

## **Important mental health factors post trauma in returning to school**

By Alexandra Gil, MA & Chelsea Torres, MA, LPC

The return, after what feels like an eternity, may be igniting mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety for children everywhere. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has outlined considerations for schools to supplement state and local guidelines in order to ensure a safe and healthy start to the school year.

Social support is instrumental in securing a positive response to trauma and stress caused by the pandemic. Given the lack of peer support and relationship bonding due to COVID-19, it is imperative that positive attachment and bonding techniques are considered for implementation throughout the school day. Trauma-informed mental health supports are crucial in optimizing the academic environment.

### *The deficit post-distance learning*

It is important to acknowledge that students likely didn't grasp as much from distance learning as they would have from in-person instruction. In addition to the lack of academic progress that may have been experienced, the social and emotional learning was substantially affected. While the focus may be on having students play catch up when they return, realistic academic expectations should take priority so as to not exacerbate mental health difficulties.

Additionally, students with disabilities may experience a more difficult time transitioning back to school. In addition to the lack of supportive instruction, they have also been without school-based therapeutic services throughout this arduous time. It would be helpful to review each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) needs and make modifications based on

each student's needs before they return to school in order to optimize their academic environment.

Mental health counseling services should be at the frontline when it comes to helping students acclimate to the academic environment once again. Validating their feelings of stress, fear, and excitement in returning to a more familiar way of living. Mental health staff are instrumental in providing critical support to students, staff, and teachers. Students may be grieving the loss of loved ones as a result of the virus, missed experiences, and stress of financial struggles.

### *Adjusting to a "new normal"*

Every individual and every family is experiencing various emotions during this unprecedented time, and each is coping in their own unique way. Regardless of age, grade, or school district, the reopening and returning to school process will vary from student to student. Some schools have decided to practice a hybrid model of mostly in person with one or two days of distance learning while others have opted for fully in person or leaving it to the discretion of the child's guardians. Most universities have opted for a fully virtual platform. In addition to being mindful of unforeseen deficits post-distance learning, it is important to consider an individuals' adjustment to returning to school or continuance of remote learning.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) identifies adjustment disorder as emotional or behavioral symptoms in response to an identifiable stressor or stressors occurring within three months of the onset of the stressor (APA, 2013). COVID-19 is certainly the most obvious identifiable stressor for most of us. Returning to school, however, during a pandemic that is still very much happening, is certainly an identifiable stressor for most students. Furthermore, according to the DSM-V, not only is the diagnosis of adjustment disorder

common, it also often appears in the form of an individuals' poor performance at school. Therefore, while educators and parents alike rationalize a students' poor academic performance to distance learning, it may very well be that the student is also struggling with adjustment to this "new normal." This only further substantiates the claim made earlier that mental health workers and services are a vital resource for all students as they return to school. The adjustment for students is also not something to view as a one week or one-month window after which educators and families assume all is back to normal. This mindful attention and awareness ought to be maintained throughout the entire school year or at the very least for the remainder of the pandemic.