

## TACTICS TO REDUCE STRESS AND INCREASE LEARNING AFTER TRAUMA

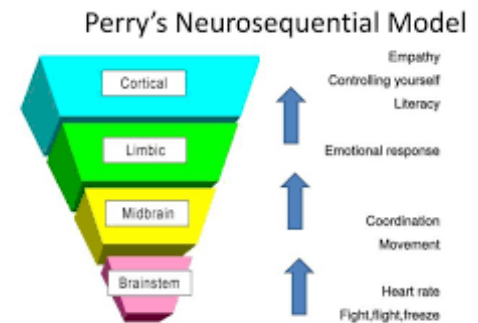
If you are an educator who will be addressing student learning loss from Covid-19 closures and disruptions, you will need to address the trauma everyone has experienced in some form, both from the pandemic and the traumatic effects of racism that were highlighted during shutdown protests. Neurobiological research shows that academic gains are hampered unless adults address students’ trauma-related social, emotional, and behavioral issues—not just once, but repeatedly, as needed.

**To address your students’ trauma, you as an educator must take care of yourself**—research shows the positive impact this has—and you will benefit from your principal’s support. This page provides tactics you and your school can use to support yourself and other teachers, followed by tactics for helping students.

**To care for and prepare themselves, teachers and schools should:**

**1. Learn the basics of Neurosequential Model of Education:**

When a person is experiencing trauma, the brain responds by directing all systems into a flight, fight, or freeze response. In these states, it is very difficult to control one’s emotions or learn new material. Therefore, it becomes critical to reduce the level of physical and emotional arousal in yourself and your students and to maintain calm environments in which students can absorb new material.



Perry, B.D. (2002). Brain Structure and Function I: Basics of Organization. Adapted in part from "Maltreated Children: Experience, Brain Development and the Next Generation" (W.W. Norton & Company).

2. **Understand your secondary traumatic stress:** Familiarize yourself with the **warning signs of secondary traumatic stress** and regularly complete short **self-assessments** to determine when to spend more time on your own mental health. Take steps to find support and relaxation when needed.
3. **Create a peer support network:** To support students more effectively, consider forming support groups for educators within your school to help reduce staff stress responses. Administrators or multi-classroom leaders (or other teacher-leaders) can facilitate regular check-in meetings with small groups of colleagues during which staff can honestly and safely share challenges and successes. This will help normalize feelings and build group cohesion. Opportunity Culture schools can use regular multi-classroom leader team meetings, which should always include emotional checks. During these check-in meetings, practice interventions that can be used to regulate one’s physiological response to trauma (see item 5 below). See [page 3](#) for simple guidance on facilitating these discussions. Be sure to close on a positive note, to avoid doing more harm than good.
4. **Create a schoolwide rapid-response support system:** Acknowledging that educators and support staff may find themselves overwhelmed at unexpected times, whether from their own emotions or the secondary traumatic stress of supporting students, work with your administrators to create a system that allows teachers and staff to take a quick break when needed before returning to their students. One example is **Tap in/Tap out**, where a group of staff with complementary schedules creates a text chain to use when additional support is needed during a class.
5. **Learn techniques such as deep breathing exercises:** Peer support groups should practice **short deep breathing techniques** to experience the benefits themselves and learn how to lead these exercises with their students. Schools should provide team leaders with instructions and reminders to practice these at regular intervals throughout the day as well as when confronted with stressors.

**To help students, teacher should:**

6. **Build relationships through morning meetings, individual check-ins, small groups, and other means:** A relationship with a supportive, trusted adult has been shown to significantly boost resiliency in children who have experienced trauma. Successful teachers have long known that strong relationships with students lead to increased academic growth. Relationship-building is even more crucial when some or all students or teachers are at home, and all these tips can be done online as well as in person. Try [class morning meetings](#), individual check-ins, small groups (see tips for check-ins and small groups [on page 4](#)), and [dialogue journals](#). For more ideas on building warm, personal connections, see [Tips for Building Relationships During Remote Learning](#).
7. **Guide students to learn and practice calming deep breathing:** Take a minute or two at the beginning of the day and/or each class to lead a [short breathing exercise](#), to help regulate students' systems and set the tone for a more focused learning time.
8. **Provide time for calming rhythmic activities:** For students who are experiencing heightened anxiety, rhythmic activities such as walking, running, singing, drumming, tapping, clapping, and dancing can provide significant relief. Building in short rhythmic activities throughout the day can help lessen students' levels of anxiety, allowing them to then focus on learning. (Some of these activities are easily led remotely, without the need to follow social distancing requirements; in-person teachers may need to adjust their approaches or timing.)
9. **Help students practice gratitude:** Research shows that feeling and expressing gratitude can help students in many ways, including increasing achievement, boosting their resilience, and improving their relationships. There are many ways to practice [gratitude within the school setting](#), but an easy place to start is to have students keep a journal in which they write up to five things for which they are grateful each day (for younger grades, this may be just telling one thing). This simple practice can settle the mind and eventually help students look for positive moments in the day.
10. **Identify equitable ways to give students grace while holding them to expectations:** Plan when and how you will give students extra time to meet deadlines; help students stay on track by, for example, given them multitiered deadlines.
11. **Plan responses for Covid-specific behavioral issues:** Teachers should prepare to manage potentially complicated and awkward interpersonal situations related to Covid-19. For example, what is the appropriate response when a child coughs or sneezes? How might one handle another student who reacts to the cough by finger-pointing and accusing the child of being infectious? What discussions are appropriate and effective if issues of cultural shaming arise (for example, blaming specific students for spreading the virus)? What happens if a conflict arises regarding differing levels of compliance with mask-wearing and social distancing outside of school? These questions can be discussed among colleagues before school begins so that teachers feel prepared to positively manage difficult interactions, consistently. See [Classroom Tips for Responding to Hateful, Offensive, or Aggressive Language](#) for a framework for responding to these issues.
12. **Involve parents and students in creating a plan to respond to collective trauma:** Very few people have escaped feeling the negative consequences of the global pandemic, yet each person's experience and needs have looked different. During remote learning, educators can use their regular check-ins with students and parents to learn about their needs. In addition, consider conducting brief, regular class surveys to highlight common concerns, to determine appropriate responses to current and changing needs; encourage your school and district to do the same.

## APPENDIX

### Guiding Questions and Structure for Peer Support Groups

- Form consistent groups of peers and set regular meeting times. For example, use part of your regular multi-classroom leader team’s weekly meetings.
- Designate a facilitator for each meeting. The facilitator role may rotate for each meeting, or one person who demonstrates interest or has the particular skills can be designated as the permanent facilitator. As a default, the multi-classroom leader can facilitate.
- In the first meeting, discuss the purpose of the group (for example, to support one another personally and professionally) and decide on simple ground rules (such as confidentiality, positive regard, active participation in giving and receiving support, and leaving time for others to talk).
- Based on the time available for the meeting, determine how long participants each have to explain their challenge or triumph and receive constructive feedback. The facilitator should monitor time in a warm, but firm way to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to share.
- Ask each member to share a particular challenge and a recent joy/“silver lining,” if any (personal, professional, or both). Each member who is sharing a challenge may indicate the type of support that might feel helpful and/or ask other members to share ideas that have been helpful in similar situations; the facilitator may prompt others to share ideas, too. The focus should be on affirming how reasonable it is to feel challenges at this time, and, where possible, on emerging with constructive solutions, including how group members can help one another outside of the group.
- If the group begins to feel too negative or complaint-oriented—without pivoting to affirmations, support, and solutions—the facilitator should gently guide the conversation in a positive direction by affirming the individual’s feelings, asking if the team has further thoughts, or closing the group by having members share a recent joy or something for which each is grateful. The goal is for participants to leave feeling lighter for having shared and received non-judgmental support, while also feeling encouraged to continue making progress.

## Questions to Lead Check-Ins and Small Groups

Beyond beginning with asking students how they are, teachers can use more structured, guiding questions to give students a safe space to share their feelings and concerns. Questions for individual and small-group conversations may be the same, but responses in small groups may be more general, expressing that you heard them but suggesting you may talk more (privately) later in the day. Use active listening and affirming statements in these conversations: “What I hear you saying is...”

- To help students share their feelings, try using “scale” questions: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how happy/sad/bored are you feeling?” or “Are you feeling a little worried, somewhat worried, or very worried?”
- Follow up with “Can you tell me more about why you feel that way?”
- Facilitate peer support: “What strategies are you using to help manage your stress/feel better?”
- Ask: “How can I help you learn during this difficult time?”

## Dialogue Journal Prompts

- What is something that you are proud of?
- Describe a time when you tried something that you thought would be hard. How did it go?
- Whom do you admire and why? The person can be fictional, in your family, someone you have never met, or a friend.
- What are you struggling with that you think I should know about?
- What do you wish you knew more about?
- What do you wish you could change?
- Describe what was happening during a recent time when you laughed.
- What three wishes would you make if you found a genie in a bottle?
- What is a compliment that you have been given recently? How did it make you feel?
- What is your favorite place to go? What do you like to do there?