

7 Tips for Educators Returning to School During COVID-19



As COVID-19 restrictions begin to ease, students and educators are preparing for a return to schools. Whether returning in June or in September, the transition back will likely be anxiety-provoking for many students given the extended time away and the uncertainty related to the pandemic.

School staff will need to support students in the transition back to the classroom, and at the same time manage their own transition and anxiety.

This article provides suggestions for school staff on how to support this transition, particularly for anxious youth.

1. Provide clear information to families as early as possible

Anxiety thrives on uncertainty and the COVID-19 pandemic is filled with it. While tolerating uncertainty will be required for families to some extent, communicate frequently and clearly with families about what is planned for returning to school can ease the transition. Important information for families may include:

- Changes made at schools
- Specific expectations for families
- Upcoming plans
- Long-term plans.

Even if plans change, regular communication with families will support their own planning and coping.

2. Validate, listen, and be supportive to students

The recent events will likely have had substantial impacts on students and they may be experiencing a host of emotions in regard to their return, including anxiety, disappointment, and anger.

As educators it will be important to listen to students' concerns and, even if the emotions are extreme, **express understanding and empathy**. Letting families know you understand and appreciate their perspective will help open up a dialogue for problem solving.

3. Be honest and encouraging, rather than reassuring

Anxious students will likely need some initial assurance from trusted adults that returning to school is okay. However, blanket reassurance statements (e.g., everything will be fine; there is nothing to be worried about) can be invalidating and can create doubt and uncertainty that may drive a need for further reassurance (e.g., child constantly asks if things are okay).

Instead, being open, honest, and encouraging with students is a preferred approach. This may include acknowledging risks while emphasizing how precautions reduce those risks and how students can feel good about coming back to school given all of the thought and planning that has gone into protecting students.

If students continue to [seek reassurance](#), staff can encourage tolerance of uncertainty and teach students to use [realistic thinking skills](#) or [learn to problem-solve](#) and come up with solutions to their own concerns where possible – “What can you do here to calm yourself down?” or “What options do we have here instead of just avoiding?”

Identify the problem, identify possible solutions, pick a solution and try it out! Don’t let anxiety win.

4. Encourage a gradual approach, not avoidance

No amount of planning will prevent youth from being anxious. Therefore, encouraging tolerance of fear and anxiety, rather than avoidance, will be essential. Fear naturally encourages a desire to run away, but this avoidance maintains anxiety in the long-run. In contrast, facing feared situations promotes resilience and reduces anxiety in the long-run by helping youth realize they are capable of coping.

While being understanding and validating of anxiety, school staff should encourage and reinforce families in making attempts to face fears around returning to school. If significant anxiety prevents a direct transition back, establishing a plan for gradual re-entry to school may be necessary. For example, an anxious youth may initially practice visiting the school on weekends before working towards partial attendance (e.g., specific hours, days, or classes) and then full attendance.

For more detailed information on facing fears gradually:

- Check out [Facing Fears](#) on the Anxiety Canada website
- Start a [My Anxiety Plan \(MAP\)](#)
- Use the Facing Fears tool in the free [MindShift CBT mobile app](#)

5. Praise and reward students for being courageous

As students are returning to schools, praise them for showing courage in the face of fear and let them know that being brave and courageous will help them (and you and your fellow staff) get through this together.

When you see a student or fellow staff member do something that you know is hard for them or anxiety provoking, let them know you've noticed it and are proud of them for facing their fears courageously.

6. Model good coping behaviors for students – calm, honest, and caring

Students will look to staff to be positive role models through this process. How you handle your fears, your own stress, and how you act throughout the day will impact how children assess their own situations and react.

Letting students know your experiences with anxiety and uncertainty, as well as your coping strategies, can make them feel less alone and can provide them with a guide for how to handle the situation themselves.

In most cases it is appropriate to be open and honest with students in a developmentally appropriate way if they ask tough questions about the future. That may mean:

- Helping them understand that future school closures may be a possibility
- Acknowledging that their friends (or teachers) **may** become ill with COVID-19
- Being frank about other stressful situations that may occur during the upcoming school year that we haven't yet predicted.

We can let students know these situations can be upsetting to think about, but that we can try to take things one day at a time and enjoy the current day rather than worry about what the future holds - especially when that [future can be somewhat uncertain](#).

These are challenging discussions that aren't easy for anyone, but helping youth develop an ability to be 'comfortable being uncomfortable' may help them cope with future issues like this one.

7. Take care of yourself and know your limits

Our capacity to support others is limited by our own physical and mental well-being. Remember that being a teacher or school-based professional is tough and you may be struggling to keep yourself healthy throughout all of this.

Ensure you are showing yourself compassion as well as others – you may need an extra break or two in your day to regroup given all these changes. In preparing to support students, school staff should ensure they make time to take care of themselves through:

- Maintenance of healthy living (sleep, exercise, nutrition)
- Engaging in self-care
- Communicating with professional and personal support networks.

If challenges to cope with these changes and demands have led to substantial mental health problems for yourself, a fellow staff member, or a student, it may be time to solicit professional help rather than trying to manage it all on your own.

Thanks to Scientific Advisory Committee members [Lynn Miller](#), [Robert Selles](#), and [Daniel Chorney](#), and [Melanie Badali](#), Board Director, for creating this resource.

For more COVID-19 related information, check out Anxiety Canada's [COVID-19 resource page](#).