

Supporting College Students



Navigating Stress, Adversity, and Trauma in the University Setting

Students are struggling, especially students who may be experiencing layers of stress compounded by historical, racial and cultural trauma. Each one of us has the power to support through the simple and profound ordinary magic of connection and kindness. Here are some proven practices for cultivating connection and resilience.

FIRST, TAKE CARE

Adults are not separate from the stress, adversity and trauma being experienced today. [Self-care](#) and self-awareness is key to well-being and our ability to support others. The simple act of taking **3 deep breaths**, tones our vagus nerves and calms our system; There is compelling [research related to diaphragmatic breathing](#) (deep belly breaths). Know that it is common to need extended support, in the form of therapy, collegial collaboration, time off, and self-care.



Emotions serve the important purpose of guiding our emotions. When we **label our emotions** we are able to create enough distance to start regulate our emotions so we can make decisions from a place of regulation. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. If you'd like to know more about the science behind this seemingly simple, possibly counter-intuitive strategy, read this [brief article about terrifying tarantulas and the regulating power of naming our emotions](#).



Bringing awareness to your emotions and labeling them is a helpful first step.

TAKE NOTICE

Acknowledging and Normalizing (not the situation, but the response to the situation): Acknowledging the layers of stress and the [impact on learning](#) lets students know you understand and empathize with their experience. You can further validate their experience by sharing your response to current stress, adversity and trauma; even sharing small stories of how difficult it is for you to focus, track schedules and materials or just show up in ways we may have been able to in the past conveys that WE are in this together.

Recognition, appreciation and just plain noticing: These actions are motivating and relationship building. You can support students by noticing and appreciating how they have showed up and what their participation has meant for your own sense of purpose and well-being. Specific, concrete details enhance our appreciations (e.g. "the way you all built on each other's comments during this discussion was collaborative and generative"). In this [Harvard Business review article](#), Mike Robbins and Oprah discuss the relational and motivational meaning of appreciation. From a trauma-informed perspective, recognition, appreciation and noticing help us feel seen, valued and heard and so we feel secure, connected, and ready to learn. Win, Win, Win.



Validating: Adults can validate by taking student perspectives and normalizing students' emotions; let them know how common their feelings are and that a wide range of emotional responses make sense. Showing genuine acceptance, understanding, and support of students' emotions and perspectives builds positive relationships. **Avoiding Invalidation, even warm invalidation:** At times when people are looking for support, we unknowingly respond with invalidation, including silverlining; pivoting to the positive (e.g. "Well at least..."); and minimizing, discounting emotional responses (e.g. "that happened weeks ago, why are you still so upset"; "Shake it off, you are going to be okay").



Validating & normalizing helps students feel understood & trust their perspectives and feelings.

TAKE ACTION

Offer Voice and Choice: In times of stress, people feel empowered when they are able to express their needs and navigate their paths to resilience. To see if students would benefit from extra supports: additional office hours; review classes; rubrics, exemplars, or tip sheets for papers and projects.

Offer Flexibility: Your ability to be flexible may offer an essential lifeline. Consider how you could adjust deadlines, assignments, and requirements. This may require rethinking representations of learning and what constitutes essential knowledge, dispositions and skills in your course or discipline. It may also require suspending some default reactions i.e., taking student actions personally, not attributing character flaws and manipulations.



Offer Avenues of Support: Adults can reinforce how normal it is to need a wide variety of supports by re-posting information for [mental health supports](#), [ally groups](#), [meaningful action](#), [direct discussions with CU experts willing to discuss the Chauvin trial](#), and healing engagements such as community events and memorials.

Offer and Access Resources Related to Trauma: Experience of trauma can be layered, including [secondary traumatic stress](#), and [historical](#), [racial](#), and [cultural](#) trauma.



This is a time for space, grace, and focus on support.

