# Advice for school and university leaders: How to support your community

## *Mental health and well-being during Coronavirus*

## Introduction

School and university leaders are facing unprecedented and profound challenges. They are being called upon to bear other people's pain, predict the future when the only certainty is that everything is changing, and protect their community's well-being whilst also meeting academic expectations.

Guiding an organisation through a global pandemic whilst also attending to personal challenges and suffering requires extraordinary effort. Drawing on our collective expertise and that of the contributors, and on our members' experiences, we hope that this article will help you with this effort.

This article was prepared by the Council of International Schools, in consultation with Rob Evans, Ed.D, Ellen Mahoney of Sea Change Mentoring, Michael Thompson, PhD and Douglas Walker, PhD. If you have any feedback on this article, or questions that you would like future articles to address, please contact katierigg@cois.org.

## The impact of Coronavirus on individuals' mental health

*"The mental health effects of COVID-19 are as important to address as are the physical health effects."[1]*
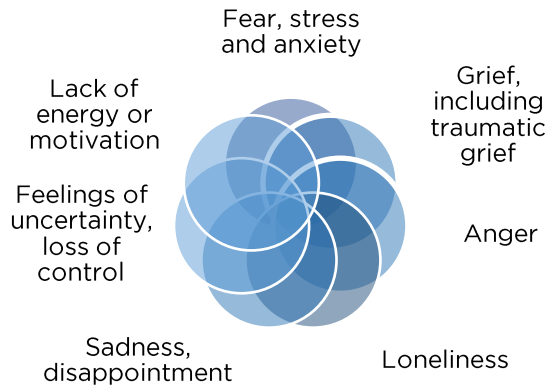
We are all still learning about the mental health implications of Coronavirus and associated challenges, which will include long-term economic hardship for many. Recent polls, emerging studies and research from previous outbreaks all suggest that the mental health impact of the pandemic could be profound and long-lasting.[2] This impact will be different for different people but key amongst the emotions that individuals are experiencing are fear and uncertainty, and so much grief and loss. The loss of physical connection, the loss of routine, the loss of ceremonies and the richness and vibrancy of campus life. Individuals with underlying mental health conditions may find it particularly difficult to cope, with many reporting increased anxiety, problems with sleep, panic attacks or more frequent urges to self-harm among those who already self-harmed.[3] Figure 1 sets out examples of the impact of Coronavirus and previous quarantines on our mental health. Figure 2 sets out some of the risk factors that underpin these.

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[1] Gionfriddo, P. President And CEO Of Mental Health America, March 3 2020, https://www.mhanational.org/press-releases

[2] Survey results collated by Cowan, K. on behalf of MQ: Transforming Mental Health and the Academy of Medical Sciences, *Understanding people's concerns about the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic*, April 2020, https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/99436893
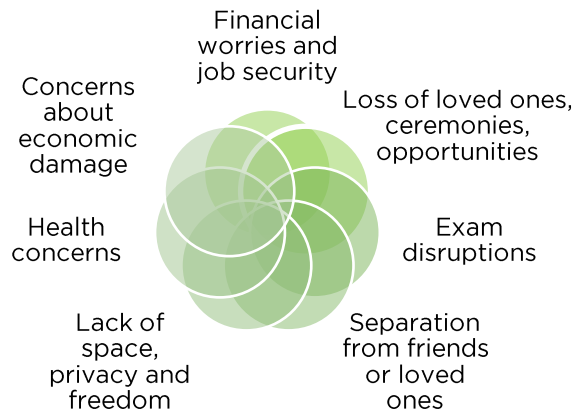
[3] Young Minds, *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*, March 2020, page 10

## Figure 1: Impact on mental health[4]



Fear, stress and anxiety
Grief, including traumatic grief
Anger
Loneliness
Sadness, disappointment
Feelings of uncertainty, loss of control
Lack of energy or motivation

*Isolation: "Since going into isolation my anxiety has really increased...It often comes really unexpectedly. I have trouble breathing and thinking straight. It's just a sense of all-over-the-place-ness." (young person)[5]*

## Figure 2: Risk factors



Financial worries and job security
Loss of loved ones, ceremonies, opportunities
Exam disruptions
Separation from friends or loved ones
Lack of space, privacy and freedom
Health concerns
Concerns about economic damage

*Exam cancellations: "It was really tough to hear. I cried. It had a big impact on me. It was like I had been preparing to run the marathon and I was at the start line and they were counting down, 3, 2, 1 - and then they tell you they're not going to run the race." (young person)[6]*

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[4] Mental Health America, *Mental Health America Reports Severe Anxiety Screening Results Related To COVID-19*, March 16, 2020,; Brooks, S. Webster, R. et al. *The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence,* 26 February 2020
[5] BBC news, *Coronavirus*, 1 April 2020
[6] BBC news, *Coronavirus*, 1 April 2020

## Figure 3: Stress, trauma continuum[7]
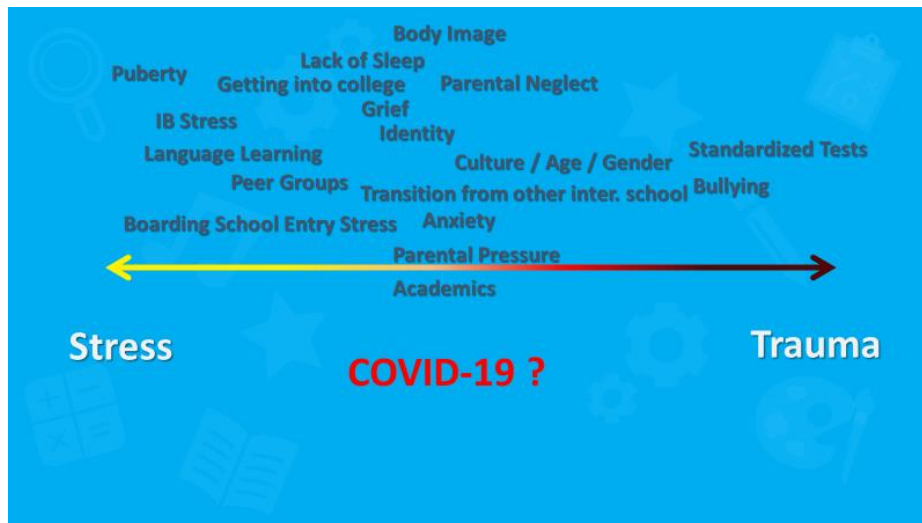


Think about the threat of Coronavirus and its impact on your community as falling somewhere along this continuum. Stressful for many, possibly traumatic for some. Moderate levels of stress and anxiety are normal and can help us to respond to difficult circumstances. However, when these become acute, they can inhibit our ability to function and change the way that we normally behave, the way that we communicate, cope and make decisions.

## Protective factors

People have reported important protective factors in recent months, including social adjustments that have led to increased sense of belonging to communities. For some it has created an opportunity for calm and reflection, for others is has increased their connection with family, friends or colleagues. It has also provided a sense of perspective for many, enabling people to examine and appreciate intrinsic elements of their lives, such as the quality of their relationships or finding joy in a hobby, which in turn helps to build resilience.[8]
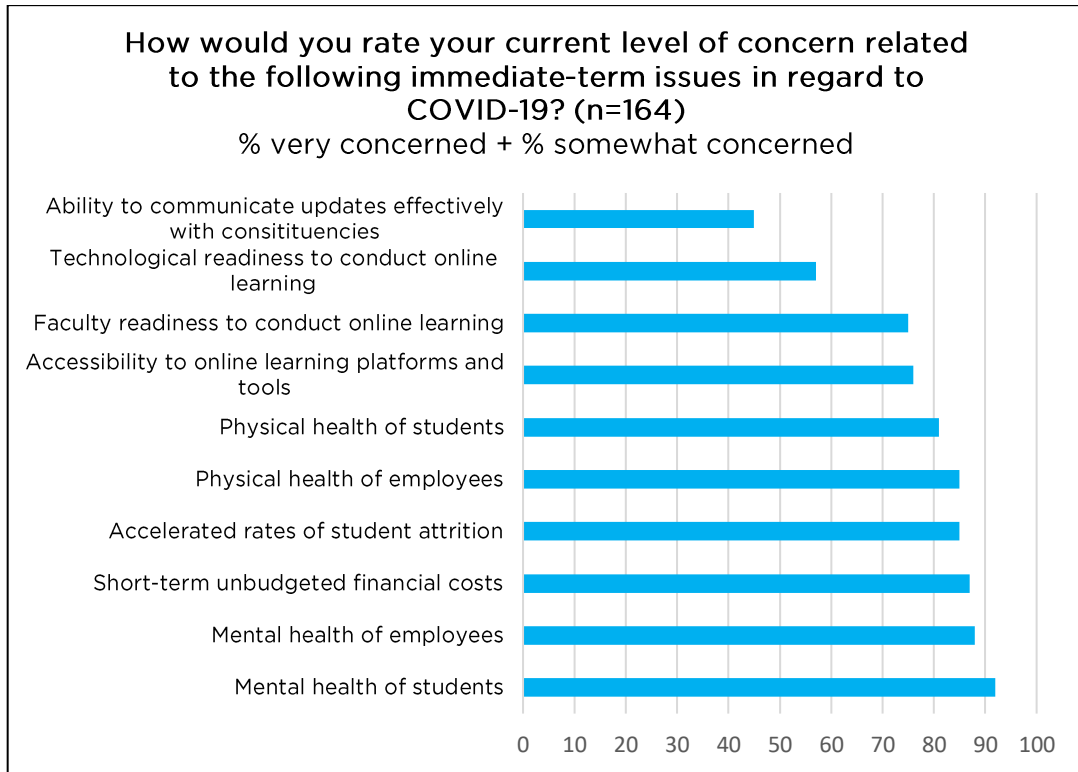
## Leaders' perceptions

School and university leaders are very aware of the risks to their community's mental health and are taking proactive measures to reduce these. In a survey of University Presidents in the United States, the mental health of students and employees were key concerns for survey respondents.

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[7] Walker, D. *Keynote Address: The Impact of Child Trauma on Learning,* CIS Child Protection Workshop, the Hague, 29 January 2020

[8] Gray, P. *The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,* 2011, American Journal of Play, volume 3, number 4

**Figure 4: Inside Higher Ed Survey of University Presidents[9]**



How would you rate your current level of concern related to the following immediate-term issues in regard to COVID-19? (n=164)
% very concerned + % somewhat concerned

| Issue | |
|---|---|
| Ability to communicate updates effectively with constituencies | ~45 |
| Technological readiness to conduct online learning | ~57 |
| Faculty readiness to conduct online learning | ~75 |
| Accessibility to online learning platforms and tools | ~76 |
| Physical health of students | ~81 |
| Physical health of employees | ~85 |
| Accelerated rates of student attrition | ~85 |
| Short-term unbudgeted financial costs | ~87 |
| Mental health of employees | ~88 |
| Mental health of students | ~91 |

# Eight key considerations for school and university leaders

Schools and universities have become powerful protective factors and vital sources of support during this time, offering opportunities for virtual connection, joyful events, academic engagement, social emotional learning and therapeutic intervention. Here are some key considerations for school and university leaders to bear in mind as they continue to protect and support their communities.

## 1    Keep it simple and apply the essentials of good leadership

*Rob Evans, Ed.D and Michael Thompson, PhD. reflect on the essentials of good leadership.*

However new and complex the current crisis, the essentials of leading a school or university through it are old and simple. These essentials are, fortunately, already part of most school heads' and university leaders' practice. They begin with courage.

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[9] Inside Higher Ed, *Webcast: Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: A Survey of College and University Presidents,* 1 April 2020,  Download the slides here

## Courage

*"you gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."*[10]

In every crisis, the whole community looks to its leader to see how he or she is affected (*Is she as afraid as I am?*) and how they're coping (*Is he really taking charge?*). People do this reflexively, even unconsciously, because a head of school or university leader is the priest in the secular parish, the ultimate parent figure. The most important thing you can do for your community is to find your reservoir of courage and to manifest that courage in a way that steadies teachers, faculty and parents. The community doesn't expect you to be fearless, and wouldn't believe it if you pretended to be, but everyone needs to know that their leader is tackling the challenge. If you can look fear in the face and keep going, then your community can find its courage, too.

## Connection

When a crisis threatens lives and disrupts relationships throughout the community, as this one does, leaders are the architect of sustaining connection. This does not mean producing voluminous communication. Connecting means reaching people in a personal way. We've heard from many heads that they begin their Zoom faculty meetings with a few minutes of asking people how they're doing, which has boosted morale. We know a principal who has called every one of his 100 staff, including custodians, to ask how they're coping; morale has skyrocketed. We recommend this to all leaders. We recommend, too, that you ask faculty to make a similar outreach to parents.

## Candor

No leader can be totally transparent - there is always information that must remain confidential - but in a crisis, it's important to be as candid as you can. Doing so demonstrates and inspires trust. It's a way of saying, "We can face this together." Many heads have told us about faculty who worry that enrolment will drop and require staffing cuts. Teachers may ask you, "Will I have a job next year?" and you may not honestly be able to reassure them. Rather than sugarcoat matters, it's better to say your version of, *"I wish I could say yes, but I can't yet. There's too much uncertainty. Here's what I can tell you. I want us to re-open as strong as when we closed. I'm working on that with the Board. I can't give you a firm timeline today, but I promise you I will tell you whatever I can whenever I can."*

## Clarity

Candor's close cousin is clarity. In a crisis like the present one, it's crucial for faculty and staff not to have to guess what their boss is thinking about any important issue. Clarity means that you *specify what's negotiable and what isn't*. You may be convinced that your school needs to do X and do it in a particular way, that it needs to do Y and you'll be glad for faculty input about the best method, and that it definitely cannot do Z. If so, everyone needs to hear you spell this out. Similarly, a great many heads we've talked with say they've learned how important it has been to provide clear guidelines for families about online learning, about what parents should expect for their children, what roles they should play, and so on.

## Empathy

Candor and clarity are crisp, even forceful. Together, they provide comfort and inspire confidence, but their impact is magnified when the leader combines them with empathy. Exaggerated or inauthentic "I feel your pain" is not just futile but off-putting. But when, in a simple, honest way you name something everyone is feeling, they feel a rush of relief. They feel closer to each other

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[10] Eleanor Roosevelt

and to you—and they feel energized. Your simple, truthful confirmation of how difficult this is for everyone (you included) can be powerful. For example: *"Many of you have told me that after three weeks of Zoom teaching, you're exhausted. Me too. I think we have a right to feel tired."* There's no need to overdo this, but leaders who combine clarity and firmness with genuine empathy help their people sustain their effort and performance even in the worst circumstances.

## 2      Draw on evidence-based practices

These essentials of good leadership are underpinned by evidence into organisational responses to large-scale crises, which highlights the importance of the following elements:

- **Connectedness** – are you providing on-going opportunities for virtual connection and peer support?
- **Hope** - how can you help your students, faculty and parents to be hopeful about the future?
- **Safety** - are you increasing your community's sense of safety by, for example, providing clear, regular and accurate communication about prevention and response measures?
- **Self and Community efficacy** - can you draw on the core values or your institution and stories of resilience to convey to your community that you will get through this together?
- **Calming** - do you model good practice through calm and thoughtful leadership and communication, and do you empower your community to regulate and manage their emotions so that they can keep calm?

### Figure 5: Five Key Elements of Recovery from Large-Scale Crises[11]
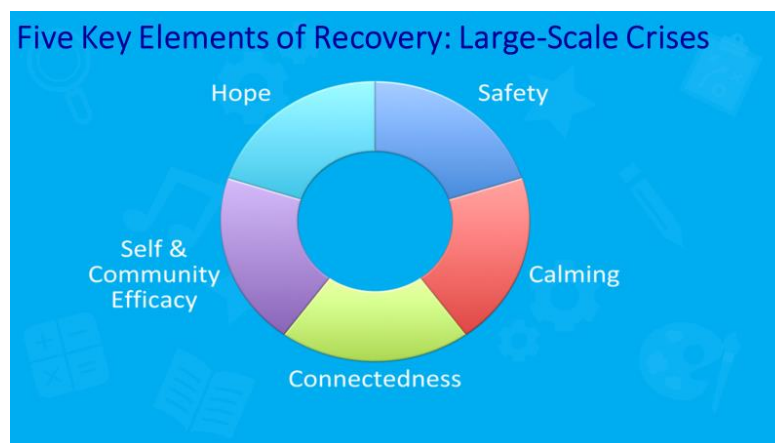


## 3      Adapt your policies and communications and engage your board

### Policies

Take stock of the ways in which you already support the well-being of your community and consider how you can address new needs and make this support work in remote learning environments. This might include introducing a mental health or well-being policy, if you do not already have one, which can provide you with a framework for your organisation-wide approach. It

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[11] Hobfoll, S. Watson, P. et al. *Five essential elements of immediate and mid–term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence,* Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes 70 (4), pages 283-315

might also be necessary to update mental health or suicide-prevention reporting protocols so that they work in your new virtual environment, cater to different time zones, and anticipate the possibility that individuals nominated to receive reports might fall ill.

Appointing a head of well-being and/or well-being champion(s) can help to raise awareness of mental health and ensure that any policies are implemented in practice. Their roles might be to co-ordinate the institution's approach to mental health, signpost individuals to services, raise awareness of resources, oversee initiatives and help to promote openness. Reviewing your equality and inclusion policies and practices to ensure that you prevent and respond to any xenophobia and racism that arises as a result of Coronavirus is also a key consideration.

### Governance

Having support from your board, owners or trustees, and making sure that they provide input into the institution's efforts to address mental health risks will help to elevate these efforts.

### Student services and well-being activities

Moving student services (including counselling and broader well-being activities) to a remote model is critical. Some universities and schools will be able to build on teletherapy programmes already put in place, while others might be trying it for the first time. Different interventions include video and audio counselling sessions, text-based chats, online mental-health screenings, and self-help tools that can be used independently. Considering how to ensure confidentiality for remote counselling sessions is important, with some sessions now being delivered during the student's daily walk. This guidance considers how to address safeguarding considerations linked to virtual one to one sessions. Communicating internal and external pathways to support to everyone, and not only those who reach out, is particularly important in remote environments.

### Communications

During periods of crisis, providing clear and consistent messaging from trusted sources can reassure people and help them to regain a sense of control. Public health messaging which makes it clear that you are following official guidance and that any actions you take are based on expert advice is a first step.  Communications can be significant protective factors, but they can also become risk factors. Streamlining communications across the organisation to avoid overload is important.

## 4      Identify and support at-risk individuals and prepare to support some individuals through traumatic grief

*"It has made my OCD so much worse. I am now washing my hands every five minutes or using hand sanitizer." (young person)[12]*

Consider who in your community is facing additional challenges and offer them targeted or specialist support if you can. Your teachers and faculty are in a very good position to help you to identify at-risk students. Individuals who might be particularly vulnerable during this time include those who have underlying mental health needs. Consider whether well-being staff can work with these students and their parents or carers (where appropriate) to agree on the most appropriate support. This might include, for example, thinking about how to adjust any coping strategies that would ordinarily require physical connection, having adults they trust check-in on them from time to time, and working out together how best to continue any therapeutic support in the virtual environment.

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[12] Young Minds, *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*, March 2020, page 4

Staff or students who are currently separated from family might also be feeling particularly isolated and having someone check-in on these individuals more regularly can make a big difference. Individuals who are caring for someone who has contracted the virus may need additional support, and you may be able to provide this or help to alleviate pressure on them. Students who are exposed to harm in the home are particularly vulnerable right now. Having your safeguarding team review their child protection cases, make referrals to agencies where appropriate and update any risk assessments and safety plans will help to make sure that these students are safeguarded as best as possible and have access to helplines and school support.

You might have some students or staff who have gone back to their home countries and are in time zones which make it difficult for them to participate in classes without significant disruption to their routine and sleep. Consider how your staff can help to support these individuals. Those who lack reliable access to the internet or struggle with technology are likely to find online learning particularly challenging, and your IT team may be able to help address their issues or upskill them.

Finally, if you have students who have been impacted by the cancellation of in-person graduations, consider what graduation means to your students and how you can help them to recreate that meaning online. Can you invite Alumni to help make this graduation extra meaningful? Consider creating a graduation theme with students that will also serve to heal the community, such as *"In gratitude"*; *"Looking back to look forward"* or *"The moments that define us."*

## Traumatic grief

Some members of your community might experience traumatic grief as a result of losing someone close to them. While many of us will adjust after a death, some of us will experience ongoing difficulties. If someone's responses are severe or prolonged and interfere with their everyday functioning, the individual may be experiencing traumatic grief. These resources will help your faculty to identify signs that someone might be experiencing traumatic grief and to know how to respond. Adopting a trauma-informed approach more broadly can help institutions to create a culture of safety, trust and support, and to safeguard individuals who experience trauma, for whatever reason.

## 5     Learn about your community's well-being challenges over time and respond to these

The unprecedented nature of the Coronavirus makes it difficult to know how best to support people. Consulting with your community about the challenges they face and seeking feedback from them on your institution's responses will help to ensure that the support you are providing meets the needs that are arising in practice. This can be done by encouraging people to share concerns and making sure that your communications and actions promote an openness about mental well-being. Using well-being instruments such as community surveys or engagement sessions can also help, as can one to one contact and small group discussions around social emotional themes.

Some institutions use wellness apps to analyse well-being data. The primary purpose of these apps is normally to help students to develop and maintain healthy habits, to recognise and change unhealthy beliefs and attitudes and/or to manage stress and depression. When using these apps to monitor well-being trends, privacy should be a key consideration.

# 6      Protect educator well-being

One of the key take-aways from our members who have been teaching remotely since January has been the importance of protecting staff well-being and preventing educator burn-out. When asked what had helped to protect their well-being in recent months, staff and faculty identified 'compassionate leadership' as the key factor. Specifically, leaders who:

- ✓ were realistic about what could be achieved and responsive to individual needs and circumstances.
- ✓ were open and transparent about developments and changes with staff and faculty.
- ✓ helped staff to put in place clear boundaries between work and personal life, manage parents' and students' expectations and take weekends to switch off fully.
- ✓ highlighted the things that were going well and showed appreciation for their work.
- ✓ modelled good working practices and self-care by, for example, finishing on time, not working weekends and asking for help when needed.

Effective line management and supervision can be powerful protective factors for staff. They can significantly reduce stress and can help individuals to solve key challenges related to their role. Supervision works best when it is regular and planned and when it enables staff to consider areas of work that they are finding difficult and to think about how to address the needs of students they are concerned about.[13] Supervision can also help to prevent *compassion fatigue* and *vicarious trauma*, which can happen when individuals become overwhelmed by the narratives shared by others. Faculty in pastoral, safeguarding and well-being roles are particularly vulnerable. Having policies which recognise that staff and faculty are exposed to stress and to these phenomena helps to normalise them. Training staff to recognise the signs can also help to prevent it. Strengthening employees' social emotional skills helps to build their resilience and meaningful recognition programmes can increase satisfaction and compassion. Check-ins with health professionals for those in key roles and access to individual counselling for everyone can also help.

We have heard from our members that their staff's emotional fatigue came in waves, with certain weeks being particularly difficult. These waves were influenced by developments like extensions to campus closure, news of deaths within the community and cancellation of important ceremonies and competitions. Anticipating and responding to these by, for example, slowing the pace over

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[13] Anna Freud staff well-being

difficult periods, interspersing mental health days and making the time to connect to staff and faculty individually, can all help.

# 7     Create on-going opportunities for virtual connection and prioritise well-being

*"If you have friends to speak to then speak to them and let them know you are thinking of them. Even just a couple of update texts from my friend made me feel so much better." (young person)[14]*

We know that human connection is the foundation of creativity and knowledge generation. It is also a critical component of individual and community well-being.[15] Although the benefits of physical connection are well documented, audio and video-based connection also fosters well-being, with some studies suggesting that *physical*, *audio* and *video connection* with friends and loved ones all increase our oxytocin levels (a sign of bonding and well-being) and reduce our cortisol levels (a marker of stress) by similar amounts.[16]

We have seen in recent months the myriad ways that our members have continued to foster connection in remote learning environments. Members have told us that resilience-based workshops with parents, staff or students, centred around a well-being topic were particularly helpful, boosting well-being and helping to normalise mental health topics. Continuing small group sessions that were already in place, such as tutor group check-ins, enabled continuity and on-going contact. Techniques such as Circle Time or Worry Bags have been used to good effect with younger students to help them to talk about, recognise and manage their emotions.

Members have also highlighted the role that synchronous classes and video-based communication have played in helping to build connection, and the value of holding online office hours for drop-ins. Online competitions, quizzes, events and assemblies, and bringing people together around a fun or creative theme, have all helped to strengthen the sense of community and provide opportunities for much needed relaxation and joy. Involving students in the design and execution of these projects has also increased engagement and relevance. Finally, wee have also heard how virtual exercise classes, mindfulness activities, coffee times and social events have all provided much needed respite and helped to reduce stress.

*"Should we continue student learning during covid19? A question of Maslow before Bloom"[17]*

Although many leaders are asked to resolve a 'conflict' between *well-being* on the one hand and *learning* on the other, we believe that this is a false dichotomy. We know that without well-being, there can be no learning, and this is never truer than during a global pandemic. Focusing on well-being is *necessary* to enable teaching and learning to continue. This might mean taking longer breaks, interspersing mental health days or suspending formal learning and focusing exclusively on well-being for certain periods. It will almost certainly mean slowing down the normal pace and being realistic about what can be achieved.

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[14] Young Minds, *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*, March 2020, page 12

[15] SE Hobfoll, P Watson, CC Bell, RA Bryant, MJ Brymer, MJ Friedman, et al. Five essential elements of immediate and mid–term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes 70 (4), 283-315

[16] Rosen L, cited in Fagan, K. *What Made Maddy Run,* 2017, pages 147-148

[17] Doucet A. *Should we continue student learning during covid19? A question of Maslow before Bloom,* 26 March 2020

## 8    Empower your community to protect their own well-being, support others and be hopeful about the future

Quarantines and physical isolation can increase our stress levels and disrupt our usual coping mechanisms. Providing your community with the knowledge and tools they need to protect their own well-being during this time is important. Key to this is recognising that the way that we feel depends in large part on our physiology, the chemicals in our central nervous system, our adrenal system and our neurotransmitters. We can protect our physiology by maintaining healthy habits around sleep, diet, exercise, social connection, relationships, relaxation, and limited alcohol consumption. We do not need to score highly in every area to protect our well-being, but if we neglect too many areas, we increase our risk of burn-out. Figure 6 represents some of these key elements and Figure 7 looks at young people's experiences of different coping mechanisms.

### Figure 6: How's Your 5?[18]



### Figure 7: Young Minds survey of young people with a history of mental health needs[19]



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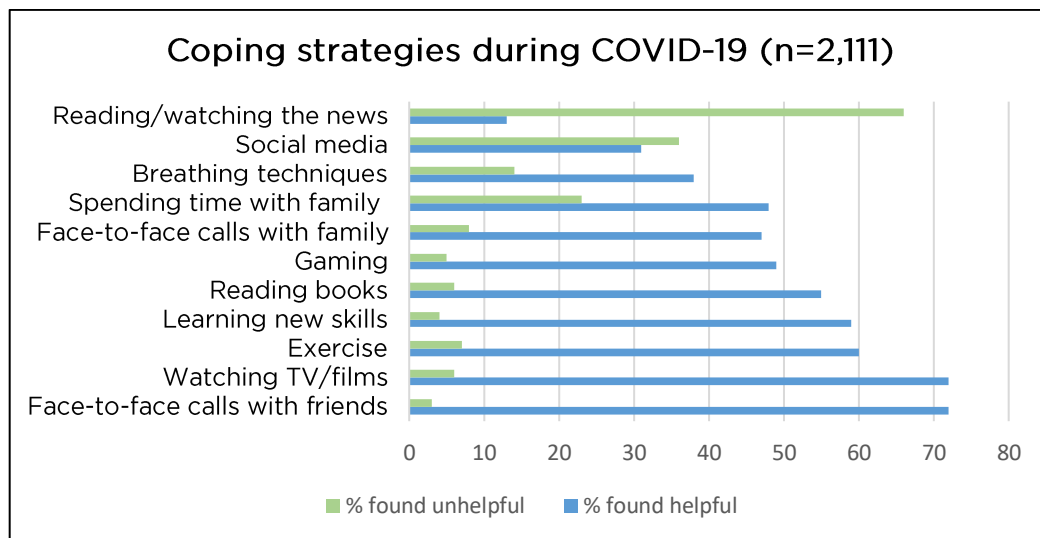
[18] Mercy Family Centre, How's Your 5?

[19] Young Minds, *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*, March 2020, page 4

Young people who participated in this study also suggested the following techniques: writing and journaling; spending time with pets; playing or listening to music; watching YouTube; being outdoors in nature; and creating and sticking to a routine.[20]

*"So much suffering and anxiety everywhere... But it also occurs to me that this is when the world needs our eyes and ears and minds. We are (and especially you are) the generation that is going to have to help us make sense of this and recover afterward."* [21]

Finding meaning and appreciating positive changes that result from crises can help with the grieving process. As leaders you are ideally placed to help your community to do this. Activities such as the wish box in Figure 8 can help people to be hopeful about the future, which is an important aspect of positive well-being.

**Figure 8: Barnardo's wish box for when the world is normal again[22]**
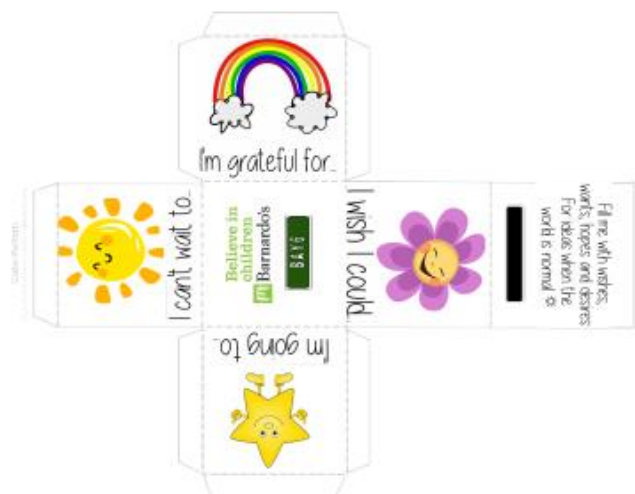


# Resources

These resources supplement this article and will help your students, staff and parents to be mindful of their own and others' mental health, to recognise when someone is struggling and when someone needs specialist help, and to be hopeful about the future.

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Saunders, G. A Letter to My Students as We Face the Pandemic, 3 April 2020

[22] Barnardo's, Wish box for when the world is normal again, April 2020