

The mental health challenges of returning to school/college

This month's blog is written by Geraldine Jozefiak, exams officer at HMP Norwich and the author of blog posts, ideas and news via her website <https://www.geraldinejozefiak.com/blogoptin>

In the UK, our school children have returned to school and college following the most traumatic period education has experienced in years. It's going to be a challenge, for all of us.

Whatever our relationship to our young people we'll have seen the stress and worry that the effects of Covid-19 has had on their learning, social interactions, and of course, results.

There will be commiserations, hugs, anxiety, re-connections and hope.

We'll see all this on the surface. What we might not see is the underlying worry that this period has left behind.

We only see what people allow us to see (more if we are skilled at Noticing).

We may all want to rush to point a finger, to blame one or two others who've had an impact on the current situation.

We may feel our students deserve different from what they experienced. We may want to shake some cages and voice our thoughts, safe 'in hindsight'.

Different ways of handling stress

Those who aren't phased by any of this won't understand the displacement you, and they feel as you return to your schools. Everything needs building up again – I get it. Everything needs to be put back together.

It's a time when familiarity will bring comfort. But change too is inevitable.

How you handle this period of adjustment will say much about the values you place on serving your community, and the ability you have to manage your own health and wellbeing.

You need to be balanced in all of this.

Reactions are fine if they lead to positive change. Standing up in the limelight is perfect, if you can stay the course and are committed to the process.

I've seen too many colleagues standing up for change without the strength to see things through. Of course, times of tumult bring out the bullies and naysayers too, but I believe it's also a time of positive steps.

Exams officer blog

What we've seen hasn't all been good for those we work with and work for. Some of those who should have known better have let their ego overtake their sense of what's right.

But this is the time when our concern for own mental health must take centre stage.

So, to be present for your friends, families, students, colleagues, you need to take a good look at how you process stress.

What and who presses your buttons? You need to be able to recognise the comments and topics that are going to tip us over.

Know your own flash points

- What subjects are likely to get a reaction from you, disproportionate to the comment?
- Are there times of the day, week that see you more liable to stress?
- Do you have any tasks or interactions that you anticipate giving you grief?
- Is there anyone, or group of individuals who you find yourself avoiding, or responding badly to?
- What topics are your particular downfall?
- What combinations are likely to bring out an off-guard comment?

Know what you know

We're all good at undermining ourselves at times. Worry can make us feel inadequate. For some it makes us superior. We turn into Gladiators ready to take on the fight.

As you re-join your school community, this is a time to know your own place of balance and strength.

What expectations can you put some faith in (or not) as you start back amongst your colleagues and students?

What I know about:

- **myself** – my thinking, my life view
- my **values** and way of handling things
- my **subject specific and emotional intelligence skills** and what I bring to the party
- the likely actions of **those I work** with
- my School's (and **SLTs**) responses and support
- the thinking behind the **Covid-19 experience** we're still working through
- **student's fears** and anxieties about their past, present and future
- **parents' concerns** for their young people and how to respond to them
- **Awarding Bodies and Education organisations** support for staff and students

When you're solid on your terms then you'll be able to respond to those around you from a

place of confidence.

There will be a ton of questions for you from all kinds of directions. Pre-planning will give you assurance that you have anticipated the mood and gauged the right collective response. Whatever stance you take, keep the bigger picture and the greater good in mind.