

# Student mental health during and after COVID-19: How can schools identify youth who need support?

How teachers can use existing processes in schools to identify students who may need extra support—especially regarding anxiety and depression, which can often go undetected even under the best of circumstances.

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In the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic, schools have confronted unprecedented challenges as they moved to quickly shift classes to an online format, provide equitable access for all students, support teachers' and students' educational needs, and make plans amidst great uncertainty. The pandemic itself has caused much worry, stress, and grief. These stressors can cause mental health challenges for anyone and can cause acute symptoms to appear for people who may experience preexisting mental health challenges.

Some of the typical indicators teachers may use to identify students experiencing mental health difficulties may not be available. Some teachers may not be meeting with students in person. Some teachers may not have the same student drop-ins. Some teachers may not be able to read students' masked faces. As such, teachers may wonder how students are doing or the degree to which they are struggling, particularly with respect to emotional problems.

Here we address how teachers can use existing processes in schools to identify students who may need extra support—especially regarding anxiety and depression, which can often go undetected even under the best of circumstances.

## Universal screening to identify students in need

An established method to identify students who may have difficulties with anxiety or depression is through systematic screening of the school population. For elementary school students, screening involves teachers and students completing brief questionnaires regarding students' emotions and classroom behaviors. At the middle and high school levels, screening primarily relies on student questionnaires regarding the frequency or severity of any emotional concerns.

Teachers also may be asked to nominate students who appear to be excessively anxious or frequently sad. Students can complete questionnaires using paper-and-pencil surveys or, more appropriately for online instruction phases, through online, secure questionnaires. School mental health professionals (e.g., counselors, school psychologists) use scores on these questionnaires to identify students who appear at risk for anxiety or depression difficulties. Sometimes, these at-risk students are asked to complete the questionnaire again a few weeks later to determine whether their mental health challenges are enduring.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 15 to 20% of students could be expected to be identified as needing support through screening (Dowdy et al., 2015); this percentage will almost certainly be higher given the potential emotional fallout of the pandemic.

## Different roles of school professionals

School-based mental health professionals can provide direct support to students who are potentially at risk for emotional issues by helping to implement systematic screenings. While each school-based helping profession's ultimate goal is to facilitate the optimal development of each child, there is a differentiation in roles that each specialist takes.

For instance, within the screening process teachers are the professionals who are the most knowledgeable about students' general behaviors because they have the most contact with students daily. As a result, observant teachers may be able to detect subtle changes in children's daily mood, habits, and school-based practices.

In order to take a closer look at teachers' concerns regarding problem behavior, a second professional (i.e., school psychologist) typically administers rating scales such as the Behavioral Assessment System for Children-Third Edition (BASC-3) or the Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (BESS). School psychologists administer scales such as these to multiple informants such as parents, teachers, and students themselves to provide a global view of a child's functioning. Students that the school psychologist identifies as at-risk are typically referred to the school counselor.

Within this tiered screening process, school counselors may decide to implement another round of screening before intervention implementation by administering a more specified rating scale in an area identified as at-risk (Erickson & Abel, 2013). For instance, if a student was identified as being at-risk for attention problems, the school counselor could administer the ADHD Rating Scale-5 which can help to accurately identify students who meet the DSM-V criteria for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; DuPaul et al., 2016).

## Screening process case study

Michael makes every effort to reach out to his students with recent disruptions in face-to-face school instruction. Most students respond to check-ins and complete academic work at an expected level, but Sarah has not responded to communication and frequently fails to complete assigned work.

Michael first reaches out to other teachers who work with Sarah and determines through this network that Sarah shows similar behavior with other teachers. The team confirms that technology is not a barrier and fails to find any evidence of environmental concerns that would prevent her from connecting. Concerned about potential mental health distress, Michael contacts the school psychologist to inquire about screening. Michael's school was already planning on administering a universal screening tool for all students the following week.

As a result of this screening, the school psychologist found that Sarah needed some additional supports and connected her with the appropriate school and community mental health resources. If results of the screening had not indicated specific mental health concerns, a school-based team would probe further to identify other factors that are preventing Sarah from finding success.

## Screening is one part of the prevention and support process. What happens after identification?

Once students are identified as being at-risk for emotional difficulties, it is important for the school to have a plan of action to connect youth to effective support services. Ideally, this would involve in-school individual or group counseling as part of a multi-tiered system of support (Eagle et al., 2015). Alternatively, students could be referred to community agencies that treat youth with mental health disorders. Some school districts contract with community agencies to provide mental health support in the school setting.

Given the many mental health challenges that students may experience during and after the pandemic, it is important for educators to (a) assist in identifying at-risk students through systematic screening; (b) advocate for universal screening of the school population during and following online learning phases; and (c) increase awareness of the importance of mental health screening with their teacher colleagues as well as school administrators and parents.

## References

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