

NAVIGATING OUR OWN PERSONAL FEAR AND HELPING OUR STUDENTS DURING COVID 19

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, we are being inundated with messages to protect our physical health by washing our hands, practicing social distancing, and wearing masks. But we are given very little guidance to support our emotional health. This uncertainty can leave us feeling anxious and/or fearful, making us more susceptible to illness. When stress, worry or fear are left unchecked they can suppress our immune system and that helps us ward off illness. When we are in a state of fear, the reactive part of our brain (sometimes referred to as the emotional brain or downstairs brain), known as the amygdala takes over control of our thoughts or actions. In essence, we enter a state of fight – flight- or freeze existence based on our fear. When we are in this reactive state our amygdala automatically produces a steroid known as cortisol. Cortisol itself is a useful defense mechanism to protect us when faced with an immediate, imminent threat to our survival (e.g., when responding to an emergency situation such as avoiding an oncoming car when crossing the street).

However, when fear associated with experiences becomes prolonged (or perceived as prolonged), the amygdala works overtime. It continues to produce cortisol, essentially shutting down the rationale, decision-making part of our brains (the frontal cortex which is referred to as the thinking or upstairs brain). Being in a constant state of fight-flight-or freeze is exhausting and unhealthy and weakens our immune system.

The reason for sharing the above is that having accurate information as to what many of us, along with our students, are experiencing can be helpful in our efforts to mitigate our own fears and to position us to be able to help our students to do the same. The bottom line, if the thinking-brain of our students is off-line for extended periods of time due to being in an ongoing state of fear and uncertainty, this experience can have a toxic effect and thus impede their ability to rationally solve problems or achieve. This too, of course, is the same for us as professors.

So, what can we do with this understanding given our current set of circumstances that can be helpful for ourselves as well as our students? Actually, quite a bit. Here are some points that may prove helpful in our efforts to support our students:

- Be sure to acknowledge these trying times on a personal level with our students, but don't ruminate on the problem. Rather, validate their concerns and provide factual information about COVID 19 and the importance of exercising influence over the things we DO have the ability to influence to help reduce our fear.
- Consider sending periodic communications to simply check in on a personal level and to express that you were thinking about them. Personalized communications rather than group communications tend to be perceived as most meaningful and reassuring. In this type of communication, consider sharing guidance on the skill of shifting focus or thoughts towards things to be grateful for and the increasing depth and breadth of acts of kindness witnessed among people in response to our immediate circumstances.
- Encourage students to be in the moment. This mindfulness practice can help to shift focus away from the uncertainty of what the future might hold to what is happening right now. It can also help reduce the level of stress they might be experiencing by worrying about what may or may not happen and help them to re-engage their thinking brain.

- Encourage random acts of kindness towards others which makes the person providing the kind gesture, as well as the recipient of the kind gesture, feel good. These types of feelings help to build resiliency which also helps to strengthen the immune system.
- Encourage gaining, maintaining and strengthening a sense of humor. You don't have to try to become a virtual stand-up comic, but perhaps build in some mechanism for levity during interactions and encourage students to do the same.
- While sharing accurate information is essential, be cautious about information overload. Acknowledge this concern and suggest to students about setting limits of watching the news and using social media.
- When a student or colleague expresses concern, listen to them non-judgmentally. Acknowledge and validate their concerns and provide accurate information and encourage exploration of self-help strategies (e.g., maintaining a reasonable degree of structure in healthy daily routines) as well as appropriate professional help when warranted. Be a beacon of hope as hope for a better tomorrow can help us all to navigate the immediate challenges at hand.

One final piece of guidance that extends beyond the above points for consideration. Please understand and accept that there will likely be a direct correlation between your ability to navigate your stress, worry and fears, and your ability to help your students to do the same. Much like the airline attendant that reviews safety features before take-off, remember that to be a part of the solution, you need to ensure that you address your immediate needs first so that you can then help others.

Yes, these are unsettling and difficult times, but we can get through these uncharted waters together. How we interact with our students, in this regard, extends far beyond the traditional curricula in the courses we instruct. In many instances, putting in place the above-noted considerations may likely serve as a pre-requisite to achievement and retention for many of our students.

If you have questions or are looking for additional information don't hesitate to reach out to the McDowell Institute at (mcdowell@bloomu.edu).

