

Classroom Stress-Breakers

Tips for Offering Students Emotional and Mental Support in the Classroom

We have all had a challenging couple of years. We've had to hear about students grieving the deaths of family members, struggling to stay motivated while they try to survive new economic and physical challenges and overcome unexpected health issues, and remain engaged despite a significant societal increase in daily hassles. Sharing mental health resources with students is an obvious and necessary step, especially with students we recognize are in crises or distress, but many of us also want to do more to support all our students emotionally and mentally. These suggested "stress-breakers" are basic actions drawn from psychological research that apply to just generally being supportive in the classroom and creating a space conducive to well-being. When students mention difficulties or articulate a stressor in class, the list below describes evidence-based effective actions you can implement in the moment.

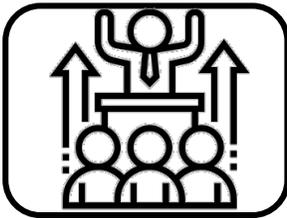


VALIDATE

The most basic element of emotional support is giving the student recognition that what they are experiencing does sound difficult. Common phrases you can use to validate include: "I'm sorry you are dealing with that. It does sound difficult," or "That sounds upsetting. I understand why you're feeling so stressed right now," or "That is a lot to go through."

USE AFFILIATIVE HUMOR WHEN STUDENTS NEED A HAPPY MOMENT

"Affiliative" humor is positive, inclusive, makes everyone feel more connected, and has immediate mental health benefits. The trick is that humor must be "good-natured" and not sarcastic, aggressive, or exclusive to certain people, values, or interests. Puns (e.g., "Why was 10 afraid of 7? Because 7 ate/8 9.") are one example of affiliative humor that can be successfully used in classrooms. Asking if anyone has great pun to share because you could all use a mood-booster or mental-cleanser is an easy way to go about it. You can also share one yourself by saying something like, "I could really use a smile- break right now, so I'm going to tell you about the most awful pun I heard...or show you my goofiest dance move before we start back in."



GIVE RELEVANT COMPLIMENTS

Stress creates self-doubts and helping students combat those doubts can be as easy as offering basic compliments, such as: "I think you're very strong for being here and pursuing your academic interests today," or "Thank you for sharing, that takes courage. I am glad you're here contributing to this class," or "Thank you for showing up, for still trying to learn. I admire your resilience."

CONSIDER IF YOU CAN LIGHTEN THE BURDEN IN CLASS

It may be possible to lower the cognitive burden for the day, by offering to share your notes or outline for the class, or to record the class and make it available to students afterwards, or to put together some electronic flash-cards they use before next class. It may also be possible to start with a warm-up activity like a review quiz game, or a class discussion summarizing everything they can remember covering last class. Active learning activities generally offer a helpful distraction and boost most students' moods. Spending five minutes having fun as a larger class or reviewing material they already know builds up students' self-confidence that they can learn what comes next too (and sometimes helps them recover things that they missed last class due to stress before the confusion gets deeper).



DO NOT "QUIK-FIX"

Avoid asking questions that might be interpreted as judgmental or prying (e.g., "So how did that happen?") or offering advice (e.g., "When that happened to me, I found meditation really helped."). It is natural to show you care by offering up your similar experiences and learnings but doing so doesn't actually help your student (unless they explicit ask you for advice first). Instead, try starting with a question that invites them to share their own thoughts on handling it, such as, "What do you think helps/ will help you as you deal with this?"

CHECK BACK IN

At the end of class, in next class, or even via e-mail later, a simple, "How are you doing now?" helps students see that you do remember their challenge and care about their experience. Again, avoid the inclination to fix or offer advice though. The most important things is to listen, validate, and express care such as, "I hear you. I think you're being brave. I'm proud of you for trying to take care of yourself too. I hope things get easier, and I'm glad you're here today."

If you do recognize a student is in distress or crisis, please engage and share UH's formal mental health resources:
<https://www.uh.edu/caps/resources/students/>