

# Mental & Emotional Well-Being During COVID-19

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Helping Your Student  
Face Isolation Anxiety,  
A Sense of Loss &  
Uncertain Times



SAN DIEGO STATE  
UNIVERSITY

# Face Uncertainty

It's difficult. The ground beneath students is shifting during this COVID-19 pandemic, as they try to come to terms with being in limbo. There's no firm endpoint in mind and the "usual" of their life has been disrupted. That's an unsettling feeling, no doubt.

Most of us aren't wired to tolerate uncertainty and disruption well. We crave predictability and routine, often finding uncertainty more stressful than knowing something bad is going to happen. That's why, in the middle of these difficult times – when students are worried about academics, friendships, relationships, finances, going back to school, job prospects, health and the future – it's important to **remind them that this uncertainty won't last**. They *can* make it through.

## Building Resilience

As you help your student face today's uncertainty, they're building lifelong resilience to bounce back from hard times. Being resilient, according to the Academic Resilience Consortium, means to have capacities for...

- Persistence
- Creativity
- Emotional intelligence
- Grit
- Cognitive flexibility
- Risk-taking
- Adapting to change
- Delaying gratification
- Learning from failure and success
- Overcoming adversity

Try to frame it like this for your student: The current pandemic is allowing them to practice resilience. To illustrate that, ask them to pick one of the capacities above and think about how they're currently putting it in practice. For instance, "creativity" could be how they're working to stay connected with friends despite social distancing. And "emotional intelligence" may be how they're looking out for others rather than retreating internally.

For better or worse, **this moment in time is now part of students' college story**. They're working through it with strength, perseverance and resilience. Consider doing what you can to help them focus on the skills they're building and let all the emotions out. A new normal is upon us these days. Truthfully, students will likely experience other disruptions throughout their lives. By getting solidly through this one, they'll be that much better prepared.

Source: Academic Resilience Consortium, [academicresilience.org](http://academicresilience.org)

## Helping Them Cope: Grab Hold of What *Is* Certain



In uncertain times, it can help students to remind themselves of the constants that *are* certain, such as...

- Their interests
- How much they like their major
- Family/friend love and support
- How important college is to them

Encourage students to name a few certainties that fit. It'll give them something solid to grab hold of during rocky times.

# Make Room to Mourn and Grieve

The things students have lost amidst this pandemic and its associated limits, disruptions and shutdowns are significant. They have every right to mourn the quick goodbyes to friends, uncertainty about when they'll see each other again, missed celebrations, end-of-year events and so much more. In fact, **mourning can be very healthy as they name their grief and face it head on**, rather than pushing it aside like nothing happened.

That grief may involve losing...

- **A Sense of Belonging.** Students may no longer have all the people around that made up their community, causing wonder about where they fit.
- **A Sense of Place.** Campus is where they spent much of their time, energy and effort, so it takes time to adjust.
- **A Sense of Independence.** This may feel stunted by suddenly needing to head home or to another living arrangement.
- **A Sense of Well-Being.** Then, there's this, which is being compromised for everyone as we work to stay healthy and keep others well in the face of COVID-19. Economic difficulties, employment uncertainty, academic shifts, and the loss of anticipated gatherings and celebrations can leave everyone feeling traumatized and uneasy.

There's also something called **Anticipatory Grief** that many people are experiencing. It involves concerns about what the future holds when we're surrounded by uncertainty.

And **Ambiguous Loss** and the grief attached to it is when we can't quite get our heads around the loss of dreams, imagined futures, feeling safe and living in a stable world.

The accumulated losses are significant. So, encourage students to grieve, cry, be fearful and feel things are unfair. Offer an opportunity to let out their sadness and anger, provide comfort and discuss what they're mourning. Only then will they be able to eventually emerge from their grief and take the next steps.

Source: *Harvard Business Review*, 3/23/20

**"It's shattering to lose innocence, it's traumatic to feel things were stolen from us and it is very sad to miss the things we hoped for and anticipated."**

– Psychologist Lauren Rockwell  
(*The Mighty*, March 2020)

## Helping Them Cope: Name the Grief



Identifying their grief is often a necessary first step for students to accept and work through it. So, **help them consider what losses they're mourning at the moment.** End-of-the-year events? Research that's been stalled? The athletic season? Friendships that were just blossoming? When they name their grief, they have a better chance to put their emotions in motion and face them directly.

# Deal with Anxiety

Even before this pandemic hit, 62% of college students in the U.S. said they had experienced overwhelming anxiety within the past 12 months, reported the American College Health Association. Add in a pandemic where they have little control and it makes sense that they may feel surrounded by worry and anxiety.

What are some of the things they're worrying about? They may include questions about returning to campus, finances, employment, friendships, relationships, the future, staying healthy as COVID-19 information swirls around and more. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations; their reactions are personal and *completely* valid.

## What Pandemic Anxiety May Look Like

According to the Centers for Disease Control and UC Berkeley's Health Services, this stress and worry during an infectious disease outbreak can manifest as...

- Anxiety and panic
- Hyper-vigilance about their own health and that of their loved ones
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- Anger
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
- Feeling helpless
- Social withdrawal

If students have pre-existing mental health conditions, please have them continue with treatment and be aware of any new or worsening symptoms. Encourage them to reach out!

## Managing Anxiety

There are some simple, effective ways for students to manage these fears and anxieties so worry about COVID-19 doesn't control their life. They include...

- Talk with trusted others and maintain social connections
- Exercise to channel their panic elsewhere
- Take deep breaths, stretch and meditate to quiet their mind

## Helping Them Cope: Counteract Negative Thoughts



When negative thoughts creep in, students can try to **counteract** them by writing down a positive, rational counter statement. For instance, "I can't control any of this" could be replaced with "But I *can* control how I'm responding."

Or they can **reframe** a negative thought such as "This week has been awful" to find five things that have gone well, from getting a paper done early to finding a great Netflix series.

Source: PositivePsychology.com

# Deal with Anxiety

- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals
- Continue with pre-established counseling sessions
- Give themselves half-hour “worry periods” to get things out so they’re not in a constant state of worry
- Treat themselves to simple pleasures as a boost
- Let go of what’s not in their control
- Get enough quality sleep
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs
- Keep informed with facts from trusted campus and news sources
- Take an occasional news and social media break so they’re not surrounded by upsetting 24/7 coverage
- Stay healthy by following the recommendations to wash their hands frequently or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer, steer clear of sick people, cover their mouth and nose with a tissue (not their hands) when they cough or sneeze, avoid touching their face and stay home
- Seek additional help if they feel overwhelming worry or anxiety

## Helping Them Cope: Be Mindful



Mindful breathing and grounding exercises can help students feel calm and centered.

For instance, they can try the **5-4-3-2-1 exercise**, where they ground themselves by identifying 5 things they can see, 4 things they can touch, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell and 1 thing they can taste. It’s important to take long, slow, deep breaths to enhance the calm.

Students can also find **free resources** to support their mental and emotional wellness during this difficult time at: [blog.calm.com/blog/free-resources](http://blog.calm.com/blog/free-resources).

Plus, help them recognize that **anxiety can sometimes be contagious**. So, it’s important that they try not to constantly discuss the pandemic and its impacts with others where they feed off one another. They may also be susceptible to **empathetic stress**, where they take on some emotions others are experiencing during difficult times. This makes having healthy coping mechanisms at the ready even more important.

Overall, you can help students keep in mind that **this time of pandemic and worry isn’t permanent**. Worst-case scenarios rarely reflect reality, *The Guardian* reminds us, and this *will* end. In the meantime, encourage them not to stuff their worry deep inside because they’re nervous that a “gang of feelings” (sadness, anxiety, etc.) will overrun them. Instead, they can cope with their anxiety in healthy ways, reach out for assistance and take good care.

**Sources:** MayoClinic.org; *The Guardian*, 3/16/20; UC Berkeley University Health Services, [UHS.berkeley.edu](http://UHS.berkeley.edu); Centers for Disease Control, [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov); American College Health Association, [acha.org](http://acha.org)

# Navigate Through Isolation

When students are holed up, temporarily isolated from the people and life they knew, it's natural that a bit of **Isolation Anxiety** may take hold. Add the uncertainty associated with the pandemic and mourning lost opportunities, and it can be quite overwhelming.

## Preventing an Isolation Spiral

Luckily, there are some wise ways to help prevent an isolation spiral, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America and the National Alliance on Mental Health, that you can share with your student, including...

- **Turn Social Distancing into Social Cohesion.** Connect with your people in all the technological and from-afar ways you know how.
- **Find Things to Do.** Do one productive thing in your immediate surroundings each day – from projects to helping a neighbor – so you feel less “stuck” and more accomplished.
- **Stick Close to Your Normal Routine.** Doing so will help make you active and engaged, instead of lethargic and unmotivated. Plus, it'll be easier to adjust when the isolation period ends.
- **Help Others.** Become more externally focused to get outside of your own internal struggle. Check on others, send positive messages, engage in local efforts and reach out.
- **Don't Obsess Over Endless Coronavirus Coverage.** Don't skew your perspective and increase your anxiety by Googling every symptom and watching endless news. Instead, limit media consumption and only tap into reliable sources for information.
- **Keep Things Organized.** Be organized and fairly neat because, when your space becomes chaotic, it's easier for your mind to become that way, too.
- **Start a New Ritual.** Give yourself something to look forward to, whether it's a regular video chat with friends, walks, journaling or cooking with a family member. It'll help feel like you're making the most of this time instead of looking at it as lost opportunity.

**Note:** Isolation can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, so it's important for individuals to stay on track with counseling, medication and self-care.

**Sources:** Anxiety and Depression Association of America; National Alliance on Mental Illness

## Helping Them Cope: Embrace the Pause



Students have hit pause on their regularly scheduled life. So, how might they embrace the pause?

- Enjoy how it feels to quiet their mind when they're not so busy
- Reconnect with people in their life – from a distance
- Start up a positive new habit that they've been putting off

And then, they can consider ways to incorporate more pauses into life when this current situation subsides.

Connecting with other people, even when you can't be with them in person, is crucial during this time of social distancing. **We all need one another's support and care as we struggle with pandemic realities.**

"Social connectedness is critically important to warding off loneliness and resulting depression," according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. What else can connections do for your student during a time of isolation? They can...

- Remind them that they're not alone
- Give them new things to think about
- Get them outside of their own heads
- Help them focus on others' needs instead of just their own

## 10 Ways to Stay Connected During a Pandemic

1. Participate in online campus programs and initiatives
2. Start a virtual game night or book club with some friends
3. Do an online workout with other people
4. Hold outdoor coffee meet-ups with friends and neighbors (standing apart!)
5. Use video chat features so you can hear *and* see one another
6. Play one-on-one games via video
7. Start a game of emoji-charades where you take turns describing movies, TV shows, songs, etc. using only emojis
8. Sing or play music together using a video-sharing platform
9. Challenge your friends or family to livestream trivia on Instagram – or host your own
10. Start a Google Doc with friends so everyone can add ideas about in-person activities to look forward to

Encourage students to let people who are important to them know that. They can have fun with friends in new ways, and build stronger connections by getting creative. It doesn't matter what they do to stay connected. What's important is that they do *something* and do it regularly.

## Helping Them Cope: Realize That Life Isn't Shut Down



If students take a moment to look around, they'll see that life goes on and that they can be part of it during this uncertain time. They can try...

- Supporting healthcare professionals on the frontlines
- Thanking grocery store staff
- Sending thank you notes to hard-working professors
- Waving and talking with neighbors from afar
- Ordering takeout from a local restaurant
- Calling a local agency to see how they can help
- Anticipating what the needs will be after this subsides – and start working on those things now

When we look for the helpers and what is going *right*, it increases our hope, our sense of community and our feeling that we can be part of the solution.

# Tap Into Campus Resources

We know these are uncertain times for our entire **San Diego State University** community, as we navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic together. We're concerned about your student, from their physical health to their mental and emotional well-being. And we're here to help!

In addition to the information in this brochure, please know that the following targeted resources are also available to students – and to you – during this crisis...

## SDSU Resources

- Counseling & Psychological Services  
[www.sdsu.edu/cps](http://www.sdsu.edu/cps)  
619-594-5220  
[psycserv@sdsu.edu](mailto:psycserv@sdsu.edu)
- Student Health Services  
[www.sdsu.edu/shs](http://www.sdsu.edu/shs)  
619-594-4325
- Well-being & Health Promotion  
[Healthpromotion.sdsu.edu](http://Healthpromotion.sdsu.edu)  
619-594-4133  
[well-beingandhealthpromotion@sdsu.edu](mailto:well-beingandhealthpromotion@sdsu.edu)
- Economic Crisis Response Team (ECRT)  
[www.sdsu.edu/ecrt](http://www.sdsu.edu/ecrt)
- Title IX Resources  
[titleix.sdsu.edu](http://titleix.sdsu.edu)  
619-594-3069
- Parent Resources and Information  
[newscenter.sdsu.edu/student\\_affairs/parentinfo.aspx](http://newscenter.sdsu.edu/student_affairs/parentinfo.aspx)  
Parent Hotline: 619-594-1653
- SDSU Police Department  
[police.sdsu.edu](http://police.sdsu.edu)  
619-594-1991

For campus updates about the COVID-19 pandemic and our response, please go to [sdsu.edu](http://sdsu.edu).



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