



Coronavirus: Adapting to changes

Educators play a significant role in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing in a changing learning environment.

It can be difficult to know what to prioritise when trying to adapt to multiple changes. Mental health underpins a learning community's ability to be resilient and continue to learn during change.

Educators play an important role in supporting students' social and emotional wellbeing and can encourage them to seek support from wellbeing professionals if needed.

This resource provides educators with practical guidance on how to:

- simplify things within your control
- focus on social and emotional learning
- try to be positive
- talk through challenges
- notice when a student is struggling
- follow-up with disengaged students
- acknowledge your boundaries.

It also provides schools with practical guidance on how to:

- make wellbeing services visible
- strengthen relationships with families
- prioritise mental health and wellbeing.

Educators

Simplify the things within your control

During a time when your learning community may need to adapt to significant change, think about the things you can control and try and simplify them.

Try not to put too much pressure on yourself, your students or others around you.

Break tasks down into manageable chunks and give as much notice as possible about transitions and changes to routines and environments.

Communicate regularly and openly with students about changes to reduce concern and uncertainty.

Focus on social and emotional learning

Work with leadership to make sure each student has an ongoing relationship with a teacher.

Invite students to reflect on what they're finding challenging and what they're enjoying about the changes.

Celebrate what's going well, share bewilderment and listen to students' feelings.

Be You has a range of online [fact sheets](#) and [Professional Learning](#) modules for educators to help them support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Try to be positive

While you may be surrounded by many challenges, try to focus on strengths and build on them. A positive frame of mind will not only put you in a better position to adapt to these challenges, it will also support you to recognise and encourage students' strengths. It's important for students' mental health and wellbeing that they feel good at something.

Talk through challenges

During times of change, it's normal to have more conversations that become emotional. When talking with students, families or colleagues, allow them to express their feelings, which can put them in a better position to think clearly.

Validate their feelings by saying, "I think I'm hearing that you are feeling...". You don't need to accept responsibility for these feelings. It's important for your own wellbeing that you don't take emotional conversations personally, so debrief afterwards with a trusted colleague, family member or friend.

Be overt about areas of uncertainty or continuing concern, so the person feels like it's not just them feeling confused.

Listen to understand, not judge or blame. Double check you have understood what their issues are.

Try and focus the conversation on small things – within your and the other person's power – that you can do in the short-term that may improve things.

Follow-up with a written communication after important conversations, to double-check you understand what the issues are and confirm agreed decisions and actions. Building this line of communication helps build trust and provides a record of the discussion.

Notice when a student is struggling

The challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic put students more at risk of developing anxiety and depression. For example, they may be worrying about their family and their academic performance, while coping with the loss of social interaction due to isolation.

When talking with students, try and understand their level of wellbeing and support structures by listening for:

- Confidence and general attitude. Are they finding positive ways of coping with the situation? Are

their eating and sleeping patterns being affected? Are they exercising?

- Supportive relationships in their home. What is day-to-day life like for them? How much time are their parents or carers able to spend with them? What are relationships like with siblings?
- Supportive relationships outside of the home. Are they in contact with friends? Are they pursuing interests?

If the student is having trouble communicating, talk initially with their family to get a better sense of what the home environment is like and how the student is doing.

Early signs of stress, anxiety or depression may include:

- changes in education participation
- more distracted in lessons
- renewed or increased fear of cyber bullying
- more angry outbursts or meltdowns than usual
- withdrawn from situations and previous social connections or activities (beyond the constraints of the coronavirus restrictions)
- expressions of disconnection and futility, such as saying things like, "What's the point", in conversation, classes or work submissions.

For more information on [stress](#) and [mental health conditions](#), visit the Be You website.

Follow up with disengaged students

In a supportive but persistent way, contact students whose engagement in learning is causing you concern.

Here are some suggestions for developing a line of communication with disengaged students:

- Start by setting up an agreed line of communication between yourself and the student. If possible, be clear about when you will connect, for how long and how often.
- If the student is not attending school in person, build up to a deep connection. For example, start with an email or online message, then suggest a phone call when the student seems to feel more comfortable, then work up to a video conference or face-to-face meeting.
- If the student is struggling to communicate and feels comfortable with parent or carer support, organise a video conference with them both.

- Use visual resources such as feelings charts and strength cards to help students build insight and the skills to talk about, and manage, their feelings.

Make sure you know how to draw on the expertise of your school's wellbeing and leadership team, who can help you consider the resources at your disposal and develop a plan to support the student.

Acknowledge your boundaries

As a significant adult in the lives of your students, it's helpful to listen to them and encourage them to get support from wellbeing professionals.

Educators aren't responsible for diagnosing a mental health issue. If someone brings up a topic you don't feel comfortable discussing, acknowledge that you aren't the right person to be talking to about the topic and refer them to the appropriate person.

If you're unsure who to refer students to when they need additional wellbeing support, ask your wellbeing or leadership team.

Schools

Make wellbeing services visible

Promote both the wellbeing support offered within your school and details of external services to staff, students and families. Normalise help-seeking behaviour and mental health issues in communications to your learning community.

Ensure staff are aware of wellbeing policies, and when and how to use the expertise of the wellbeing and leadership teams.

Wellbeing team members will have the best insight into which students and families might be particularly vulnerable or at risk. It's important to follow up with these students individually so they know the wellbeing team is available to support them.

Develop plans with these students to anticipate potential triggers and stressors as they try to cope with change, and to lay out strategies for managing these scenarios. For more information visit the [headspace](#) and [ReachOut](#) websites.

Strengthen relationships with families

Finding ways to work effectively with families is an important part of supporting students through a changing environment.

- Create a culture of kindness within the school. Share and celebrate positive developments.

- Encourage all families to highlight any issues with educators early so they can help, rather than waiting until crisis point.

- Explain the signs of common mental health issues to families so they know what to look out for. Explain how the wellbeing team will be offering support.

- Make it clear to families that educators aren't mental health professionals but are there to provide general wellbeing support for students.

- Share the details of support services with all families, including [headspace](#), [ReachOut](#), [Kids Helpline](#), [Lifeline](#), [Raising Children](#), [1800RESPECT](#), [Mensline](#) and Beyond Blue's [Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#).

One way to create a forum with families when in-person meetings aren't an option is a family survey with two questions: 'What is helping you manage during these times?' and 'What can we do to help?'. Just make sure you have the resources to analyse, and report on, the responses.

Compile themes from responses, which will help shape the school's family communication plan. Consider highlighting these themes in a communication back to families and include relevant support information.

For one-on-one conversations with families, negotiate a communication channel that works for them and you. They may not be comfortable with a communications channel due to poor reading or technical literacy, or because they can't use the channel without being overheard and therefore can't talk freely.

Prioritise mental health and wellbeing

To support your school through the current changes and the recovery process that will follow the pandemic, consider how you can take a whole learning community approach to social and emotional wellbeing.

Be You has tools and resources that can guide and support you through this process. To access these tools, you'll have to register as a [Be You Learning Community](#). A Be You Consultant can guide you through the process.

You can attend an online [National Check-In event](#) or fill in the [contact us](#) form on the Be You website to talk to a Consultant.

Wellbeing support for educators is available at Beyond Blue's [Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#).