

Providing Students With Emotional Support During a Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has changed our “normal” or daily routine. What was expected to be a two-week shelter in place or “lockdown” became considerably longer. I’m an adjunct instructor who primarily works from home, so the lockdown did not affect much of my daily routine. However, I did notice a change in my online students. Students who were once active online were not logging in as often. I would receive emails requesting extensions on assignments from students who were essential workers, exhausted from putting in extra hours at work. Other students emailed me asking about their options for dropping the course because they felt they could not concentrate and remain current with their course assignments.

While I was fortunate to be with my family during the initial lockdown, I learned that several of my students were not as fortunate and were experiencing the lockdown alone. Without a support system to help them cope with their circumstances, these students experienced anxiety about the changes occurring in their world. Nontraditional students were physically and mentally exhausted, especially those who were parents. They were trying to remain calm for their children, teach them from home, and were struggling to stay current with their own coursework. Some of my students knew someone who was sick or knew someone who had passed away from the virus. Everyone was struggling to grasp this new normal. It was then that I realized my students needed emotional support more than ever. Below are a few of the steps I have taken to help support my students during the pandemic and beyond.

Use available communication tools. Increased communication becomes considerably more important in distance learning. Although I try to promptly respond to student emails, I take advantage of the application “Remind” to help expedite student communications. Remind is a text messaging app that permits communication with students in real time. I began using the app about two years ago with my dual credit students to remind them about upcoming assignments and exam dates. During the pandemic, I decided to use Remind to provide students with a platform they could use to mentally escape. When I introduced the app, I told my students that it was a place for them to discuss movies or shows they had watched or recommend interesting books or hobbies. It was a space they could use to talk or hear about topics other than the

virus. To my pleasant surprise, a good number of students used the app. They discussed the latest series they were watching on Netflix, recommended a few good books, or talked about their day. If a student did not participate, I reached out to them personally to see how they were doing.

Become familiar with your institution’s student resources. I reached out to students who I had not heard from via the Remind app or by email. A few students had lost their jobs and were searching for a new one. I also had students who were having a difficult time dealing with anxiety. We have great resources at my institution, so I referred my students to these offices. I knew that if I could not help them, someone at my institution could. I familiarized myself with the resources available, such as the campus food pantry and staff members in the student health services center who could connect with my students and discuss their situations.

Be flexible. If this pandemic has taught me anything, it’s to be flexible. I extended deadlines and due dates on some assignments. I understood that some of my students were parents and may have had to help their children with online lessons. Instead of having assignments due during the week, I extended the due dates to the weekend. I transformed writing assignments into reflective responses to give students the opportunity to write and share their feelings, which can be therapeutic. For instance, in one prompt I asked, “Everything we read and hear regarding the pandemic has been negative. What is something positive that you’ve experienced or witnessed?” This was my way of helping students see the bright side of a negative experience. One student wrote about teaching his grandmother how to video chat so they were able to have virtual dinners almost every night. He learned a lot about his grandmother and his family history. By having assignments that focused on the positive things happening in their lives, students were able to switch their mindset, even if was just for a moment, to a more positive one.

It’s okay to share feelings. I told my students that it was okay to feel anxious and scared. The pandemic derailed all of us from our daily routine and we are all still learning how to adapt to a new normal today. I assured my students that it was alright not to feel perfectly normal, and if they needed to talk about something, I was available. I was surprised by the number of responses I received. I had a student who was a single mother with two young children. She was finding it difficult to keep

a positive attitude and a smile for her children when she herself was feeling anxious and scared. She was unsure if she was “allowed to not be okay.” Another student expressed relief because she thought she was the only one feeling overwhelmed. I believe that when instructors share their own feelings with students, it opens the lines of communication and helps students realize they are not the only ones feeling anxious about the unknown.

Continue to stay connected. Although the semester is ending and you may not see or hear from students again, it’s important to continue to keep the lines of communication open. Every now and then I send an email to my prior semester students, the ones who were with me when the pandemic started, to see how they are doing. It is nice to hear that most of them have adjusted to this new, but hopefully temporary, way of life. Several have even kept in touch with other students from the class.

As faculty and staff, we are all in this together with the same goal in mind: To help our students succeed. We need to support our students academically and emotionally to the fullest extent possible. A simple “How are you?” or “Is there anything I can do to help?” can show our students that we care about their emotional well-being.

Angela Alejandro, *Adjunct Instructor, Psychology*

For more information, contact the author at McLennan Community College, aalejandro@mclennan.edu.