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Returning to School **After Lockdown:**

Kooth's Tips and Advice
for Teachers



■ Understanding the Difficulty of Returning to School

Data from Kooth, the UK's largest online digital mental health provider for children and young people (CYPs)

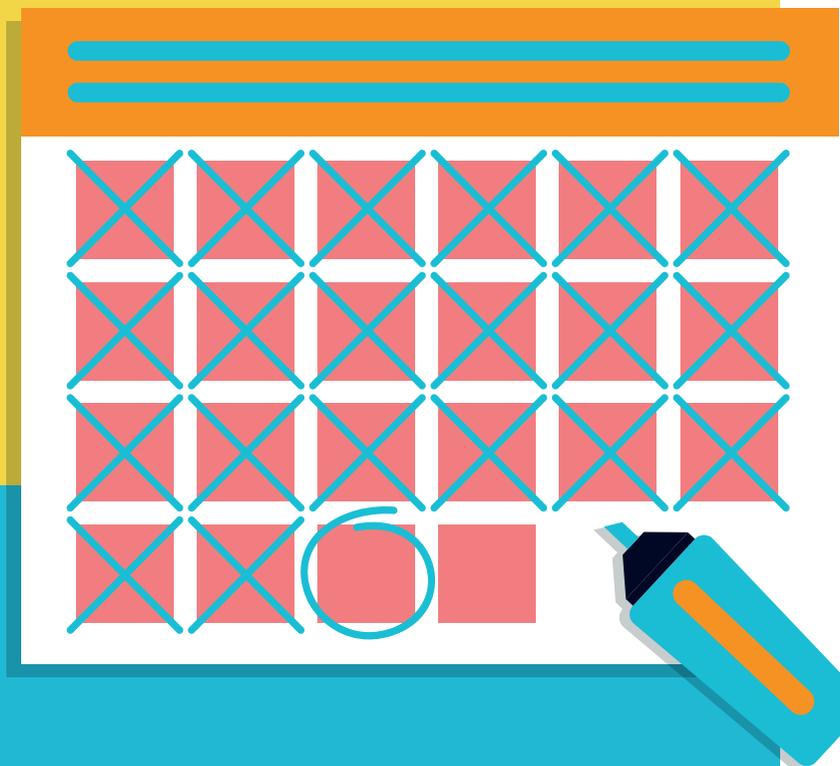
- There has been an **87%** increase in the number of CYPs presenting with sadness issues in comparison to last year
- There has been a **53%** increase in the number of CYPs presenting with eating difficulties in comparison to last year
- **43%** of CYPs are presenting with issues around anxiety/stress
- **1/5** of all CYPs are presenting with thoughts of suicide
- **Nearly a quarter** of all CYPs are presenting with family relationship issues
- Feelings of low self worth have affected almost **12%** of CYPs
- **More than one fifth** of all CYPs are presenting with self harm issues
- **46%** increase in average weekly service users logging in to Kooth

■ Introduction

School is so much more than a place of learning - the community of support, structures and boundaries create an important **sense of safety and belonging** for children- and indeed for many, school is where they feel most safe in the world. The start of another school year can be anxiety-provoking for students at the best of times, but the normal back-to-school nerves are likely to be a lot more acute this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. Teachers will be faced with the daunting task of having to support students transition back to face-to-face learning, whilst at the same time managing their own adjustment and stress.

With anxieties still high for many, creating an environment that promotes safety and sense of belonging is going to be crucial as schools reopen and this should be afforded the same attention as catching up academically. Whilst some pupils will welcome the return to structure and familiarity of a typical school day, others may benefit from a more empathetic and measured approach.

Here are our tips and suggestions to help best support your students navigate some of the complicated emotions they may be facing with going back to school, as well as advice for helping you to maintain your own mental wellbeing.



■ Importance of Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Space

For a number of young people, the impact of this pandemic will have been devastating. Some will have experienced the premature loss of a parent or loved one and many will have ongoing worries about the health risks within their families - particularly those from known vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities. **“The impact of parental unemployment on young people cannot be underestimated; whether a reality or a possible future consequence, this threatens their human needs at the most basic and fundamental level in terms of having sufficient food and shelter that most of us take for granted,”** explains Dr. Lynne Green, Chief Clinical Officer, at Kooth. **“For those living in households where there is abuse and/or neglect (including through parental substance misuse), the loss of the school environment has been so much more than a loss of education and social connections.”**

We know that trauma in childhood can have both immediate and long-term negative consequences on development at all levels (eg social, emotional, cognitive, physical). **“In short, those who have experienced trauma tend to become much more sensitive to threat, resulting in anxious responses being triggered over time by less and less stress,”** says Dr Lynne Green **“Teachers are in a fantastic position to create more positive experiences for young people to help counter the long term risks.....and to create an environment that does not just foster learning, but creates a sense of safety.”**



Supporting Your Students...

■ Communication

Given how unpredictable the world is right now, the importance of open, honest communication can not be underestimated. **“When we are faced with uncertainty, it is natural for us to seek out information from a range of sources to meet our need for clarification,”** says Dr. Green. Students may feel nervous or anxious about returning to school and need reassuring to help them feel that it is a safe environment. **“As teachers, it is important that your pupils (and parents) feel able to ask questions and have some confidence that your responses are accurate and honest, based on the knowledge that you have.”**

Be prepared for difficult questions but if there’s a question that you can’t answer, that’s ok! **“Don’t worry too much about having all the answers and solutions....transparency and candidness (with age appropriate language!) goes a long way and will promote that all important sense of safety.”**



■ Allowing vulnerability

Lockdown will have affected students in different ways and reactions to the pandemic are going to be hugely varied. It's also known that many young people will experience delayed reactions which may play out in the school setting, says Dr. Green. **“By recognising this and adopting a ‘universal precaution’ approach, you will enable those who are struggling to feel supported and increase the resilience of all, thus reducing the likelihood of a negative reaction further down the line.”**

Dr. Green also suggests that encouraging open dialogue about the impact of COVID-19, through group discussions (for example), as well as teacher **‘modelling’** that it is ok to feel sad, worried, angry etc to help reduce feelings of isolation and promote a sense of belonging and safety.



■ Getting the basics right

The school experience is likely to be very different for returning pupils - e.g. socially distanced classrooms, new playground rules, staggered break times and forward-facing desks.

“Ensuring that the new boundaries are clear and in line with local and national guidance plus having support in place to better enable their effective implementation, will create a sense of confidence not only in your pupils but also amongst your staff, parents and the wider community,” says Dr. Green.



■ Flexibility

As you begin to adjust to the **'new normal'**, it's important to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Boundaries and systems are crucial but flexibility has never been so important as it is right now given the levels of uncertainty we are facing.

“By building in some flexibility to the rules, you will be teaching your pupils a lifelong skill of being able to bend and adapt when faced with challenges,” explains Dr. Green. **“When managed within an overarching environment of consistency and open (age appropriate) communication, a flexible approach will feel responsive for your pupils and this will further promote a sense of safety.”**



■ Creativity

Concerns over falling behind are going to be unusually high this academic year, amongst pupils, parents and teachers - and may be particularly prevalent for those facing GCSE and A Levels exams next year.

Whilst attempts to redress the six-month absence from school that many have faced is important, making time for creative and social activities such as art, drama or music, is helpful too. **“Group projects for those with shared interests outside of traditional sets or year groups will help pupils to experience school as a place where they belong, regardless of how they are performing academically and in spite of any emotional difficulties they may be facing,”** says Dr. Green.



Maintaining Your Own Mental Wellbeing ...

■ 5 Ways to Positive Wellbeing

Teachers and educators are facing unprecedented challenges and stresses in the midst of COVID-19. In order to continue providing students with the same high standards of education and ongoing support, it is essential that you take good care of yourselves and pay attention to your own wellbeing too. Below, Dr. Lynne Green, chief clinical officer at Kooth, shares five easy-to-implement strategies to help support positive mental wellbeing.

Self-care

Teachers are fantastic at supporting and caring for others but like many in helping professions, you are not always so great at applying the same level of compassion to yourselves! There is no right or wrong way to cope through this, however, we do know that guilt, comparisons to others and self criticism tend not to work. Compassion, on the other hand, towards yourself as well as to others, is an emotional response known to be essential in promoting wellbeing. Remember you are trying your best and that is good enough.

Work-life balance

It is important that you try not to let your anxiety about needing to do a good job push you into overdrive - at the expense of your own wellbeing and/or the wellbeing of those around you (including your pupils). Allow yourself to take some time to focus on the things that help you relax, help you feel energised and positive.



De-personalisation

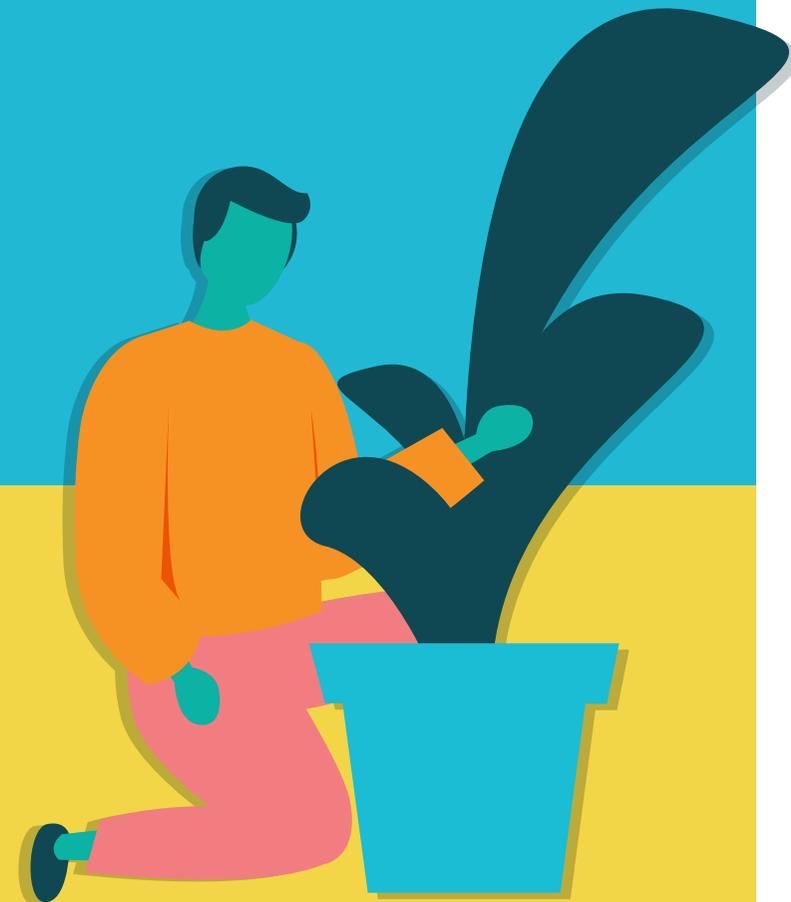
Unfortunately, those working in public, front line services often bear the brunt of other peoples' anxieties; teachers for example, are likely to be on the receiving end of the many worries and frustrations experienced by both parents and pupils. Whilst it is important to hear those worries and not push people away, please try not to personalise the emotional response of others - remember that whilst you may be part of the solutions, the problems that have arisen as a result of this pandemic are **not your fault**.

Realistic Expectations

Whilst having a high expectation that things can and will get better is important for both personal mental health as well as inspiring confidence in others; unrealistic expectations tend to result in unhealthy pressure and ultimately create a sense of failure. Having a sense of perspective in terms of what can be achieved under the current set of circumstances and challenges will reduce the likelihood of over promising and under delivering - have high standards - but try not to get too carried away in setting them!

Support Network

Last but definitely not least, it is vitally important that teachers consider their own support network and reach out for help when required. Your role is arguably amongst the most demanding in our society at the best of times - and you are now seen as playing a significant role in redressing what has been an unprecedented challenge within our education system. In addition to confiding in friends, family and colleagues, please please please seek professional advice and support if required - even at an early preventive stage - do not suffer in silence.



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