

# Supporting Our Students (and Ourselves) During the Coronavirus Pandemic (and Beyond)

*A working document to help faculty/staff talk with students during this time of uncertainty*

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## Why Mental Health?

There are many best practices as to how colleges/universities, including individual faculty, can generally support students' mental well-being. In times of crisis or significant loss, however, students are even more likely to look to faculty members for support. Some events may be individual to a student (e.g., death of a loved one), while others may impact the student body as a whole (e.g., the current global pandemic). Even if someone is not directly impacted by a traumatic event, factors such as the event's magnitude, amount of media coverage, and changes to one's usual routines can increase anxiety. Upholding the well-being of both students and faculty can greatly promote student learning and a positive classroom environment.

## Our Current Situation, and What Individual Faculty Can Do

At the University of Hawai'i, many of us are having our first interactions with our students since the flood of news over the past few weeks. Even more challenging, our upcoming conversations cannot be held in person, AND they will be ongoing conversations since we are not sure when this crisis period will end. Therefore, opening class with some reassuring remarks and/or making space for some discussion can help ease students back into the semester, as well as address the worry and anxiety that students are more-than-likely feeling and bringing into the classroom. National surveys of students after other crises indicate that helpful faculty are those who do *something* – at least acknowledge the event/crisis, and acknowledge that there is potential impact on the students – regardless of how big or small. While the expectation is not for faculty to serve as counselors, a bit of acknowledgement, validation, and space can go a long way in terms of helping our students to succeed despite current stressors.

## Here are some tips that may be relevant for any faculty and class size/context:

- 1) **Acknowledge the crisis and validate students' reactions.** Acknowledge the ongoing events, and that there is much uncertainty right now. Validate the spectrum of feelings that students may be experiencing – this includes everything from worry/fear/anxiety (e.g., from the ongoing changes and uncertainty), to anger and resentment (e.g., change of plans, cancelled graduation ceremonies, etc.), to loneliness (especially those who are studying away from home and family). After a traumatic or upsetting event, people often question themselves for feeling the way they do. Specific to the current pandemic, some media outlets are posting stories with themes such as “this is easy compared to X” (e.g., being asked to stay home is easy, compared to being asked to go to war). While such a comparison may resonate with some, for others it may invalidate the current worry and anxiety that they're feeling. We can provide reassurance that their feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. It is also normal for their reactions to change day-to-day. Finding out that their fellow students are having some of the same reactions can also be a great relief.
- 2) **Be (truthfully) reassuring.** Provide some hope and reassurances, but do not make promises that you aren't able to keep or be sure of. Hopeful messages might include assurance that you will continue supporting students to successfully complete the course, and that you are available via email/phone/video to discuss individual situations or accommodations.
- 3) **Offer flexibility, and be prepared with possible alternatives.** If appropriate, show flexibility with things like deadlines and daily lesson plans. Some of us will also need to think through assignment formats (e.g., if the original intention was for students to accomplish a project in a group or out in the community). Other strategies such as holding a review session can help ease students' mental and cognitive load.
- 4) **Be “trauma-informed.”** Some professors may be thinking of somehow incorporating the current pandemic into their lessons, as a way of using current events to illustrate theories/concepts. While there is much support for helping students apply classroom concepts to real events, be careful and purposeful in how this is done. Reminding students of loss or crisis can worsen trauma they might already be feeling. Also, some students may be finding that class is a welcome distraction to the constant bombardment of media coverage of the pandemic, so also hearing about it in class can exacerbate feelings of stress and being overwhelmed.
- 5) **Provide relevant (and vetted) resources.** Remember, the expectation is not for faculty to serve as personal counselors for their students. Space and validation can go far in the classroom environment, and within our roles as faculty. Beyond that, refer students to relevant resources so they can find/access what they might need. A vetted list is provided at the end of this document.
- 6) **Don't worry alone.** Talk with other faculty about how they are handling discussions in their classes. And don't be afraid to debrief your discussions after they've occurred. Also, share with your leadership (discretely and appropriately) if new issues arise or if specific students might need additional support/follow-up.
- 7) **Take care of yourself!** Do not feel compelled to lead a full discussion with students if your own emotions/situation make you feel unable to do so. Give a simple statement to the class, using the guidance above, and move on into class work. Outside of class, be sure to seek appropriate support for yourself. The list of resources below applies to everyone, not just students.

Here are some additional tips for faculty who would like to facilitate in-class discussions with students (i.e., those with smaller classes/groups and where distance learning logistics allow for it):

- 1) **Consider how much time the conversation might take.** Depending on the structure and question(s) posed, as well as the size of the class, you may have to be flexible with your lesson plan for the day. Generally, once you open the door and the students begin to respond, you just have to “let it play.” You may also have to think about allowing time throughout the semester, since we are still in the thick of things. Also, some students may need time before they will feel comfortable enough to speak.
- 2) **Power to choose.** Allow everyone the opportunity to talk. For example, you might lead with an opening question and then do a round where everyone responds (with option to pass). But, also say that no one will be required to participate. If students choose not speak, remind them of your office hours, e-mail address, and/or willingness to meet one-on-one.
- 3) **Set some ground rules (students can help set them too).** Ground rules should be set before the conversation begins and reiterated every time thereafter. For example:
  - a. Your (virtual) classroom is a safe space, both physically and intellectually. Differing views and experiences are respected. Avoid blame and speculation. Discretion is expected with respect to personal stories.
  - b. Students should speak only for themselves, as no one can possibly speak about how someone else is reacting. Everyone has a unique perspective on what has happened. The focus will be on support, not judgment.
  - c. Encourage students to be empathetic listeners. In conversation, people are often thinking about what they want to say next, rather than fully listening to the individual who is talking.
- 4) **Balance the power as much as possible.** Ensure that no one student or group of students has more rights than others, and take care that all receive equal respect.

### **Resources to Disseminate to Students (and Faculty)**

- Counseling services
  - At UH Mānoa – Counseling & Student Development Center (CSDC) – <http://www.manoa.hawaii.edu/counseling/> (though in-person hours are now limited).
  - In the community – various providers listed on Mental Health America of Hawaii’s “Finding Help” directory – <http://mentalhealthhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/Updated-2018-Finding-Help-Directory.pdf>.
- Community 24/7 services
  - Crisis Text Line – text ALOHA to 741-741
  - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - Crisis Line of Hawai‘i – 832-3100 on O‘ahu; 1-800-753-6879 on neighbor islands
- Other resources in response to the Coronavirus pandemic:
  - Comprehensive list of online resources from Mental Health America – <https://mhanational.org/covid19>.
  - Tips sheets
    - CDC’s guidelines for managing stress and anxiety during the outbreak – <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
    - From Mental Health America of Hawai‘i – <http://mentalhealthhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-Coping-Tips-1.pdf>.
    - From the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – <https://afsp.org/taking-care-of-your-mental-health-in-the-face-of-uncertainty/>.
    - Nicely done tips to help students manage their anxiety, from Harvard – [https://www.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/coronavirus\\_HUHS\\_managing\\_fears\\_A2%5B5%5D.pdf](https://www.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/coronavirus_HUHS_managing_fears_A2%5B5%5D.pdf).
  - Apps
    - Headspace – mindfulness and meditation app.
    - Virtual Hope Box – individuals can personalize the app to help with coping and stress management.
    - PFA (psychological first aid) mobile – app for providers responding to adults and children during an organized response effort.

### **Questions about this document or community resources?**

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### ***This document adapted from:***

<https://counseling.uiowa.edu/self-help/facilitating-classroom-discussions-after-a-disaster/>  
<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/crisis/>  
[https://www.niu.edu/facdev/\\_pdf/leadingclassdiscussions.pdf](https://www.niu.edu/facdev/_pdf/leadingclassdiscussions.pdf)