

# Mentally Healthy Return to School Following Winter Break and Beyond

This has been a school year filled with both opportunities and challenges, a year like no other. Educators have welcomed students back to learning after the winter break—pivoting to remote learning and continuing to support students learning and well-being.

## Reflect

Every day, educators and students are exposed to big and small challenges. This year we have seen educators and students rise to the challenge in innovative and creative ways—connecting and building meaningful relationships with students and families. While everyone's experience during COVID-19 is unique, feeling upset or worried is a very common reaction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these feelings have been magnified. Many have experienced disappointments and disruptions, like missed family gatherings, lack of access to recreational activities, and inability to be with friends. As an educator, you can help to normalize these feelings, and continue to build caring classroom environments both remotely and in person.

## What do I say?

In your role as an educator, you can help to support all students who may be experiencing a range of emotions at this time. The following chart contains a sample of some helpful language to support students as they make their way through this challenging time. Refer to our complete info sheet — [Loss, Grief, and Bereavement during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) for more detailed information.



	ACKNOWLEDGE	BRIDGE	CONNECT
<b>All students</b>	<p><b>ACKNOWLEDGE that students may feel a sense of loss during the pandemic.</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lot of us are missing things we used to take for granted. If you could wave a magic wand, what would be two things you would wish for right now?</li> <li>• It's okay to feel sad or upset about things you are missing because of the pandemic.</li> </ul>	<p><b>BRIDGE the sense of loss that students may feel with the notion of collective loss.</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The pandemic is different for everyone, but most people could name one or two things they have lost because of it.</li> <li>• When we hear about other people's losses, we may feel sad about that. Feeling empathy for others is kind and caring.</li> <li>• It's important to remember that even though there have been losses, there have also been gains. What is something good that has happened?</li> </ul>	<p><b>CONNECT students to ways that others have found to cope with loss</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The community has tried to help families with things like drive-pass birthday wishes, signs in windows, and chalk pictures on sidewalks. Have you seen any?</li> <li>• Have you noticed ways that people are coping with all of the changes from the pandemic?</li> <li>• Sometimes it is good to try to find a silver lining after a loss. Can you think of any silver linings?</li> </ul>
<b>Some students</b>	<p><b>ACKNOWLEDGE that there are times when everyone feels upset, and that you have noticed that the student is struggling.</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many students are feeling upset these days because it feels like everything is going wrong, and they are missing out on things that they were really looking forward to.</li> <li>• Students say that sometimes it feels like it's one thing after another and like it won't ever get better.</li> <li>• I've noticed you seem to be feeling upset a lot these days. Would you like to talk about it?</li> </ul>	<p><b>BRIDGE the student's emotions and behaviors with the pandemic experience, and remind them of coping skills that can help.</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some students tell me that when things start to weigh down on them it can help to use some coping strategies. Want to <a href="#">try some with me?</a></li> <li>• What has helped you in the past when you have been feeling down or overwhelmed?</li> </ul>	<p><b>CONNECT students who need more support with resources, school mental health professionals or other helpers.</b></p> <p><b>Say things like:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are some helpful resources online that some students are using to help them cope. <a href="#">Here are a few to try.</a></li> <li>• There are people who work with our school who have special training with mental health and coping. Would you consider talking to my colleague Sue?</li> <li>• What can I do to support you as you navigate things at school. Do you need more time on the next assignment?</li> </ul>

## What can I do?

Whether your students are learning face to face or in a virtual environment, building and maintaining relationships continues to be key. The following strategies can help support students as they transition back to learning after the winter break or from remote to in-class learning:

- Anticipate significant fatigue and sleepiness, particularly among adolescents. More gradually reintroduce academic rigour compared with previous years, with a shift in focus and expectations on social and emotional well-being, self-efficacy and adaptive skills.
- Re-teach expectations and routines, and be patient and positive (and non-punitive) when reinforcing and reminding about physical distancing requirements.
- Consider refraining from introducing new academic content until routines are firmly re-established. Allow extra time for transition.
- Role model the [behaviours and coping strategies](#) you are hoping the students will follow.
- Consider opportunities for students to work cooperatively, feel empowered and assist others, which can prove restorative following significant disruption and collective stress.
- Provide students opportunities to voice concerns, challenges and needs.

## Resources

Finding ways to nurture relationships and continuing to build connections and community will help students as they transition back to school. It's important to provide ongoing opportunities for students to continue to learn and practice skills to manage the emotions and challenges they may encounter in coming weeks and months. As they learn ways for supporting their mental health, students can create a toolbox of strategies to practise throughout the year inside and outside of school. Here are some resources you may find helpful.

[Class Conversation Starters](#)

[The First 10 Days \(and Beyond\)](#)

[Social-Emotional Learning Classroom Posters](#)

