

## Prioritizing Scholar Psychological Needs During Challenging Times

### Introduction

Teaching has always been a tough job. Teaching against the backdrop of today's challenges - even tougher and certainly more complex. Now, more than ever, scholars look to their teachers to establish equilibrium and environments of safety. Scholars want to explore the social and political issues that they are living and discuss these thoughts and feelings at school. This short guide seeks to draw attention to easy-to-use strategies that you can implement in the classroom to foster psychology well-being of the scholars in your care.

### Adjusting Classroom Norms in Common Sense Ways During Significant Events

During periods of significant national news, scholars may manifest anxiety and fear through increased off-task behaviors and may have trouble concentrating on current classroom content. They may also desire to talk to friends about their feelings or check their phones for news updates or texts from parents. These are normal responses to stressful circumstances, and we should adjust classroom norms during such times to accommodate the psychological needs of students. For example, if scholars are frequently checking their phones in a high school class because of breaking news, it may be appropriate to pause instruction and say, "It seems like there is some important news happening right now. Why don't we all pause to check-in on the latest headlines and talk about what we are seeing for a few minutes". Make referrals to Social/Behavioral Counselors as needs arise.

### Recognizing Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety and Fear in Children and Adolescents

- On-going feelings of worry and unease
- Restlessness
- Fatigue
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Trouble sleeping
- Panic attacks

### How to Help Scholars Mitigate Fear

Never forget, students take their emotional cues from the adults they are around. Always model positivity, calm and a stable, re-assuring environment. The following tips can help:

1. **Provide Factual Information in a Reassuring Way.** Answer questions honestly while providing re-assurance. It is important that students know they can trust you to tell them the truth about what is going on, while also not causing panic.
2. **Create Routines that Help Scholars Feel Safe.** Structure is important and provides a sense of stability. Spend time practicing classroom routines that reinforce safety.
3. **Make Space to Listen to How Scholars are Feeling.** Make space to ask how your students are feeling and respond. Let them know that your classroom is a safe space to be vulnerable and

talk about feelings. Make it clear that you take this matter seriously and will not tolerate anyone shaming someone else for their feelings.

4. **Look for Signs of Anxiety or Emotional Distress.** Knows the signs and symptoms of mental unwellness (listed above) and make referrals to the Counselor when you see them.
5. **Teach Coping Skills.** Talk to students about ways they can express themselves and regulate their own emotions. It is also okay to share how you as an adult have been successful in this (e.g. reading, having quiet time, meditating, etc.). Practice those SEL skills and use the Uplift 5.
6. **Focus on What is Controllable.** Students take comfort in stability and control. Focus them on projects, assignments and routines that allow them freedom, choice and a sense of control.
7. **Encourage Positive Thinking and Mental Health Practices.**
8. **Encourage Social Interaction Virtually or In-Person While Practicing Social Distancing.** Build talk time and social-distanced group work into the classroom and use virtual classrooms to allow scholars to interact and discuss assignments with one another.
9. **Refer for Professional Help to the Social/Behavioral Counselor at Your School.** Refer to the Social/Behavioral Counselor when you have concerns about a student's mental health or well-being. These professionals are here to help.

### Recognizing Trauma

Some scholars may experience trauma as a result of significant national news events, and feeling unsafe as a result of domestic terror threats. **Trauma** results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. **Acute Trauma** is a serious psychological condition that may require treatment from a licensed mental health professional.

#### Psychological Responses:

Denial, Anger, Fear or Sadness  
Shame  
Confusion and Anxiety  
Depression  
Numbness  
Guilt and Hopelessness  
Irritability  
Difficulty Concentrating

#### Physical Responses:

Headaches  
Body Pains  
Digestive Symptoms  
Fatigue  
Racing Heart  
Sweating  
Feeling Jumpy  
Nightmares

### Use Trauma Informed Teaching Strategies

Check out this [article](#) for easy to implement trauma-informed teaching strategies that you can incorporate into your daily practices.

### Professional Services Available for Scholars

- Social/ Behavioral Counselors are available to meet with scholars virtually and in-person. If you believe a scholar would benefit from talking with a counselor, you can reach out directly to your campus Social/ Behavioral Counselor.
- Social/ Behavioral Counselors will be doing walkthroughs throughout the day and week to assess for scholar support needs.

### Professional Services Available for Staff

- **Informal Check-Ins with an Uplift Licensed Mental Health Professional:**  
If you would like to check in with a member of the Counseling Services team, you can email [counseling@uplifteducation.org](mailto:counseling@uplifteducation.org). Someone from the team will follow up with you to schedule a time to talk.
- **Uplift Education's Employee Assistance Program:**  
Uplift provides access to an Employee Assistance Program which provides a wide array of support services. In particular, you can access on-going counseling services, free of charge. Below is contact information from our EAP site that can be accessed via Uplink. Please [click here](#) if you'd like to learn more. To speak to a ComPsych GuidanceConsultant<sup>SM</sup> for assistance with emotional concerns and/or to obtain a referral to a professional counselor, call 888-628-4824. You can also use the "Ask a Guidance Consultant" feature found in the right-hand column of the homepage for answers to non-emergency emotional health questions.

### Sample Responses to Complex Scholar Questions

You may feel nervous about how to respond to some complex questions from scholars. In general, it is best to allow students to do the talking and for you to serve as a listener. As such, many of the samples responses below are reflexive in nature and intend to guide scholars towards further processing of their thoughts. Additionally, in times of crisis it is imperative that scholars are reassured that they are safe at school.

#### 1. How do I forget what I saw on the news?

You want to forget? Tell me more about that. (Allow scholar to respond.) I can understand why you may feel that way. It's normal to sometimes want to block out and forget difficult and sad emotions... I wonder though, do you think there are any reasons to remember your thoughts and feelings? Let's talk about that... (May also be appropriate to refer to Social Counselor for further discussion)

#### 2. Should I fear for my life?

Do you feel afraid? Tell me more about that. I can understand how and why you might feel afraid, but it is the goal from all of us here at Uplift that you feel very safe at school. It is our number one priority. (Listen to scholar.) If you feel afraid, would you be willing to go and talk to our Social Counselor about your feelings? They are a great resource on campus to help you sort through these emotions.

**3. I saw violence on TV. What is our school doing to make sure that violence doesn't happen here? Am I safe?**

Do you feel unsafe? (Listen to scholar, then reassure.) Your safety is our number one priority. Uplift Education does lots of things to make sure that our students are safe each and every day. For example, we conduct criminal background checks of all people who enter our building and require them to produce a valid photo ID.... We also keep all building doors locked except for during passing times as an added safety measure. As a staff, we conduct drills several times during the year so that we know exactly how to respond in any sort of situation that might occur.

**4. Why are we talking about this/ watching the news?**

Why do you think we should talk about this? (If in a group setting: What does the group think? Any thoughts on why this topic is important to discuss?) .... Let's talk about it...

**Additional Discussion Guide Resources to Support Scholars:**

- [Talking to Kids about the Attack on the Capitol](#)
- [What to Say to Kids When the News is Scary](#)
- [When Bad Things are Happening](#)

**Positive Mental Health Practices**

- [How to Look After Your Mental Health](#)
- [Building Better Mental Health](#)