

A New Existence: Teaching through COVID-19

When life went virtual in the spring, many of us imagined that everything would be back to normal after a few weeks. Now, with the school year in full swing, we are still surrounded by uncertainty. The ending of last school year and the start of this one have been filled with loss and change, both large and small. This is grief.



We have a lot of questions and not a lot of answers; as teachers that can be challenging as we are used to having answers. One thing we can be sure about is that this year feels very different from previous years, and that you are probably wondering how to support yourself and your students through this difficult time.

"That makes sense."

One of the best ways we can support other people is by practicing compassion, both for ourselves and for our students. We do that by providing a safe, accepting space. We can acknowledge and validate the range of experiences our students share with us. None of us has ever done this before, and no one has all the answers. At the Wendt Center we try to remind ourselves, each other, and our clients, that all of our feelings and thoughts during this pandemic make sense.

When someone tells us that we are not alone and that our feelings are accepted, it helps soothe the emotional parts of our brain and reengage the parts that are responsible for thinking and learning. That is why we encourage you to show up for your students in this compassionate way.

Who...	else helps you when you need support?
What...	can you do that helps you feel calmer?
When...	will you be able to take a break?
Where...	do you feel comfortable or safe?
How...	will you know if you need help again?

Of course, while we practice compassion, it is also helpful to recognize what tools and strategies your students have in their tool belts to help shift to an increased calm state. Our students have many strengths and tools available to them; receiving support in recognizing and using resources and coping skills is where you come in. The questions to the left can be used to encourage your students to recognize, discover, and use the skills and supports they already have, and can be used to open or close a class.

What Can I do to Help My Students Stay Present and Regulated?

We compiled some of our “go-to” grounding and coping skills. Students learn when they see you model these skills for them. Practice these activities with your students and notice out loud how they helped you! Remember that the goal is not for you to be the only person helping your students, but to help them develop a community of supportive peers and adults, and to discover and use their own internal strength and capacity.

Provide consistency, predictability, and reliability.

- As much as you are able, set up each part of their day in a way that encourages those things.
- Consider having a morning meeting or a ritual to begin and end each class session.
- Think about how students shift between their classes and activities within each class; incorporate coping skills into transitions.
- Whenever possible, find areas where the students can be given control.

Incorporate movement.

- Set a timer and take a short dance break every ten minutes.
- Take short stretch breaks to do the "physical opposite". If you've had students typing or writing, have them roll their shoulders a few times, or clasp their hands behind their back and expand their chest.
- Incorporate your favorite dance or stretch into each small transition.
- Model and encourage different ways of sitting while teaching and learning.
- Ask students for ideas about incorporating movement. They will likely have ideas about how their bodies want to move.

Take deep breaths together.

- Roller coaster breathing: Trace one hand with the pointer finger of the other. As you go up each finger, breathe in, and as you go down, breathe out. Try to go S L O W L Y.
- Birthday candle breathing: Your hand turned into a birthday cake with candles! Blow them out one by one - the last one is a trick candle that will need to be blown out a few times!
- Butterfly breathing: Transform your body into a tight cocoon by crouching down and tightening your body up with your arms wrapped around your legs. While you breathe in, transform into a beautiful butterfly by expanding your body as big as you can. Breathe out and return to a cocoon. Repeat at least three times.

Notice things around the room.

- Our brains feel safest when we scan the horizon for danger. Encourage your students to look up from the screen and around their environment.
- Ask younger children to play "I Spy" and search for objects of a particular color, or to spot things beginning with a particular letter.
- Ask older children to identify 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can touch, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste.
- Encourage students of any age to find an object they love and hold it.

Use music to ground and shift the emotional state.

- Ask someone to sing you their favorite song!
- Put on some music and ask students to tap along to the beat. Encourage them to tap both hands and both feet to get their whole brain and body involved.
- Start a game of freeze dance! When the music is playing have students relax their body like a cooked noodle: loose and wiggly. When it stops have them tense their body like a raw noodle: tight and tall.
- Encourage students to share small moments of joy, then have them make up a song or rap about it.