

Student Mental Health in a Remote Environment

Teaching Remotely: Shared Experiences

Summary of virtual panel event held on September 3rd, 2020
[\[Link to video\]](#)



Recall your own experience as a university student. Remember your excitement to embark on a journey to meet new people and learn new things. The possibilities of travelling to new places and experiencing independence for the first time. Now imagine for a moment that those plans were suddenly cancelled. Your excitement turns to mounting anxiety as you find out that your learning will be done online and your relationships will be built through a screen. Instead of exploring campus, you're asked to stay home to be safe. And instead of feeling independent, you start to feel alone and isolated. The overall student experience is dramatically different in a remote environment and student mental health plays a significant role in academic success. Stress can be amplified and support can be difficult to navigate.

Panelists:

Allison Drew-Hassling, Director, Student Affairs

Jennifer Heisz, Associate Professor, Kinesiology

Gillian Mulvale, Assistant Professor, DeGroote School of Business

Panel Questions:

How does supporting student mental health differ in a remote environment vs. in-person?

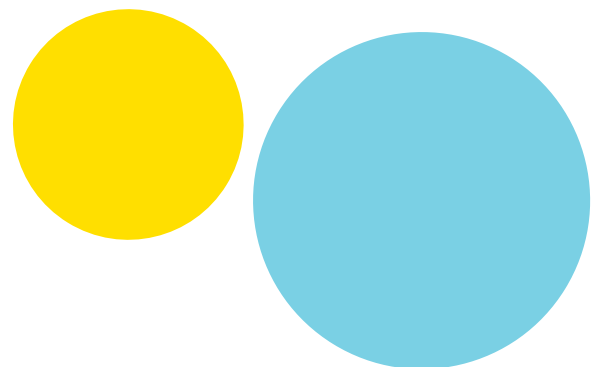
What are some simple things I can do right away to help support student mental health in my classroom?

What supports exist for students?

What support exists for me?

5 Key Takeaways from the panel

1. It is important for all professors to anticipate that students will be struggling with this new transition and may require additional accommodations. Faculty members must strive to set up their classrooms for success and add resources to the syllabus which depicts that their classrooms are a mental health positive space. [15:19-24:20]
2. It is important for faculty members to create welcoming and communicative virtual environments. This may involve providing students with resources and guidance at every juncture. It may also involve checking in with your instructional team and ensuring they are well and not burned out. [15:19-24:20]
3. Protocol for responding to students in distress-difficulty in a virtual learning environment. This document goes through 5 steps on how to tackle student distress and mitigate stress. [24:30-25:58]
4. There are 4 main indicators of distress or difficulty: Academic indicators, behavioural and cognitive indicators, emotional indicators and physical indicators. [26:00-31:50]
5. The 5 R's on how to approach a difficult or distressed student are recognize, reach out, rate, respond and review. [33:33- 35:40]



Some key takeaways from each panelist

Allison Drew Hassling, Student Support and Case Management, Interim Director (Student Accessibility Services)

- When reaching out to students it's important that faculty members find a private and safe location for conversations with phone access and emergency numbers at hand. [33:33-35:40]
- Yellow is used to represent a student in some distress or difficulty. Students do not appear to be at risk to self or others. Therefore they may need help within the next week or more. [35:45-39:10]
- A student in the orange zone is in significant distress or difficulty. While the student does not appear to be at risk to self or others they may need help in the next 1-2 days. [39:11-43]
- A student in the red zone is in serious distress or difficulty. This student appears to be a risk or potential risk to self or others. They require immediate support and the best solution is to call security and remove yourself and others from the actual or virtual setting. [43:50- 46:26]

Jennifer Heisz, Associate Professor, Department of Kinesiology

- In this unprecedented time students may seem fine on the surface however beneath the surface they may be suffering from heightened state of anxiety due to activation of the amygdala. [55:00-57:15]
- Students may be hypervigilant to smaller stressors in the fall semester. This may cause them to be hyperreactive to things like a bad grade or not understanding a concept, not being able to effectively interface with the online platform etc... [57:16-58:23]
- Students who experience chronic stress are more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression. This makes it extremely difficult for students to remain motivated to study and remain engaged in their learning. [58:24-1:00:47]
- Faculty members should try to direct students' focus by specifically telling them what to focus on. Reiterating difficult material in different ways may also help students better understand material. [1:00:48-1:02:56]
- It is extremely useful for professors to be consistent and organized. For example constructing your lectures and powerpoints in the same manner. This helps students stay calm throughout the lecture. [1:02:57-1:03:57]

Gillian Muvale, Associate Professor, DeGroote School of Business

- It is important for professors to explicitly acknowledge how difficult this transition is for students and communicate this during lecture. This provides students with comfort and helps alleviate barriers between faculty and students. [1:08:21-1:09:24]
- It is imperative that faculty members attempt to incorporate a group work component in their lectures. This helps reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as give students the opportunity to engage with their peers. [1:09:42-1:11:13]
- It is important for professors to share their own experiences with students. This helps eliminate stigma around mental health and provides students with a safe place to discuss their feelings. [1:13:20-1:15:22]

Sarah Wojkowski, Director of Clinical Education and Associate Professor, School of Rehabilitation Science

- Professors should encourage students to be active and move around. This can be reinforced in their own classrooms. For example giving students a 5 minute break between speakers to stretch. [1:16:23-1:17:50]
- It is important for faculty members to celebrate the success of the learners. This involves creating a positive environment and teaching students to emphasize on the good. [1:17:52-18:45]
- Faculty members should encourage students to post an introductory video. This helps create a sense of community and allows students to learn more about their peers. [1:18:50-1:19:20]

Teaching Remotely: Student Mental Health in a Remote Environment Summary & Tools

This summary was recorded during the seventh and final Teaching Remotely Virtual Panel Session, “Student Mental Health in a Remote Environment” on September 3rd, 2020.

The virtual panel summary includes information and resources in ways to help students’ mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and working remotely.

Articles

- In the article, [What Comes After the Coronavirus Storm?](#) Peggy Noonan writes that the world will eventually get to a, “safe harbor, and we’ll find we are a changed country.” She also states from Damian Barr’s tweet, “we are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm.”
- The article, [Best Practices-Video Conferencing](#), shares some tips to make Zoom sessions as secure as possible.

McMaster Resources/Tools

- Newly released due to COVID-19, [Professor Hippo-on-Campus](#) is an online educational program that trains to help improve mental health for students, staff, and faculty.
- The [McMaster SafetyApp](#) provides safety alert notifications and access to campus safety resources. The app also features a “Friend Walk” option that allows someone to watch your travel route home.
- [Responding to Students in Distress and Difficulty Protocol](#) are steps in understanding if a student requires support in any distress. The protocol includes the 5 R’s in helping a student in difficulty and distress including: Recognize, Reach Out, Rate, Respond and Review.
- Even though we are not face-to-face, McMaster remains committed to excellence and the principles of mutual respect, responsibility, dignity, and the well-being of others. [The Code & Online Communities](#) enforces the importance of these student rights and responsibilities as our community adapts to the changes due to COVID-19.
 - [Student Support & Case Management](#)

- The [Student Wellness Centre](#) is a place for the McMaster Community that provides an abundance of wellness support such as counselling options, medical services and wellness programs.
- The [Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office](#) at McMaster has many services and useful links and also supplies free support resources for those experiencing violence during COVID-19.
- The [McMaster Archway](#) is a support team who guides incoming first-year students at a time which is still uncertain. This program allows students to reach their end goals and to create a successful experience at McMaster.
- The Graduate Students Association website includes a Mental Health and Wellness Support Line called [Empower Me](#). The 24/7 accessible counselling service that allows students to speak with a counsellor to support students during a crisis.
- [Student Navigators](#)- The Student Navigators are recent graduates who are willing to help and support those who are figuring out their way through their programs and at McMaster.

Other Useful Links/ Resources

- [NeuroFitLab](#)- Researches ways to promote mental and physical health from teens to seniors. Their ultimate goal is to help those who are struggling and to become healthier.
- [Valley Centre for Counselling](#)- An online resource for those struggling with stress due to COVID-19. The website includes sessions on how to deal with anxiety and worry related to the pandemic.
- [Thomas Frank YouTube Videos](#)- These Youtube videos help students with their studies by his helpful study tips such as “How to Study When You Have ZERO Motivation.”
- [GoNoodle](#) - A website that has a series of web-videos, games, and activities focused on introducing short bursts of physical exercise in the classroom.
- [Body Break](#)- BodyBreak includes resources for staying fit and healthy, and sharing speeches that motivate others to succeed.