforms: Available from your browser
Developer: Headspace
About: Headspace offers free access to K-12 (primary-secondary) teachers and supporting staff in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. Learn more here.
Mindful gNATs

Cost: Free  
*Platforms*: iOS and Android  
*Developer*: Handaxe  
*About*: Designed to teach young people simple mindfulness and relaxation skills, used in schools. Learn more [here](#).

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Reflect

Cost: Free (Through Microsoft 365 Education)  
*Platforms*: Microsoft Teams for Education  
*Developer*: Microsoft  
*About*: A free tool in Microsoft Teams, the Reflect app features check-ins designed to support educators in embedding explicit SEL instruction in their classroom routine. Emojis and an expressive “Feelings Monster” bring 50 emotions to life to help students connect facial expressions and body language to emotional vocabulary. Learn more [here](#) and [here](#).

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Stop, Breathe & Think

*Platforms*: iOS and Android  
*Cost*: Free  
*Developer*: Tools for Peace  
*About*: Designed for daily meditation & mindfulness, this app has a unique approach that allows you to check in with your emotions and then recommends short, guided meditations and yoga and acupressure videos, based on your current mood and feelings. Educators can use this as a class warm-up activity. Learn more [here](#).


Child Mental Health in Low-Income Communities Survey, First Book, 2022


This resource was made possible by funding from the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.