

Be explicit

First, be explicit about what we know about mental health and cognitive functioning at times like this, explaining to students what we know about chronic stress and why it would have an impact on us in the ways that Dr. [Kira Mauseth](#) describes (low mood, memory problems, problems with planning, etc). Share that some students might be experiencing these impacts, while others may not, but that it is a normal reaction to very abnormal circumstances. I will add that this approach is always helpful, as there will always be students who are living with stress and trauma in your classrooms. A simple way to bring attention to one component of chronic stress is to intentionally focus on sympathetic nervous system arousal. Start class with a breathing exercise or relaxation exercise to ground students in that space and lower arousal that some may be experiencing chronically. Have them reflect on the experience of intentionally calming their bodies and how they can become aware of how they embody stress and what they can do to help themselves. If you're comfortable, do a small relaxation exercise or even a moment of silence at the outset of each class.

Build Community

Second, I would double down on efforts to create community and belonging in the classroom. We know that this is foundational to create equitable learning opportunities for all students and especially helps those who are suffering for myriad reasons. Right now, we're almost all suffering. The research also tells us that instructors/faculty feel rushed to get to "content" and miss the really important step of building community at the outset of class (and ongoing). Even if it takes a while, the return on their deeper learning will be much more than it might be otherwise and will really help right now, especially. For some students, this is their primary space for social support, thus connections with other students will be really helpful for them and promote better learning.

The first two suggestions here are in alignment with the research on Trauma-Informed Pedagogy. This [webinar with Mays Imad](#), a neuroscientist and survivor of the Iraq war, is a great overview of T-I pedagogy, if you are interested.

Here are some specific ideas for community building and belonging:

- Learn names and use their names as much as possible (and encourage them to do the same).
- Learn about your students as early as possible (have them submit to you directly with targeted questions (that aren't too personal, of course) or set up a Padlet sharing site for them to share something interesting about themselves with the group, etc).
- Encourage them to reach out to one another for help, as well as you (e.g., encourage them form study groups outside of class - make it easy to do so, buddy up with someone, etc).
- Do small group "get to know you" chats between students and have them report back to the group what they learned from one another. Or "get to know you games" like 'have you ever?'
- Co-create a document with students about what it means to "deeply listen" to one another and times or spaces in which they felt most comfortable and motivated to engage in the class and what that looked like. How can this be re-created in your class?
- Use TILT (see below)

Weave in transparency whenever possible

Third, bring transparency to the classroom (based on the "[Transparency in Learning and Teaching \(TILT\)](#)" literature) in your assignments and class activities. This has been a remarkably effective tool to increase belonging, long-term retention, and increased motivation and has a disproportionately positive impact on marginalized students and first-generation students. The [TILT website](#) is a useful resource for the basics and provides examples. Consider changing one or two assignments in your class to model this framework. While changing assignments to align with the TILT model can feel like too much right now, consider that small changes can be effective too. Make small adjustments to a couple assignments for now if that is all you can manage.

Take care of yourself

Finally, remember that your self-care is as important as your students'. Try not to feel pressured to make it all ok in the classroom, which is impossible. Do what you can to the extent that it does not tax you too much and create flexibility for yourself. Can't focus on grading? Take longer to do so if you need time and share with them that you need more time, as you would offer them grace during this time, too. Everyone (you and students) will need flexibility as we navigate these most challenging waters together.

I know this seems like a lot, but it really calls for relatively minor changes that can have a big impact. Hope this helps!

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