



# Supporting Students and Staff After **COVID-19**

Your Trauma-Sensitive  
Back-to-School  
Transition Plan



**JEN ALEXANDER**

FOR MORE go to: <http://bpub.fyi/SupportAfterCOVID19>



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# About the Author

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Jen Alexander believes we can make a positive difference in the lives of students, one relationship at a time. That's why she's a passionate leader in the movement to build trauma-sensitive schools. Known by children and adults alike as "Ms. Jen," she loves helping kids—and giving others the tools and strategies they need to help kids, too.

As a former special education teacher and school counselor in Iowa, Ms. Jen has approximately 20 years of experience providing support to young people and the educators who serve them. As a popular professional development facilitator, trauma expert, and author, Ms. Jen shows fellow educators what works and why when it comes to building trauma-sensitive schools. With a unique ability to connect with students, educators, other helpers, and parents, Ms. Jen is devoted to facilitating schoolwide trauma-sensitive transformation through effective professional development paired with school consultation. Within minutes of working with her, educators know they are learning from someone who understands the real struggles of everyday teaching and learning, and they join in her belief that change benefiting educators, students, and entire school communities is possible.

Ms. Jen holds degrees in psychology and special education teaching as well as a master's degree in professional school counseling from the University of Northern Iowa. She is also a nationally certified counselor and registered school-based play therapist.

# 1

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## Why Understand Trauma?

### COVID-19 and Its Effects on Students

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I miss my friends and teacher and think I'd like to redo my goal for the year. Maybe just stay alive and keep other people alive too. I don't really need to move up a bunch of reading levels or finish workbooks.

—Aisha, an almost-9-year-old

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Aisha is missing connections with the people she values at school. Although she is only a child, Aisha is reevaluating educational priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic—focusing less on academic goals, more on safety as well as people and connection. You too may be missing your connections with students and colleagues, and you too will be reevaluating educational priorities when schools reopen. Part of that process requires an understanding of trauma.

#### LEARNING GOALS

This chapter will guide you to

- Define *trauma* and describe how it can affect students' development, well-being, and learning
- Identify potential traumatic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures on your learning community
- Anticipate key student and team needs when schools reopen in your community
- Determine priorities for your trauma-sensitive transition plan

Download these Chapter 1 resources and keep them handy as you read:

**Resource 1.1: Waves Journal, Resource 1.2: Ms. Jen’s Journal, Resource 1.3: Dolphin Journal, and Resource 1.4: #NoticeTheNeed #MeetTheNeed page.**

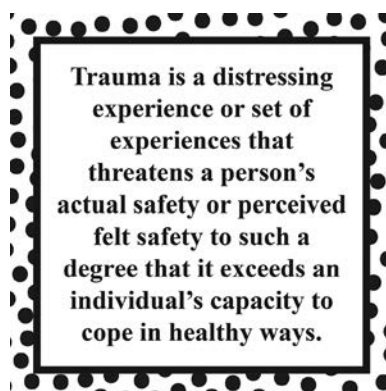
The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened lives and brought widespread illness as well as a high death toll, especially within communities of color, groups who are underresourced, and populations who were medically vulnerable. The pandemic also drastically reduced face-to-face social interactions in the spring of 2020 and beyond. As experts emphasized the importance of social distancing to flatten the curve and help prevent the health care system from becoming overwhelmed, much of the world shut down, including schools. The majority of people have been not working, working from home, or working in essential jobs where they risked exposure to the novel coronavirus. For everyone—including students, families, and educators—life suddenly changed in dramatic ways.

School closures as part of social distancing have been necessary in an attempt to keep everyone in our communities safe and healthy. Consequences related to the virus may impact youth development and influence school-related concerns regarding attendance, health, behavior, social functioning, and learning for a long time to come.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Individual responses to this global crisis will be different, but at the very least we, as educators, know that many children have experienced social isolation during what may also be times of prolonged, unpredictable, and uncontrollable stress, fear, family illness, grief, and trauma. As defined in *Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Your Guide to Creating Safe, Supportive Learning Environments for All Students* (Alexander, 2019), *trauma* is a distressing experience or set of experiences that threatens a person’s actual safety or perceived sense of felt safety (Hughes, 2009; Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006) to such a degree that it exceeds an individual’s capacity to cope in healthy ways (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Craig, 2016; Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Ogden et al., 2006; van der Kolk, 2014, 2017).

While we all feel stress, which is simply a demand or challenge, not everyone experiences trauma. Think of trauma as stress that is *too much* for an individual. It overwhelms the body’s biological stress response system, resulting in negative effects upon life functioning, whether those effects are immediate or delayed (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2015; Siegel, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014, 2017). Often, trauma comes in *too fast* or goes on *too long* while there is *not enough* support. What is *too much* for one person may not be *too much* for someone else. In this way, it is an individual phenomenon.





## What Causes Trauma?

A number of adverse events can cause trauma, including (but not limited to) accidents, natural disasters, medical trauma, separation from or loss of parents, child neglect or abuse, violence, oppression, racism, poverty, or war. Two thirds of children in the United States experience a potentially traumatic event by age 16 (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN] Schools Committee, 2017). Furthermore, at least one in four students in all schools has been traumatized to a degree that negatively affects school success (NCTSN Schools Committee, 2008). Threats to safety and life itself, whether for oneself or loved ones—such as the threat posed by COVID-19—have the potential to cause trauma.

Again, that does not mean that everyone will be traumatized by this pandemic. It just means we, as educators, need to be aware of increased vulnerability for *all* youth, families, colleagues, community members, and for ourselves. We also need to be aware of increased vulnerability for *some* youth based on environmental, housing, medical, and educational inequities that left communities of color with increased health risks in this pandemic due to preexisting health conditions and/or a dependency on low-paying essential jobs and, thus, more exposure to the deadly coronavirus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). Youth in these communities may have experienced more stress and grief than others on top of the trauma associated with racism that was present both before and during the pandemic.

With the knowledge that this time in history has affected everyone, but in different ways and to different degrees, we must proceed with curiosity so as to not make assumptions about any person or family's experience. At the same time, we must intentionally work to help soothe our own and others' stress responses in an attempt to prevent traumatic reactions for everyone. Start by emphasizing patterns of repeated, predictable care and connection in both personal relationships and within the wider community, so that comfort, love, healing, hope, empowerment, and freedom can serve as a safe haven from pain and fear.

## How Does Trauma Affect Learning?

All humans have a stress response system that is activated during times of challenge, regardless of whether a stressor or series of stressors is tolerable or overwhelming. In order for our bodies to be healthy and for us to feel well, we need to acquire more energy than we expend on any given day (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009). Importantly, an activated stress response system expends energy, which is why it is critical for all of us that stress states be temporary, manageable in intensity, and quickly soothed (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Perry, Pollard, Blakely, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995). When any person experiences stress that is *too much* or goes on for *too long*, especially if relational support is *not enough*, trauma can occur, causing changes in how the brain and body function. Trauma responses affect people physically, emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively, interpersonally, and spiritually. Ultimately, these changes can impact one's sense of self. When stress response patterns persist for youth or educators, health (including mental health) and school success can be jeopardized.

Overall, the degree of nervous system arousal we experience affects our ability to learn, process information, control our responses, regulate attention and



behavior, and generally manage executive functions. That is because each of these functions is dependent on activity in the “upstairs,” or higher order, parts of the brain (cortex). These functions require that we regulate arousal so that we are in a calm, alert processing state because that allows information to flow up to higher structures in the brain (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009). Think of this as being in a state where we feel *just right* inside. It enables us to feel safe, interact positively with others, and focus, think, plan, and learn in thoughtful, flexible, and creative ways. Effective teaching and learning are easier when both teachers and students are experiencing regulated arousal. In fact, as teachers or students dysregulate to greater degrees and get further away from regulated arousal, effective teaching and learning can become impossible.

When stress happens, our bodies can dysregulate in two different ways (or a combination of both). In the first way, our bodies mobilize defenses through an anxious, hypervigilant state where we feel *big feelings* and otherwise experience an increase in energy—all of which is controlled by “downstairs” brain functions (brainstem and limbic system). It is as if our body has pushed on the gas pedal to help us through whatever threat or difficulty we are facing, and when that happens, information does not flow to the “upstairs” brain in the same way (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Porges, 2011). This is called *hyperarousal* and is associated with changes to physical sensations as well as emotions. People tend to feel as though they are losing control and are less able to connect with others in positive ways. If the stress response is not relieved by a removal of the stressor or an increase in social support, the intensity of this state can escalate to what is called a flooded state of arousal, whereby the individual feels overwhelmed, loses control, and relies on the fight, flight, or freeze reflex in an effort to preserve safety (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Ogden et al., 2006; Porges, 2009; Siegel, 2010).

Teachers and students who are experiencing a state of hyperarousal may feel anxious or irritable; they may have difficulty being patient or flexible, struggle to recognize another’s point of view, and may act quickly without thinking things through. It’s hard to focus, think, plan, or learn. In flooded arousal states, teachers or students may become unsafe or flee quickly to escape situations, which can disrupt learning for everyone. Importantly, these reactions are reflexive and not a result of choices.

The second way our bodies can dysregulate is through an immobilization of defenses whereby the body is shut down into a numb state, energy decreases, and attention is withdrawn from the outside world (Porges, 2011). This is called *hypoarousal*, and it is as if our body pushes on the brakes instead of the gas pedal (Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Porges, 2011). While teachers or students who are experiencing hypoarousal may appear calm, they are not in a regulated arousal state. Rather, they are more shut down and generally feeling *not enough*, which makes it difficult to connect with others positively or teach and learn effectively.

Optimal teaching and learning occur when both educators and students spend much of their day in regulated states of arousal. When youth and adults experience ongoing stress and trauma, however, it is more difficult to maintain a *just right* level of energy in our bodies. In fact, internal dysregulation is necessary when individuals face threats to real or felt safety. This is why understanding trauma and how to respond to student and adult feelings and needs is central to planning for

the reopening of schools. Attending to this social-emotional piece isn't an "extra" or a distraction from academic work. Rather, it is what will make it more possible to resume academic work at all.

### What Is Collective Trauma?

When groups are traumatized, it is called *collective trauma*, which can psychologically affect entire societies and, ultimately, change culture as groups remember and reconstruct memories of the event(s) in ways that create meaning and influence multiple generations (Eisenberg & Silver, 2011; Hirschberger, 2018; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008; Ursano et al., 2014). It is certainly possible that *collective trauma* will result from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, *collective posttraumatic growth* (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) could also occur. Collective posttraumatic growth results when a group is changed in positive ways following a collective trauma. This is most likely if we organize together and fight for change that allows us to put our communities back together in ways that are better than how they were before the novel coronavirus tipped the balance and made things fall apart.

### TRAUMA AND COVID-19

Different students will have had different experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. For some, these might be disruptions in an otherwise secure childhood. Others may have experienced continuing or worsening traumatic events. We also cannot overlook that some youth experienced positive changes instead. Let's explore these factors in more depth.

### How Effects of the Pandemic Interact With Other Stressors

While closeness with safe, nurturing caregivers can serve as a buffer against unpredictable and overwhelming stress responses, not all youth have experienced real or felt safety at home while sheltering in place during the global viral outbreak, nor will they all experience safety afterwards when schools reopen. Any child or adolescent's experiences of real or perceived safety are compounded by past or current stressors, such as school closures and the loss of school as a safety net, as well as other types of adversity such as the following:

- *Economic stressors*: Job change or loss in the family, financial insecurity, housing instability, barriers to meeting basic needs or accessing resources (including educational resources)
- *Interpersonal stressors*: Separation from caregivers, worry about loved ones or friends, interpersonal conflict, rejection of personal identity characteristics, social isolation, lack of support outside one's household
- *Stressors related to health and safety*: Stressors connected to disabilities; health issues, including a) physical illness from the coronavirus or other conditions or b) mental illness; inequities related to accessing health care; grief and loss without the ability to be together or experience familiar rituals; substance misuse/abuse; child maltreatment; domestic violence; community violence; online safety concerns

- *Changes in the social safety net:* Lack of formal social supports (such as those provided at school) and services (including child protective services and related interventions)
- *Additional traumas:* Parental incarceration, being in foster care, threats or trauma associated with documentation status, racism, or any other type of oppression

What we can count on is that every student's experience has been and will continue to be unique.

Youth returning to school share similarities in experiences though, too. In relation to the community spread of COVID-19, for instance, all youth have (hopefully, for physical health reasons) experienced a drastic decrease in face-to-face time with extended family, friends, other peers, and educators or mentors. Daily freedoms easily taken for granted suddenly came to a halt for everyone, resulting in a loss of agency and a pattern of hiding in our homes. All of this occurred while fears escalated and media sources shared perpetual bad news. The switch to distance learning often brought its own stress too. What's more, students' primary caregivers were not working, working in high-risk settings as essential workers, or attempting to work from home while also doing their best as short-term crisis teachers for their children—not to mention simply trying to manage conflicts between cooped-up family members—that is, of course, if families weren't overwhelmed by fighting illness or coping with grief and loss or trauma themselves.

### **Potential Positive Impacts**

At the same time, being at home has been refreshing for some and marked by closeness with family as well as a simpler lifestyle with time for play, creative outlets, passions, or self-directed learning. Overall, students have experienced more flexibility and choice in what they do and when, as well as how they do it, including schoolwork. Some have been able to get better sleep as overextended schedules (or any fixed schedule at all) became a thing of the past. Also, youth who have sheltered in place or participated in other actions for the greater good (e.g., helping in their communities) may have experienced a sense of purpose and hope in their part of joint efforts. Some students may be more ready than ever to join with others who are standing up, fighting injustice, and acting to help make the world a better, more liberated place, especially after the crisis has brought long-standing systemic inequities to light.

Other students have benefited from escaping school-related stress and trauma that might come from experiencing social difficulties, having trouble succeeding in a traditional classroom environment, feeling pressure in large group educational environments, being misunderstood, or being harmed. For example, young students of color were not handcuffed by school resource officers while schools were closed, and these youth did not continue to be suspended or expelled at rates that fuel the school-to-prison pipeline (Love, 2020). Black female students did not continue to be punished more harshly than white students in educational environments during distance learning either (Morris, Con-teh, & Harris-Perry, 2018). Students who identify as LGBTQIA+ (and others) who experienced oppression or bullying may have been given a reprieve when schools closed (as long as it did not continue online or within home relationships). At the

very least, more introverted or anxious students may have felt more comfortable when learning from home. Others may have benefited from the support that comes from learning from family members who look like they do, speak their language, and make school personally accessible, as well as relevant, in ways that a profession dominated by white, middle-class teachers may not (Howard, 2007; Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Kelly Wickham Hurst (2020) has written specifically on the need to better understand how quarantine schooling at home may have benefited Black children, and potentially others as well, because students have been learning within an environment of relationships that affirmed and centered their identities while being free from discrimination. This should give every educator pause and spark a promise to lead the way for change as we think about how to reopen schools so that this same degree of felt safety and affirmation can be guaranteed for everyone.

All of these factors raise the question, “How will youth feel and what will they need when schools reopen?”

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN RESPONSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students’ lives and potentially resulted in multiple traumatic experiences. Going back to school may create more stress or trauma too. Importantly, these traumatic experiences interact with any other stressors and traumas that students were experiencing before. Educators will have a great deal of work to do to address these issues when schools reopen—all while managing their own potentially heightened stress responses.

Educators must be well to do this work well, so addressing educator feelings and needs must be prioritized. To help you do this, journal assignments are included throughout this book, and blank journal pages are included among the downloads accompanying many chapters. These journal assignments will prompt you to reflect on your own experiences, thoughts, and emotions as you prepare to understand your students. You may wish to use the downloadable pages provided for journaling, or use your own notebook or journal to record your responses as you work through each chapter. If you are in a leadership role at your school, share these pages and prompts with your team.

Respond now to the prompt below, using your own notebook or the downloadable Waves Journal page. I’ve shared my own reflections with you in the Ms. Jen’s Journal download.

### *Waves Journal: Reflect on School Closure and Reopening*

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Reflect for a few moments on what your time during the school closure was like. Consider what you were feeling and what you needed (whether those needs were met or not). Then, think about what you feel and need now as you prepare for schools to reopen. Write, doodle, draw, or create a collage in the downloadable journal page.

## FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS

We, as educators, have an opportunity to make thoughtful, intentional decisions about what parts of the rhythm of school we will choose to recreate and which

parts require change for the betterment of every person—every single one. There will be no going back from this crisis and the suffering in its wake to return to how things used to be. That may seem sad, overwhelming, or liberating. Like it or not, adults and youth in school communities will create a *new normal* together. Personally, I hope for a better, more beautiful, inclusive, and just *normal* in our schools than we had before, and I am inviting you to join those of us who are committed to making it happen. In doing so, we will better meet the needs of traumatized individuals and help change the problems in our existing educational system that influence, perpetuate, and cause trauma. From there, we can keep going, alongside our students and other community members, to change other systems too.

### Dolphin Journal: What You Do—and Do Not—Miss

Start this process by noting what you (and others) might miss and don't miss about how school used to be before COVID-19. You could also reflect on what you (and others) may have liked or didn't like about distance learning, as well as what everyone might feel and need as schools reopen. Consider what's been lost, what's been gained, what we might want to get back, as well as what needs to be given up or transformed.

The goal in eventually returning to school buildings, whether all together at once or in a different way that involves more split, staggered, or hybrid learning, is to replace social distancing with titrated social gathering when it's safe to do so. This guide will show you how to do this at your school in flexible, attachment-affirming ways. As you read, I encourage you to explore feelings and needs with your colleagues, families, and students.

As you work through this book, be ready to design and implement a school-wide trauma-sensitive transition plan that will emotionally and socially support children and adults during the initial back-to-school period following closures and beyond. Reopen schools again with community-building social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons and activities for *all* kids in hand. Be well on your way to helping everyone feel safe, be connected, get regulated, and learn. Together, we will do this work of going back to school within a culture where relationships come first as we work with others to *notice the need* and *meet the need*.

“What does that mean?” you might wonder. #NoticeTheNeed and #MeetTheNeed are phrases I have used for a long time when facilitating professional development for educators on the topic of building trauma-sensitive schools. They are rooted in attunement, a process central to establishing secure attachment between youth and their primary caregivers in the earliest years of their lives (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010; Hughes & Baylin, 2012; Lillas & Turnbull, 2009; Schore, 2013; Siegel, 2010, 2012; Trevarthen, 2009; van der Kolk, 2014). Infants and young children need adults who notice their unique needs at any given time and who respond in ways that meet those needs. This soothes the stress response that is caused by not yet met needs, and it builds trust within primary caregiving relationships. This attachment security lays the neurological framework for the eventual ability to self-regulate and ultimately fosters independence as well. Youth feel safe to venture away from attachment figures to explore the world, trusting they can return to them for help and support when needed.

Having our needs met within trusting relationships is not limited to early childhood, however. We all need our people, especially when we don't feel well or are distressed. Therefore, noticing the need and meeting the need is something educators must do for students, families, colleagues, and themselves. In fact, you must start with yourself because when your needs are met, you will have increased capacity for helping others.

While it won't be easy, please believe me when I say that we will cultivate hope while doing this work.

We can do this. Let's jump in.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Trauma is a distressing experience or set of experiences that threatens a person's actual safety or perceived sense of felt safety to such a degree that it exceeds an individual's capacity to cope in healthy ways. It is stress that is *too much* for an individual.
- The COVID-19 pandemic may result in collective trauma and collective post-traumatic growth.
- Trauma resulting from COVID-19 interacts with other trauma and stressors students experience.
- Reopening schools presents both an opportunity and a responsibility to create a new, better, and more just normal for the school community.

## TAKE ACTION

Use the downloadable #NoticeTheNeed #MeetTheNeed page (illustrated by Carol Hinrichs) to help you take action.

1. Start thinking about the needs of your returning students when schools reopen. Identify students who might be struggling more than others as a result of the pandemic and subsequent school closures (or other stressors) as schools reopen.
2. What feelings and needs may be present for these individuals? How might you begin working together with other staff members, families, and students themselves to help meet the needs of these youth?
3. Now, challenge your thinking by considering how your assumptions could be inaccurate. Consider what strengths could also play a role in those students' school success and how to build upon them.
4. Everyone will need joy and laughter as schools reopen. How do you naturally foster this in your setting, and how can you emphasize it now even more?

#NoticeTheNeed #MeetTheNeed