

Supporting K-12 Students Through Mental Health Challenges



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health professionals have seen an increase in depression, anxiety and other mental health struggles among K-12 students. Counselors can often help children through these challenges, but when a counselor is not immediately available, Professor of Counselor Education Marc Grimmert says there are ways educators can help.

How Do I Know if A Child is Experiencing Mental Health Struggles?

There are several signs that could be indicators for parents, caregivers or educators that a child or teenager might be experiencing a change in their mental health.

- > **Changes in behavior:** If a child who is normally really happy or outgoing suddenly seems to be withdrawn.
- > **Changes in appetite:** If a child suddenly or gradually starts eating significantly more, or significantly less, than they would typically eat.
- > **Sudden reluctance to engage:** If a child suddenly or gradually stops hanging out with or engaging with friends in the way they typically would, or if they express reluctance to engage with certain adults in their lives.
- > **Constant worry:** If a child appears to be “getting stuck” in negative thoughts and worrying more than they used to.

How Can I Help A Student During a Mental Health Crisis?

1. Be present and listen:

Before an adult can help a child experiencing emotional distress, they need to slow down and listen to what the child has to say. Sit down, use open body language and listen quietly while the child shares what is bothering them.

→ **What you can say:** “I’m noticing something is going on with you. I want to learn what’s going on so I can be helpful to you, but right now, I just want to listen.”

2. Be intentional:

When speaking to a child who might be experiencing emotional distress, adults need to differentiate between what they think will help and what will actually help. For example, while an adult may think a physical gesture like a hug would be comforting, that might actually make the child more uncomfortable. It’s recommended that adults share everything they plan to do before they do it and let kids know that they can tell adults if they’re uncomfortable.

→ **What you can say:** “I would like to talk with you to see what’s going on. Would that be OK? I’m going to sit right here, and we’re just going to have a conversation if that’s alright. If we start talking about anything, or if I’m doing something that bothers you, please let me know, and I’m happy not to do that.”

3. Let them know when you need additional support:

Depending on what the child shares, a caregiver or teacher may realize they are not equipped to handle it on their own and need help from a professional. When that is the case, the adult should communicate this fact with the child in a way that lets them know they will be supported throughout the process. Not doing so could make a child feel more anxious about the problems they’re already experiencing.

→ **What you can say:** “There’s a lot going on right now. I’m not really sure how to handle all of it, but we’re going to start here, and I might have to reach out to some other people that I know to help us. But, I’m going to be here with you through it.”

OUR CONTRIBUTOR: Marc Grimmert is a professor of counselor education and licensed psychologist whose research centers on creating world-class, accessible, and affordable mental healthcare for those who may not otherwise have access. He is the founder and director of the Community Counseling, Education and Research Center (CCERC) at NC State.

