

# Mental Health Support in Schools Toolkit

Advice and practical support from SENCos and psychologists on how to support mental health and the general wellbeing of your students.



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# Introduction

**As we start to adjust to a new normal after the disruption of COVID-19, it's clear that the pandemic has caused significant stress in students' lives. With so much still unknown and with the difficulty in explaining the situation to these young people, anxiety and behaviour issues may be on the rise. Even when you have had time to prepare for them, difficult experiences can be very unsettling for both students and adults.**

It is important to recognise the changes and losses that have happened. It is helpful to reflect back students' comments and concerns using their own language. This helps to validate the individuals' experiences and leaves them feeling heard and their observations valued. Even if you don't agree with what is said, it helps to offer students the chance to voice these feelings without judgment. It's also important to share the fact that you may also experience negative feelings and even though you are an adult you do not know all of the answers.

Children and young people will have had a variety of experiences. We should not assume we know what they have lived through and what that may have been like. Everyone's experience is unique to themselves and their own situation. It is important to acknowledge that grief and loss for all sorts of things, people, objects and experiences, will come and go. Students will need to continue to grow around the experience rather than to seek to remove it or pretend it didn't happen.

Here you'll be able to find some helpful tips to support your students in the classroom. In some cases, your students may need extra support to get back on track and express their feelings, which might mean you need to bring in a SENCo to provide extra intervention to see if an underlining undiagnosed conditions may be the root of this cause.

In some circumstances, a SENCo may not be available, and a specialist may be needed to give your student the support they need to overcome these hurdles and reintegrate with the class.





# Part 1: Classroom support

## Coping through unsettling times

Children and young people benefit from routines. Often students are more resilient than we think, but they do take comfort when things are predictable. In addition, it is important to make expectations clear, so they know what is expected of them and what they need to do. We sometimes view unsettling times through adult eyes, rather than taking the time to listen and notice how students are managing.

It is important to embrace getting back to a new state of normal, but also to recognise the need to notice what has changed. Adults need to consider what losses students and young people have experienced and may continue to experience, for example, lack of freedom, new timings, absence of fun activities like after school clubs or parties, days out. Recognition of what has been lost is essential if we are to expect students to move on and embrace change.

To get a better understanding on how to support your students within a classroom setting we have worked with clinical psychologist Dr Helen Care to create a series of helpful guides which include top tips and tricks to help support anxious child or teenagers.

### [Helping students understand worry](#)

Students may be feeling a lot of worry during this time, as they may be uncertain of what the future may hold, due to the ongoing changes happening in the world. With that in mind, this guide can help you to explain the concepts of worry and anxiety to students.

### [Tips for helping an anxious child](#)

A guide providing tips on supporting your anxious students, by having conversations and engaging in activities that allow them to manage their worries.

### [Tips on surviving school shutdown and coronavirus anxiety](#)

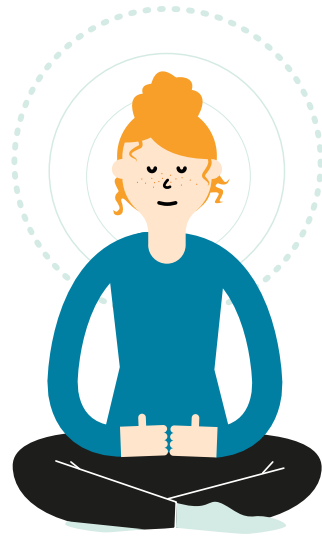
With so much uncertainty in today's society and the ongoing changes, many students and parents may be worried about future school closures. In this guide you can find support and tips for teenagers to cope during school shutdowns.



Visit the Wellbeing Zone to discover the full 'Coping with anxiety during unsettling times' series

## Mindfulness in the classroom

Mindfulness is the practice of training the mind to enhance awareness of our thoughts, feelings and sensations. It can help us all – teachers, parents and students included by increasing attention span, concentration, and emotional resilience throughout periods of uncertainty such as COVID-19, when it's common for stress and anxiety to build up. For a great introduction, read our [Mindfulness for Unsettling Times guide](#)



### [Empowering with Stoicism](#)

Stoicism, an Ancient Greek philosophy that focuses on self-control, developing a good character and living a life of virtue, is used to help overcome adversity and challenges. Read our guide on Stoicism written by Ben Aldridge



## Using play therapy to support students during times of change and uncertainty

Approaches that are non-verbal and involve play are thought to use the natural expression of students. Play can be described as the language and the items used in the play as the words. When difficult situations arise, it is often difficult for students to put into words how they feel about what has happened. This requires the rational mind.

When students have experienced a stressful or traumatic event, the rational human brain is often disconnected, and the emotional and more instinctual drives take control. This can be seen in students' behaviour and actions. For example, when distressed, students or young people may fight, flight or freeze. The ability to reason as to what might be happening to them in this instance is not possible.

Play can offer them the possibility to explore what has happened safely in a relationship with others. Play involves the capacity to explore, connect with others, make mistakes safely, use symbolism instead of searching for words to explain, as well as a boost in positive chemicals.



Mindfulness, therapeutic stories, creative visualisations, breathing techniques and other such activities offer students and young people the chance to develop ways of regaining control of themselves, to explore ways of managing anxious feelings and to work through what has happened.

Play and mindful activities can support students during times of change and uncertainty to regain a sense of personal autonomy and control and a sense of wellbeing.

You can learn more on play therapy in our guides:

### [Using Play to Support Students During Times of Change and Uncertainty](#)

Advice from a play therapist on how you can use play to help children to process their feelings.

### [Calming and Grounding Techniques through Mindfulness for Students \(age 4-11\)](#)

Suggestions and activities that you can use to begin to help children to develop the skill of mindfulness within play.

These resources were written by play therapist Emma Brummell.

# Part 2: SENCo support

## When to seek the advice of a SENCo

Whatever traumatic events students experience, they will respond in a plethora of ways. There is not a 'one size fits all' recovery curriculum. We hope that most students will adapt and return to the classroom with little difficulty, however there will be some cases where additional help is needed.

Remember that as class teachers, you are not working in isolation, you are part of a bigger team working to support each individual through their learning journey. SENCos (sometimes referred to as SENDCos or Inclusion Managers) are on hand to help with advice and guidance and can assist with accessing additional support from external agencies, should this be necessary.

As teachers you will know your students the best, and will be able to monitor any pointers that may indicate that you should seek the help of the SENCo, or whether it may be necessary to draw on the advice of an educational psychologist.

If any students display:

- significant changes in mood
- noticeable weight change (either increase or decrease)
- excessive tiredness lasting for longer than a few days
- unusual or out of character emotional outbursts
- secrecy
- signs of self-harming

It's important to remember that you are not working alone, and to discuss with an appropriate colleague. Always report any safeguarding concerns immediately to the Designated Safeguarding Lead, following your school's policy.

SENCos are also available to talk through any concerns around a student's behaviour or learning which may need further investigation from other professionals. Examples include students who are exhibiting behaviours suggesting that investigation is needed for ADHD, Autism, Depression, Dyscalculia, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, GAD, OCD or Sensory Processing Difficulties, although this list is far from exhaustive!

Where teachers or additional support assistants have concerns around the behaviour of a student, it is a good idea

to record observations. This may help to identify patterns in behaviour, e.g. is a child often low in attention levels in the afternoon, do they often refuse to follow instructions on a Monday morning or a Friday afternoon, is their behaviour linked to a particular school subject or to a particular adult, or do they have difficulties in retaining key information?

Behaviour tracking charts are useful for identifying the frequency and timings of a student's behaviour and can be used to complete behaviour analysis. This can be very useful when working in partnership with families at the stage when SENCo involvement is required. Other useful tools are to record the 'ABCs' of behaviour; the Antecedents, Behaviour, and Consequences, as then patterns can be spotted around what is happening directly before the behaviour, and also what the student is getting immediately after the event.

Checklists for early identification of conditions such as Dyslexia, ADHD and Autism are also beneficial in helping teachers with a starting point for their discussions with the SENCo. It's important to remember that these are not diagnostic tools and that any diagnosis made needs to be by a suitably qualified professional.

## What does a session entail?

SENcos have a range of techniques available to support their colleagues, which may include a series of observations, direct work with the student, collaborative work with other professionals, and completion of assessments, questionnaires and screening tools. Following on from a session focusing on an individual student, the SENCo may then go on to provide advice and recommendations, following the **Assess, Plan, Do, Review** cycle.

The SENCo may also decide that additional intervention is needed, and would, after consultation with the family, possibly make referrals to external agencies such as Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, SpLD support, or the Educational Psychology service.

## Coping techniques for staff

Remember that you are not alone, there is always a colleague nearby who can provide a listening ear, a helping hand, or some words of wisdom. On especially bad days, it can be helpful to debrief with a trusted colleague before going home.

Try to reflect on any negative behaviours you have seen and look to unpick them and get to the root cause. Remember that any negative behaviours directed at you are not personal attacks, but a student's way of showing you that something isn't right.

Observe and record and look for patterns in behaviour.

Remember that for some students, it is a huge effort just to get through the school gates each morning. Celebrate achievements, no matter how small.

If a student is displaying lots of inappropriate behaviours, it can help to focus on one at a time and set up a reward or praise system targeting just one behaviour.





## What to look out for in the classroom

There are many signs which may indicate that a student is experiencing difficulty with their mental health, including:

- Avoidance of tasks or activities which cause anxiety
- Having unusual outbursts of anger or tearfulness
- Being involved in more fights or arguments than usual
- A lack of engagement or interest in activities which were previously pleasurable
- Concentration difficulties
- Lethargy or extreme tiredness
- Appetite or weight changes
- Changes to normal sleep patterns
- Frequent stomach or head aches
- Avoiding or missing school, or avoiding social interactions

## Support for SENCos

Whether you are a newly qualified SENCo or have been in role for a number of years, it is always helpful to have support and communication with those in similar positions. Many local authorities have a SENCo Network group or SENCo forums where you will be offered training and the opportunity to network with other SENCos. If this isn't something that your local area offers, you may be able to form your own support groups by linking with other schools in your area to create a cluster.

There is also online support available, and a useful place to start is on the NASEN SEND Gateway site where you can sign up for the SENCo Forum for information and resource sharing.

### Helpful links:

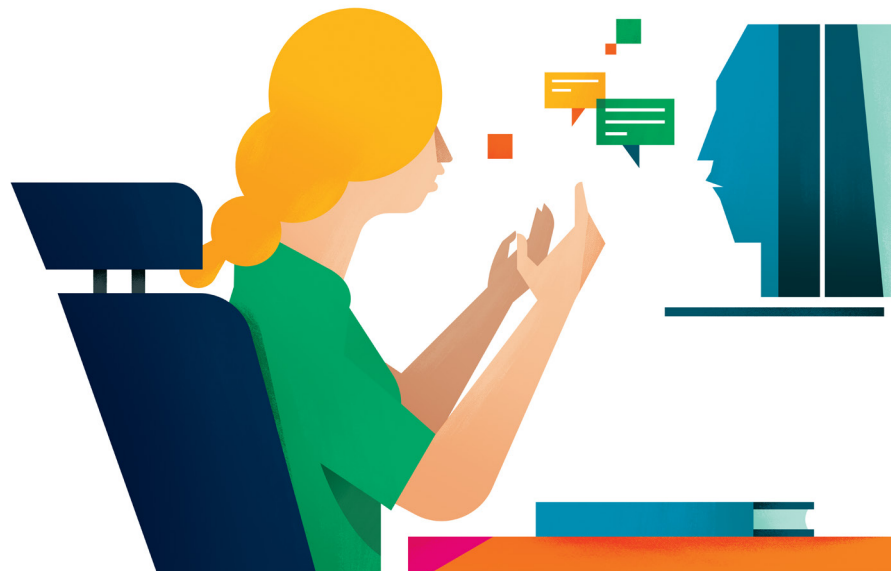
- [stem4](#)
- [NHS support for stress](#)
- [YoungMinds](#)
- [Mind](#)
- [Rethink](#)



# Part 3: Getting a psychologist's opinion

## When to seek out a psychologist?

The recent COVID-19 experience might have been anxiety-provoking and traumatic for some students. Some students will adapt to the new situation with resilience and modify their experiences in response to this. It is important not to rush the process of adjusting to the new situation. In order to consider whether a child or young person needs additional support, it will be necessary to combine the views with that of their parents or carers and trusted professionals they have known in order to consider whether any changes to their behaviour are causing concern or not. If the perspective of those involved is that difficulties are persistent and having an impact on their capacity to live well (emotionally, socially, physically and/or in relation to learning) then it may be appropriate to consider involving a psychologist.



## How to get a psychologist involved

There are two different types of psychologist who may become involved. Clinical psychologists may become involved via the Health route or educational psychologists through education. It may depend on how the difficulties present in the student as to which direction a child or young person may become involved with a psychologist. The role of the psychologist, whether clinical or educational, would be to understand the nature of the difficulties, how this presents and to consider the feelings, actions and behaviour that arises in response.

A **clinical psychologist** may be accessed via a referral to Child and Adult Mental Health services (CAMHS). This will involve concerns around health and may involve a visit to a GP to consider the changes to the child or young person's presentation.

An **educational psychologist** can be accessed via schools. Usually the school, with the support of a parent, can make a referral to associated Educational Psychology Services. Some of these are core services and others are traded and the school will need to prioritise children or young people according to the severity of their difficulties and needs. Both clinical and educational psychologists can also be accessed privately following parent referral.

## What mental health issues can arise?

Following a traumatic or stressful experience, mental health issues can increase or occur. Children or young people experiencing difficulties may not be those who you suspect or who may have experienced difficulties before. Anxiety may be experienced in response to a variety of issues, for example the changes to lives, contagious diseases and cleanliness, the sense of powerlessness and not knowing, increases to family stress such as violence in the home or new financial difficulties, lack of freedom, to name but a few. In addition, the persistence and severity of the anxiety may be extreme or may have increased as a result of the situation. Students could be living with family members with increasing mental health challenges, impacting the rest of the family unit. Greater levels of stress in family homes linked to finances, employment or relationships may challenge individuals' capacity to manage change and accommodate to the situation of new normal.

Those supporting children and young people can be at risk of experiencing secondary traumatising or stress. This is experienced in the same way as a traumatic event, e.g. physical changes in the body (racing heart or breathlessness), difficulties thinking, putting words together, focusing on something. It can be a very debilitating condition, like the primary trauma, and those experiencing it will require the support of others to work through this experience.



All individuals experiencing mental health difficulties will need support that focuses initially on meeting physical needs adequately (food, sleep), then focuses on feelings of safety and security, developing a sense of belonging and connectedness, experiencing feelings of accomplishment prior to achieving one's potential (See Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for further information).

## What a session can entail

Sessions with a psychologist will vary depending on the nature of the difficulty experienced. Psychologists will often gather information from a range of sources and develop a hypothesis to drive the work to be completed. The hypotheses may lead to an intervention to be completed to support the child or young person with the issue(s) identified.

Following the intervention, there will be the opportunity to review and evaluate what has happened. Educational psychologists offer support at the individual, group and systemic level. The level of the work will depend on what is determined to be the area requiring support. Educational psychologists seek to facilitate and empower those involved in the situation:

- **Individual work** may involve consultation, observation, assessment and/or intervention.
- **Group interventions** enable the psychologist to support several children or young people at once with a shared issue.
- **Systemic work** may involve supervision for adults working with young people, training, policy writing or development.

## What are the outcomes?

The outcomes can vary depending on the hypothesis and the reason for the work to be completed. In all cases, the outcome seeks to empower or improve something identified as an issue, to provide support so that the situation can be improved and develop the capacity to maintain the growth of the individual involved.





# Additional support for psychologists and SENCoS

Psychologists work in different ways according to their training and areas of interests. All psychologists are governed by the standards and competencies of the Health Care Professions and the British Psychological Society. Psychologists adhere to ethical principles and utilise evidence-based practice.

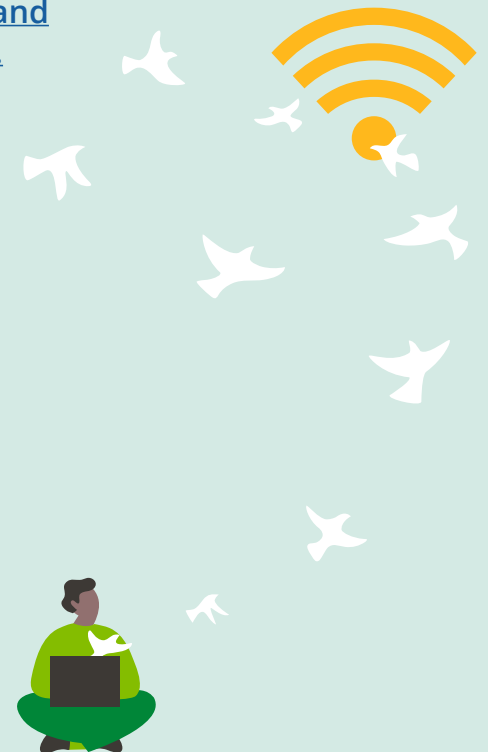
The most effective work will be that where the psychologist, SENCo and other involved professionals work together. This will enable a multi-agency approach where the work is joined up and focused on the same goals.

We should not forget that SENCoS are often the person in schools who is affected the most by the anxiety of others in the system, both adults and children. This unique position often exposes SENCoS to greater challenges and expectations in terms of containing the anxiety of those involved and holding the responsibility for these individuals. This can make SENCoS prone to experiencing high levels of primary and secondary stress.

It is important to ensure that effective supports are in place for all parties concerned. The educational psychologist can often provide support for the SENCo to enable them to better support those in their school.

## Learn more on mental health and wellbeing as well as our range of:

- [Products](#)
- [Assessments](#)
- [Support to help build healthy, calm and happy schools.](#)



## This document has been created with the support of:



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Mary is a qualified SENCo with 20+ years experience in teaching and learning, leading in SEND, EAL and EMA in mainstream schools and in a specialist provision, and now part of an [advisory team](#) working with students, staff and families across London and beyond.



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Dr. Melanie Adkins is a Deputy Principal Educational Psychologist for a Local Authority Educational Psychology Service. Melanie has been an EP for fourteen years and has experience of both Local Authority and private practice. Melanie has also been an Academic Tutor on EP Doctoral training. Melanie is also an Accredited Play Therapist, Clinical Supervisor and Sandplay Practitioner. Prior to training as an EP, Melanie was a teacher in a variety of primary schools, part of the School Leadership Team and a School SENDCo.