

The High School Educator Guide

to Supporting Student Mental Health



HIGH SCHOOL

This Is Your Guide to Supporting Students

Teens are facing an escalating crisis in mental health. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than one in three high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019. Nearly 20% of all high school students had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year, a statistic that rises significantly for LGBTQ students and students of color. We also know student well-being and connectedness are integral components to success in the classroom, and classrooms offer unique opportunities to create communities of care for students.

Your primary role as educators, of course, is to share your knowledge and expertise with students, but you also serve a critical role in the development of our nation's teens. You are often the first to notice when a student is struggling emotionally, and the first person a student trusts enough to reach out to. Teachers are considered "[frontline personnel in supporting school efforts to address mental health concerns](#)," yet a large body of research shows that teachers rarely receive training in navigating these situations effectively and comfortably.

The Jed Foundation created this quick, easy-to-use guide to increase your knowledge and comfort in navigating these situations and conversations. And we want you to know that:

- You do not have to be a mental health professional to support a student with their mental health.
- You are never alone when you support students.
- You don't have to provide care. You can be the bridge that connects them to it.

This guide will walk you through straightforward—but significant—steps you can take to:

- **Support** mental health in the classroom.
- **Follow** school and legal protocols for reporting student distress.
- **Recognize** a student who is struggling.
- **Connect** students to professional help, if and when it is needed.
- **Reach out** to a struggling student.

About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We partner with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We equip teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge they need to help themselves and each other. We encourage community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health. **Learn more and access resources at jedfoundation.org.**

How to Support Mental Health in Your Classroom

Two of the most powerful ways to improve student mental health are helping students feel they belong and are connected to something bigger than themselves, and teaching them how to ask for help when they need it. The classroom is a great place to do both.



Build Connection

Give students the opportunity to connect in small groups during the year. Remind them that they can serve as supports for one another, and, where possible, encourage relationship-building in your classrooms.



Talk About It

Begin the year by telling the class that students can come to you when they are struggling, and reiterate that message during high-pressure times, such as exams or charged political or school events. Let them know their well-being is important to you, and you are here to be a support if they need it.



Encourage Self-Care

Consider incorporating mindfulness, [breathing](#), or other calming practices into the classroom, and adding self-care activities—such as exercising, getting 8 to 10 hours of sleep, or talking with friends—to assignments. You can also model self-care by sharing with students what you do to manage stress, which not only benefits them, but also is critical to your well-being. You, too, are part of the community of care you are creating. Please take care of yourself first so you have the bandwidth to support others.



Share Resources

School: Find out what services are available to students for academic stress and mental health support. Each school community has its own internal practice for referring students. If you have specific colleagues who provide student support, invite them to come to the class, introduce themselves, and explain the services they offer. That will help students feel more comfortable seeking them out later if needed.

Local: If your school does not have dedicated mental health support staff, find out if they partner with organizations in the community and compile contact information for those resources.

National:

- For a referral for mental health treatment, call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) to reach [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#).
- For the Crisis Text Line, text HOME to 741-741 for a free, confidential conversation with a trained counselor at any time.
- To connect with help and support during a mental health, substance use, or suicide crisis, call or text [988](#) or chat online ([988lifeline.org](#)) to be connected to trained counselors.
- You can find additional crisis resources at [jedfoundation.org/its-an-emergency](#).

Share all these resources verbally, and include them in your course materials and online classroom hubs. Here is language you can use:

“If you are feeling stressed, worried, or down, or if you think a friend may be struggling, please feel free to let me know, and I will help. Here are some helpful places to go: [list school and local resources]. If you or someone you know needs to talk to someone right now, text HOME to 741-741 for a free confidential conversation with a trained counselor at any time. If you are experiencing a mental health, substance use, or suicide crisis, text or call [988](#).”



How to Recognize a Student Who Is Struggling

You know your students. If something concerns you, trust your gut and err on the side of checking in. It may turn out that nothing substantial is going on, but showing students you care is part of supporting mental health. Students—like all of us—fare better when they feel seen, cared for, and part of a community.

The most important sign that something is going on for a student—or anyone—is a significant change in how they behave or function.

Here are some specific examples:

- Missed assignments
- Repeated absences
- Decline in academic performance
- Reduced participation in class
- Excessive fatigue
- Changes in personal hygiene
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating
- Inappropriate or exaggerated actions
- Intense irritability or anger
- Worsening nervousness
- Changes in socializing
- Facing stressful life situations at home or personally
- Concern from a friend or peer
- Alarming or worrisome content in assignments
- Involvement in bullying

How to Reach Out to a Struggling Student



DO

- Invite the student to talk in a comfortable space.
- Use a calm tone of voice and non-threatening stance.
- Tell them what you observed that concerns you.
- Use “I” statements such as “I think” or “it seems,” rather than “you should.”
- Ask open-ended questions about how they are doing.
- Let students guide the conversation: “Tell me more about that.”
- Focus on listening to their concerns rather than sharing your own feelings or experiences in detail.
- Let them know you have heard them and you care.
- Refer students to school-based supports as needed. Ask if they would like an introduction or would prefer you reach out on their behalf.
- If they do not want an introduction, let them know you are going to recommend that your colleague reach out to them because you care about them.
- Follow your school’s crisis and mandated reporting protocols if you feel the student is in danger or is an immediate threat to themselves or someone else.



DON'T

- Underestimate or minimize the student’s struggles. It is far better to check in unnecessarily than to dismiss a potentially harmful situation.
- Promise confidentiality. School guidelines may require you to report a student who is at immediate risk of harming themselves (see next page).
- Leave the student alone if you feel they are at immediate risk.
- Feel pressured to be a therapist. If you notice someone is having a problem, you simply need to connect them with someone who has the training to help them.

How to Know When a Student Needs Immediate Help

A student may be at immediate risk and should be connected to professional mental health services right away if they:

- **Express despair.** *“Sometimes it feels like I’d be better off dead.”*
- **Express hopelessness.** *“No matter what I do, nothing gets better. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even worth being here at all.”*
- **Talk about leaving their family or friends.** *“I feel like I’m such a burden to them. They’d be better off without me.”*
- **Mention self-harm.** *“It seems like the only thing that makes me feel better is cutting myself.”*
- **Show signs of self-injury,** including visible cuts, burns, or scars, or wearing long sleeves in warm weather to hide injuries.

What to do:

- **Stay calm.** This will help you think clearly about how to respond, and it can help reduce the student’s anxiety.
- **Let them know you hear them and want to help.** (See wording examples on next page.)
- **Ask the student if they are thinking about suicide.** Research suggests that acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts.
- **Walk the student to the mental health support staff** or appropriate administrator.
- **Stay with the student** until they are connected with someone who knows the next steps to take.
- **Call 988,** the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, if you are unable to connect with a trained staff member.
- **Call 911** in the case of an immediate medical emergency. Explain that it is a mental health crisis, so first responders arrive prepared to respond appropriately.

How to Start the Conversation

Ways to approach a struggling student

“I noticed you’ve seemed a little down lately, so I wanted to check in with you. Could you tell me what has been going on?”

“I noticed you missed class a few times. Could you share how things have been going for you?”

“You seem really tired in class lately. How are you doing these days?”

Ways to respond when a student shares their struggle with you

“I am so glad you told me. I am here for you, and I want to make sure you are safe. I am going to introduce you to [name of mental health staff member], who can offer strategies to help you get through this.”

“Wow, that sounds really hard. It makes sense you are struggling. The good thing about talking to [name of mental health staff member] is that they’re trustworthy and a good listener, so you can just be yourself.”

“I know approaching them out of the blue might seem uncomfortable, so I could introduce you and tell them a little about what we talked about today.”

If a student does not want to share with you and you are not worried they’re at immediate risk:

- Ask them if there is someone else they would feel comfortable talking to.
- Let them know you’re always here to listen.
- Consult with a student services colleague about next steps.

Ways to talk with a student who needs immediate help

“I understand you are hurting right now. You are not alone. I am here to help you and make sure you stay safe.”

“I can tell you’re very upset, and I’m concerned about you. I’m going to connect you with someone who can help you stay safe.”

If a student declines support and they are at immediate risk, call school security or 911.

Remember you are never alone when you help students. You can enlist other school and community professionals and connect students to on- or off-site mental health services. Each day, you play a positive role in the lives of your students. You can have a huge impact when a student is at a crossroads in their life. Just showing you care can create a beneficial ripple effect that changes a student's trajectory, educational experience, and sense of connection. Your help can change—and even save—lives.

Resources for Supporting Students

Students can find open-minded support and advice on managing feelings, mental health conditions, and particular situations in JED's [Mental Health Resource Center](#).

[Mental Health is Health](#) and [Seize the Awkward](#) both have information on identifying someone who is struggling and opening up a conversation with them.

JED offers “[You Can Help](#)” trainings for faculty and students on supporting students in distress.

Learn more about how The Jed Foundation can [support your school or district](#). You can also email jedhsinfo@jedfoundation.org.





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