



Guidelines for Teachers

Listen, Protect, Connect, Model & Teach

Introduction

This guide has been developed to enable you, to talk, in a comforting and supportive way, with students who may need the support of the Student Support Team at this time.

This guide includes identifying signs of stress in students. It will allow you to give immediate support to distressed students by using a **Listen, Protect, Connect, Model & Teach** approach and signposting additional supports for students when needed. As a member of the school Student Support Team or equivalent structure such as Care Team or Pastoral Care Team, you are in a unique position to help your students, as best practice indicates that students need to be supported by people they know and trust. Just as you help connect students with appropriate academic and pastoral care services under normal circumstances, you are well placed to help these students return to school, continue to learn and complete school tasks. The provision of such support is already familiar to many teachers. It operates within the normal teacher-student relationship and does not require specialist skills. This support may be provided virtually (e.g. via email, video call, phone call) or face-to-face depending on the students individual needs.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a useful model to draw on to build resilience. As a first step we need to address basic needs. People are not resilient until they feel safe. It is important to connect people to their support systems, as people who are connected to other people recover better.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



When providing support to students, it is extremely important to be mindful of your own self-care. It is therefore essential that you:

- Pace yourself
- Look after your basic needs: eat well, sleep well and remain physically active
- Recognise your own stress
- Be aware of the boundaries to the support you can offer and of your own professional competencies and remember to signpost to other services if appropriate
- Connect with others for support
- See **Staff Wellbeing and Self-Care** for more information on teacher wellbeing and self-care

Delivering support remotely

If working remotely consider the following:

- Choose the most appropriate channel of communication (e.g. via email, video call, phone call), making sure it is safe, secure and easy to use
- Decide where you will provide the support to students. Choose a space that allows for the safety and privacy of both you and the student
- Decide what times you will be available
- Decide how to share information with students
- Have an up to date emergency contact list and list of appropriate referral agencies and services available.
- Review your knowledge of current procedures for when and how to refer students to other support services if needed
- Have a digital copy of the list of agencies and psychoeducational materials that can be forwarded to the student
- It is important to ensure that you are comfortable in your own professional capacity to support students in this way, understand your limits and know how to refer students on and know how and where to get support for yourself.
- Maintain regular contact with your colleagues to share information and support each other. It is also important to maintain and access your own professional supervision and/or link in with colleagues to access support.
- Remember while offering support without visual contact, it is important to speak slowly, clearly and calmly and to communicate with empathy and warmth through using the voice in a way that shows care.
- Listen attentively and demonstrate this listening by using affirmative sounds.



The LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH Approach¹

People have an inbuilt capacity to adapt. This is what is at the heart of resilience. Most people will weather the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought, and emerge stronger and with new skills. Most of our students will respond well to information and practical advice on new ways of managing, and staying active and connected. Others may experience increased levels of stress at this time and will struggle to adapt for a variety of reasons. These students will need greater levels of practical and social support to make the adjustments needed to stay well. Stressful times can impact on students' sense of safety and result in feelings of loss of power and control. As their teacher/guidance counsellor you have an opportunity to promote a sense of calm, hope and support to your students.

It is important to remember that not all individuals will be in need of additional support. Expect resilience, but be on the lookout for those who appear to be struggling.

During this time, changes can happen in students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Your students may be worried and anxious about the uncertainty that Covid-19 has brought to many aspects of our lives. They may worry about family members who are ill or have experienced job loss or they may have suffered a bereavement. Faced with this degree of change and uncertainty, it is normal to feel shocked, anxious, confused, and concerned. Common reactions to such situations include trouble sleeping, trouble concentrating and listening, and not finishing work. Your students may become more irritable, sad, angry, or worried as they think about what has happened and the uncertainty ahead. See *Managing Stress and Anxiety - A Guide for School Staff*. When students share their experiences, thoughts and feelings about the event, be alert to risk factors for adverse reactions. Risk factors may include:

- Challenging family circumstances
- Experience of recent bereavement
- Living in poverty or in communities experiencing disadvantage
- Pre-existing mental health difficulties
- Learning difficulties
- Perfectionist tendencies

It is normal for people to sometimes feel distressed due to COVID-19. However, if a student is experiencing ongoing, overwhelming distress, or they are struggling to function in their daily lives you may wish to consider signposting them (and their parents) to the appropriate professional services. For more information on HSE support services see [here](#) or contact your NEPS psychologist for support and advice if required.

¹ Adapted by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for Irish schools from Psychological First Aid materials developed by the American Red Cross (2014); International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2020); National Child Traumatic Stress Network National Centre for PTSD; Adams Psychology Services.



1. LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH

The first step is to listen and pay attention to what students are saying. Your students may also show their feelings in non-verbal ways, such as having difficulties managing their emotions and staying regulated. Let your students know you are willing to listen and talk about what is happening, and/or to help them access other support services if needed. (See Questions/Suggestions for Talking and Listening with your students at the end of this document).

- Listen for clues that indicate when students are having a hard time. Write down a few examples that may be helpful to note. Listen to the student's emotional and practical needs. If the student is worried, ask what they are worried about.
- If a student is particularly stressed, worried or anxious, reassure them that it is normal to have such feelings during a crisis like this.
- What might be preventing the student from doing school work?
- What might be preventing the student from completing school assignments?

Listen, observe and note any changes in:

- Behaviour and/or mood
- School performance/engagement with online tasks, lessons or resources
- Behaviours at home that parents/guardians discuss with you.

LISTEN, 2. PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH

Despite the current challenges, it is important that students understand that the school is looking after their wellbeing. You can provide comfort, increase a sense of safety and support your students to feel better by doing some or all of the following:

- Communicate with students regularly. Answer questions simply and honestly, clearing up any confusion students may have about the current situation. Let your students know that they are not alone in their reactions.
- Talk to your students about what is being done by the school and community to help them to stay safe, continue teaching and learning and prepare for their exams.
- Promote the importance of self-care including eating well, getting enough sleep, daily exercise and engaging in enjoyable activities.
- Be sensitive to students' current level of functioning and try to be flexible to their needs in order to alleviate any additional stress they may be experiencing.
- Encourage students to limit access to the media. Remind them that some reports may not be accurate and identify where they can get reliable and up-to-date information.
- List other things you do that help your students feel better. Sharing this list with other teachers may increase ideas to help your students.



LISTEN, PROTECT, 3. CONNECT, MODEL & TEACH

Reaching out to people in your school and community will help your students to cope. Social support is key to an individual's ability to be resilient in challenging times so create new ways to connect with students. These connections will build strength for everyone. Consider ways to make some or all of the following connections:

- Prioritise relationships. If students have regular opportunities to connect with people or have opportunities for social support they will feel more regulated.
- If required 'Check in' with students again face to face or if needed using technology.
- Find resources that can be supportive to your students.
- Build on your students' strengths by encouraging them to draw on what they have learnt in the past to help them cope with the current situation.
- Remind your students that Covid 19 and public health measures is unprecedented and that schools are doing the best they can to support students in this time of uncertainty.

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, 4. MODEL & TEACH

As you help your students, your efforts may be more successful if you keep in mind:

- Your own thoughts, feelings and reactions insofar as these may affect your students.
- How you cope and behave will influence how your students cope and behave. Your students will be observing you for both verbal and non-verbal cues.
- Acknowledge the difficulty that the current situation has brought to schools, but demonstrate how people can come together to cope during times of crisis and change.

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT, MODEL & 5. TEACH

Talk to your students about expected reactions in this current situation (emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physiological). These are normal reactions to abnormal events.

See *Normalising Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours - A Guide for Staff*.

- Different people may have very different reactions, even within the same family.
- People may need different amounts of time to cope and adjust.
- Encourage your students to identify and use positive coping strategies to help them to deal with this situation. See *Self-Regulation for Students – A Guide for Staff*.
- Help your student's problem-solve to get through each day successfully.
- Encourage students to think about ways they can help others.
- Remind students that, with time and assistance, they will get through this but if they continue to feel distressed and overwhelmed, to let a parent or teacher know.

Ending the conversation:

- Summarise the conversation by highlighting key issues discussed and action points.
- Agree if a follow up conversation is needed, and if so, find a suitable time.

If there is a need to signpost or refer on please see the list of services [here](#). (Subject teachers may wish to link with the schools guidance counsellor for support and advice regarding referrals to mental health services).

Questions and suggestions for talking and listening to students



Key considerations for teachers/guidance counsellors:

- How am I building and maintaining rapport?
- Am I listening?
- What is it like for this student at the moment?
- Am I on the same page as this student?
- Do I understand what his/ her concerns are?
- Am I communicating that understanding to the student?
- What more can I do to try to get on the same page?

Opening conversation:

- Introduce yourself if student is new to you.
- How may I help you?
- What are the most important things I can help you with?

Listening and showing empathy:

- Tell me about what is worrying you....
- I am hearing that you are worried about ...
- I understand your concerns - a lot of students feel that way.
- It is very normal to be sad, angry, upset, worried, frustrated....
- I hear what you are saying about....
- I fully understand why you are feeling like this...
- In this situation, your reactions are normal.
- Maybe we can discuss some things we can do to help...
- It is a difficult situation, and I do understand it is very challenging. Let's discuss if there is anything you can do to make the situation more tolerable.
- Would it be helpful to discuss possible solutions?
- The things we are doing to support you and your classmates are...
- I wonder if it is any help to you to know that these feelings are natural for many in the present situation. It can be overwhelming, so maybe we can talk about how to manage the feelings. The first step is to acknowledge the feelings as you rightly do, the next to ensure they don't take up too much time or space in your life. Should we maybe talk more on this?



- It can help to have one or two daily worry times, for example half an hour in the afternoon. If worrying thoughts occur during other times of the day and night, ask them to come back later, or tell themselves that they will take care of them during the worry time. This will give them time to take care of what else they have to do.
- It is a difficult situation, and I do understand it's very challenging. Let's discuss if there is anything, you can do to make the situation more tolerable.
- I am concerned about you and would like to suggest I refer you to someone who can help.

Reflective comments:

- From what you're saying, I can see how you would be ...
- It sounds as if you're saying ...
- It seems that you are ...

Clarifying comments

- Tell me if I'm wrong, but it sounds as if you ...
- Am I right when I say that you ...

Supportive comments:

- No wonder you feel ...
- It sounds really hard ... I'm really sorry this is such a tough time for you.
- It sounds as if you're being hard on yourself.
- We can talk more tomorrow if you'd like.

Empowering comments & questions:

- What have you done in the past to help feel better when things got difficult?
- What do you think would help you to feel better?
- I have an information sheet with some ideas about how to deal with difficult situations. Maybe there's an idea or two here that might be helpful for you.
- People can be very different in what helps them feel better. When things get difficult for me, it helps if I ... Could something like that work for you?



Dos and Don'ts when offering support	
Do	Don't
✓ Listen more than you speak to identify concerns	✗ Pressure person to speak if they do not want to speak
✓ Ask gently probing questions	✗ Be judgemental
✓ Use open questions: when, where, what, who?	✗ Use technical terminology
✓ Acknowledge feelings and understanding of events	✗ Talk about yourself or personal issues or troubles
✓ Normalise emotions and reactions	✗ Give false promises or false assurances
✓ Recognise internal resources and capacity to cope	✗ Share someone else's story or experiences.
✓ Be patient and calm	✗ Exploit the trust and confidentiality shared
✓ Allow processing and ventilation of emotions	✗ Use technical terminology
✓ Provide information about Covid-19. Be honest about what you don't know.	
✓ Listen for students' options and help them make the choices. Ensure confidentiality unless issues mentioned affect the safety of the individual or others	
✓ Ensure the 'Do no harm' principle is upheld.	