



COVID-19 Social Stigma and Mental Health Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic has required the educational system to be flexible, responsive and compassionate. Beginning with “learning from home” in the spring of 2020, and through the evolving in-person and/or virtual return to school this past fall, the COVID-19 virus has created many challenges for students, families and staff.

While each of us has a different COVID-19 experience, those impacted directly by a positive test for themselves or a close family member have a unique burden to carry. In addition to the strain of the illness, and worry about others contracting the virus, there are also mental health impacts associated with social stigma, social isolation during quarantine, and anxiety about returning to school.

We have a shared responsibility for the well-being and learning of all of the students we serve. Supporting students, families and staff who have been impacted by a COVID-19 diagnosis is part of this commitment to ensuring that all members of the school community feel a strong sense of emotional safety, belonging, and well-being. This info sheet provides background information on the mental health impacts of social stigma, to help you to lead with compassion as you prepare for instances and outbreaks of COVID-19 in your school and classroom, and to help students, families and staff through transitions from symptom/contact identification to a mentally healthy return to school.

What is social stigma?

According to the World Health Organization (2020), social stigma is the negative association between a person or group of people who share certain characteristics related to a specific disease. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this may mean people are “labelled, stereotyped, discriminated against, or treated differently” because of a perceived link with the virus. This negative association may be made towards those thought to:

- be in contact with the virus (e.g., those with symptoms of COVID-19, or who have tested positive, or is close to someone who has)
- be from countries where the virus originated or are considered “hot zones”
- be neglecting public health guidance in some way (e.g., traveling outside of their region)

COVID-19 social stigma is often associated with fear and a desire to protect those close to us. However, the impacts of social stigma are very harmful. It can increase feelings of guilt and anxiety and can exacerbate loneliness and mood problems for those suffering with COVID-19.

Instances of anti-Asian racism and other forms of discrimination associated with COVID-19 also amplify mental health concerns and can lead to marginalization and further distancing from sources of support like school. Understanding, recognizing, and addressing social stigma at school is one way to support the mental health of those who have been closely impacted by COVID-19.



How can schools help?

Words matter

When talking about the pandemic, it's important to be mindful of the words and language that we use so we don't inadvertently fuel fear and stigma. Our students are always listening, and they are particularly attuned to what they hear from influential adults like educators on the topic of COVID-19.

Keep a positive frame, and be neutral and caring in your language when discussing those who have contracted COVID-19. Gently correct others when their fears generate words that could create stigma. This goes a long way to ensuring that students, families and staff know that school is a compassionate and welcoming place for all students and that negative messaging will not be tolerated. In this way, if they or a family member gets sick with COVID-19, they will know that everyone understands that they are not at fault and that they will be welcomed back in caring ways after their recovery.

Did you know?

The official name for the disease was deliberately chosen to avoid stigmatization. The "co" stands for Corona, the "vi" for virus and "d" for disease. The 19 is because the disease emerged in 2019.

Guide for talking about COVID-19 (WHO, 2020)

Talk about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19), rather than attach locations or ethnicity to the disease, this is not a "Wuhan Virus", "Chinese Virus" or "Asian Virus".

Talk about "people who have COVID-19", "people who are being treated for COVID-19", "people who are recovering from COVID-19", rather than refer to people with the disease as "COVID-19 cases" or "victims".

Talk about "people who may have COVID-19" or "people who are presumptive for COVID-19" rather than referring to individuals as "COVID-19 suspects" or "suspected cases". Using criminalizing terminology creates the impression that those with the disease have somehow done something wrong.

Talk about people "acquiring" or "contracting" COVID-19 rather than talking about people "transmitting COVID-19" "infecting others" or "spreading the virus" as it implies intentional transmission and assigns blame.

Speak accurately about the risk from COVID-19, based on facts and latest official health advice. Avoid repeating or sharing unconfirmed rumours, and avoid using hyperbolic language designed to generate fear like "plague", "apocalypse" etc.

Talk positively and emphasise the effectiveness of prevention and treatment measures. For most people this is a disease they can overcome. There are simple steps we can all take to keep ourselves, our loved ones, and the most vulnerable members of society safe.

Emphasize the effectiveness of adopting protective measures to prevent acquiring COVID-19, as well as early screening, testing and treatment. Avoid emphasising the negative, or messages of threat. We need to work together to help keep everyone safe.



Be prepared

Any Ontario school could experience a COVID-19 outbreak, and any classroom might have a student who tests positive for the virus. Boards and schools have strong health and safety protocols in place for these circumstances. But how can we help our students to be prepared from a mental health perspective? Here are some ideas (adapted, with thanks, from the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board):

Provide reassurance and reinforcement of the physical health and safety measures that are in place:

- Hand hygiene
- Mask wearing
- Physical distancing
- New school routines
- Following the recommendations of health authorities

Continue to maintain a calm and structured classroom environment.

- Review the [Mentally Healthy Return to School Toolkit](#), including the [First Ten Days \(and Beyond\)](#) resource and the [Tip Sheet for Staff to Support Positive Mental Health for All Students](#).

Encourage everyday mental health strategies each day.

- Reinforce healthy eating (snacks, lunches), good sleep hygiene, and movement through daily opportunities inside and outside.
- Refer to the [Everyday Mental Health Classroom Resource](#) and the [Faith and Wellness: A Daily Mental Health Resource for ideas](#).
- Try these quick and easy [stress management strategies](#) with your class.
- Suggest that older students check out the [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) or [Kids Help Phone](#) for wellness strategies.

In a developmentally-appropriate and locally-contextualized manner, engage the class in a “power of empathy” brainstorm that considers reflection questions like:

- What would it feel like to learn that you have COVID-19?
- What would you want to hear from your classmates and friends?
- What are some ways we could support those who had to be away from school for any reason related to COVID-19?
- Would this look different if they were learning from home vs coming to in-person school?
- What would you need to feel better if an outbreak was declared in our school?

Keep lines of communication open within your classroom.

- Allow space for talking about thoughts, feelings, and experiences
- Offer the option for students to write down questions they may be too nervous to ask aloud.
- Remember that this will not be a one-time conversation. This will be an ongoing discussion as students begin to experience the reality with more direct impact.



Respond compassionately

When a student, staff member, family member, or cohort has symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19 there will be a range of reactions. Including your own. Be gentle with yourself as you tend to the needs of your students. Those impacted directly will need calm, caring, confidential support and reassurance. In the classroom, some students will want to process what is happening aloud, and others may be fearful when the topic is raised. You know your students best. In any case, privacy is of the utmost importance. Information about an individual's personal health information or status should not be shared without consent.

Normalize the range of emotional responses (e.g., worried, upset, sad, frustrated, embarrassed, ashamed, etc.).

- Validate emotional reactions for students experiencing symptoms, being tested, having a positive test, or in contact with someone with COVID-19 (e.g., "I understand that you feel upset about _____ because _____ and because _____").
- For classmates of those who have had a positive test or are away from school because of symptoms of COVID-19 (e.g., "no wonder you feel worried about _____ because _____ and because _____").
- Understand your own emotional reactions, and take time for your own wellness. Treat yourself with compassion at this difficult time.

Identify concrete ways to support those who are away from school for any reason related to COVID-19.

- Maintain connection with the parent/guardian through your typical communication practices.
- Send an email with a virtual card or note.
- Virtually connect with the student(s) (if appropriate).
- As students get ready to return to school, offer ideas for things they can work on so they don't feel overwhelmed with work all at once.
- Develop a support/re-entry plan for student(s) who transition back to school following a COVID-19 related absence. Take into consideration while building this plan, the emotions and experiences that they have endured over the recent weeks.

Ensure factual and developmentally-appropriate information is shared with students about COVID-19.

- Only share information as needed and respond to any questions being asked in a concise and empathetic manner.
- Maintain student/staff confidentiality in the course of communication. Students should not have access to personal health information.
- As the student returns to school, normalize the return from the absence and address any comments that could perpetuate social stigma.

Support a mentally healthy return to school following an absence related to COVID-19.

- Warmly welcome the student(s) back to class without drawing undue attention to their absence.
- Set an expectation for kindness and caring.
- Be mindful of how often the terms 'COVID' and 'sickness' are being mentioned as this may be upsetting for students.
- Notice when a student might be struggling and may require additional support.

Remember COVID-19 protocols and practices are in place to keep everyone healthy. No one is to blame or is at fault when COVID-19 enters a school, however these feelings will arise at times. **Words matter. Be prepared.**

Respond compassionately.

