Supporting College Students

Navigating Stress, Adversity, and Trauma in the University Setting

CENTER FOR RESILIENCE + WELL-BEING

Students are struggling, especially students who may be experiencing layers of stress compounded by historical, racial and cultural trauma. Each one of us has the power to support through the simple and profound ordinary magic of connection and kindness. Here are some proven practices for cultivating connection and resilience.

FIRST, TAKE CARE

Adults are not separate from the stress, adversity and trauma being experienced today. Self-care and self-awareness is key to well-being and our ability to support others. The simple act of taking 3 deep breaths allows us to pause, check in and calm our system so we can restore and engage the planning and learning part of our brain; There is compelling research related to the benefits of diaphragmatic breathing (deep belly breaths) for adults and students of all ages.

Self-awareness coupled with labeling our emotions (silently, aloud or in writing) shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. When we label our emotions we are able learn more about complex feelings and how we want to regulate our emotions. If you'd like to know more about the science behind this simple, powerful strategy, read this brief article about terrifying tarantulas and the power of naming our emotions.

Bringing awareness to your emotions and labeling them is a helpful first step.

TAKE NOTICE

Acknowledging and Normalizing: Acknowledging the layers of stress/trauma students may be experiencing and the impact on learning lets students know you understand and empathize with their experience. You can help normalize a wide range of emotions through simple statements (e.g.," I can understand why you feel that way" and "I think a lot of people are feeling that now"). Acknowledging your own emotions can also normalize the complex feelings that are typical; even sharing small stories of trouble tracking schedules or feeling unfocused and on edge conveys that WE are in this together. Even though this has been an unusual year, feeling the impact of stress and trauma is normal.

Validating: Some may experience traumatic stress related to intersecting identities: Massive group trauma experiences such as slavery, war and genocide can give rise to Historical trauma felt across generations in the form of cumulative emotional and psychological wounding. Historical trauma can be layered with Racial and Cultural trauma linked to ongoing discrimination and violence, including hate crimes and restrictive laws (e.g. voter suppression, travel bans and access based on gender). Validating all experiences of trauma, including trauma related to identity, demonstrates empathy and builds relational trust.

Recognizing, Appreciating and Noticing (R.A.N.): These actions help us feel seen, valued and heard. You can support students by noticing and appreciating how they have showed up and what their participation has meant for the learning community and your own sense of purpose and well-being. Specific, concrete details enhance appreciations (e.g., "the way you all built on each other's comments during discussion was collaborative and generative"). Even calling a student by name or lifting up a contribution during discussion can foster a sense of belonging and connection. In this Harvard Business review article, Mike Robbins and Oprah discuss the relational and motivational aspects of R.A.N.

Validating stress and trauma helps students feel understood & trust their perspectives and feelings.

TAKE ACTION

Offer Voice and Choice: In times of stress and trauma, people feel empowered when they are able to express their needs and navigate their paths to resilience. Poll students to learn if they would benefit from extra supports: additional office hours; review classes; practice exams; rubrics, exemplars, or tip sheets for papers and projects.

Offer Flexibility: Your ability to be flexible may offer an essential lifeline. Consider how you could adjust deadlines, assignments, and requirements. This may require rethinking how learning is represented and what constitutes essential learning in your course or discipline. It may also require suspending some typical default reactions: feeling personally affronted, attributing character flaws (e.g., laziness, apathy, manipulative) or concern that students are taking advantage now and it will be hard to reassert policies when current stressors resolve.

Offer Avenues of Support: Adults can reinforce how normal it is to need a wide variety of supports by re-posting information for mental health supports, ally groups, meaningful action, and healing engagements such as community events and memorials.

Offer and Access Resources Related to Trauma: When we live with extended stress and trauma, it is common to need extended support, in the form of therapy, time off, deep self-care, spiritual and faith communities and friend/family/pet connections. Secondary traumatic stress associated with witnessing the traumatic stories of another person is especially prevalent among educators, medical and mental health professionals.

This is a time for space, grace, and focus on support.

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