

Effective School Solutions

# Addressing Virtual School Stress and Its Impact on Learning: A Parent/Caregivers Guide

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## Objectives

1. What is Virtual Learning Anxiety
2. How does Virtual Learning Anxiety Impede Academic Performance
3. Virtual Learning Anxiety and Executive Functioning
4. Strategies to Structure and Support your Child's Academic Performance

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# Virtual Learning Anxiety

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**Virtual Learning Anxiety**

A new concept that evolved out of response to COVID 19

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**Signs and Symptoms**

- Excessive Worry
- Guilt/Shame
- No Motivation
- Disengagement
- Sleeping/Eating
- Isolation
- Clinginess
- Poor attention/focus
- Ruminations
- Procrastination
- Irritability
- Poor Emotion Regulation
- Executive Functioning Issues

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5

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How Virtual Learning Anxiety Impedes Academic Performance

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### Effects of Stress on the Brain

- Persistent Stress changes brain architecture
- When in survival state it is physiologically impossible to access executive states.
- Stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues become actual barriers to academic performance.
- These barriers must be addressed before any learning can be expected.

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7

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### Brain's Stress Response

The diagram illustrates three brain states from left to right: Survival State (red), Emotional State (blue), and Executive State (green). Each state is represented by a sagittal view of the brain with a specific region highlighted in color. The Survival State highlights the brainstem and limbic system. The Emotional State highlights the limbic system. The Executive State highlights the prefrontal cortex.

Survival State      Emotional State      Executive State

COVID-19 and Student Mental Health      Effective S      Effective School Solutions

8

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Virtual Learning  
Anxiety and  
Executive Functioning

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## What Is Executive Functioning

- An umbrella term that refers to a heterogeneous grouping of top-down processes that allow individuals to regulate thought and behaviors, as well as to successfully engage in purposeful, goal directed, and future oriented actions.
- A set of mental skills that include working memory, flexible thinking, self-control, and planning. We use these skills everyday to learn, work, and manage our daily life.

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10

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## Why Does Executive Functioning Matter?

- Difficulty with Executive functioning can make it hard for students to focus, follow directions, and handle their emotions.
- Executive functioning is directly connected to
  - School success
  - Work success
  - Interpersonal relationship success
  - Physical health
  - Independent adult living

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11

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## Types of Executive Functions

- Inhibition
- Flexible Thinking
- Emotional control
- Task initiation
- Organize
- Monitor
- Working memory
- Plan/Prioritize

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12

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**What is Inhibition?**

- The ability to
  - stop behaviors
  - Resist impulses
  - Delay gratification
  - Separate emotions from facts
- Academically:
  - Raising your hand
  - Waiting your turn
  - Ignoring distractions and focusing on work
  - Completing multi-step tasks

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13

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**What is Cognitive Flexibility?**

- Flexibility in thinking/adaptability
- Taking the perspective of another
- Transitioning between one task/situation to another
- Adjust plans
- Respond to feedback
- Multi-tasking

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14

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**What is Emotional Control/Regulation?**

- The ability to control/modulate emotional responses
- Regulate emotions
- Rational thought on feelings

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**What is Initiation?**

- Ability to start a task
- Independently generate ideas/problem solving

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16

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**What is Working Memory?**

- Ability to hold information in your mind to complete a task
- Encode and store information
- Follow complex instructions
- Complete multi-task activities

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17

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**What is Plan/Organize?**

- Ability to manage current and future demands
- Time management
- Setting goals
- Establishing order of information
- Identify main ideas and key elements

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18

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**What is Organization of Materials?**

- The ability to "organize" things in one's environment
  - Keeping track of belongings
  - Organizing one's workspace

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19

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**What is Monitoring?**

- Interpersonal awareness
- Work-checking habits
- Regulating and monitoring responses to situations

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20

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Strategies to Structure and Support your Child's Academic Performance

21

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**Where to start?**

- The three best questions to ask:
  - What do you need?
  - Help me to understand?
  - How can I help?

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**Find Your Calm**

- Take your own pulse, stay calm.
- While it is natural to be upset when your child is upset, but we can not help in that state.
- Practice your own regulation and self care and model your usage to your children.

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23

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**What you can do?**

- Choose times of the day when your child is calm and relaxed to introduce and/or practice new coping skills.
- Create concrete, clearly understood, visual schedule/routine to support the ongoing use of skills throughout the day.
- Ensure that your child has full access to their skills throughout the day.

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24

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## Address the Problem

- It is best to address problems head on, avoid avoidance, and don't fear conversations that need to be had.
- Using developmentally appropriate language, talk with your child about issues. Get their input and ask that they help to be part of the problem resolution.

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25

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## What you can do?

- Increase the opportunities for all family members to express their feelings, as they are able.
  - Examples:
    - Family Talks
    - Family Meetings
    - Family style meals
- Check in with your child
  - What is their perspective of the situation?
    - Do they understand or have questions?
  - What do they need to know?
    - Provide information in a developmentally appropriate manner?

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26

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## Plan, Plan, and Plan Some more

- Brainstorm ways to prevent future virtual learning mishaps.
- Discuss what barriers there may be and strategize ways to overcome those barriers.
- Proactive Prevention:
  - Save a backup file of big projects or take a picture before sending them
  - Create a daily schedule with login information for each class
  - Set alarms for class start times, breaks or other important times
  - Keep a list of each teacher's name and contact info handy.

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27

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**What you can do?**

- Proactive Prevention:
  - Save a backup file of big projects or take a picture before sending them
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28

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**Routines**

- Routines provide increased comfort and are of even more importance during times of stress.
- Routines are one of the best tools for combatting anxiety and worry.
- Examples:
  - Sleep/wake times and routines
  - Hygiene routines
  - Household chore routines
  - Mealtimes and routines
  - Entertainment routines
  - Academic routines

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29

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**What you can do?**

- Daily schedules: Structuring the student's day ahead of time is a highly effective way to help reduce anxiety associated with ambiguity. This is even more important when changes beyond our control continue to shift each day. Structure provides the student with a sense of boundary and control.
- Start and end times
- Academic and task completion lists
- Visuals

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30

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**Camera Problems**

- Your child may have no issues posting on social media, or face timing with friends, but webcams in regard to virtual learning are a different story.
- Many students feel extremely vulnerable on camera. It can exacerbate anxiety and reduce their ability to focus and attend.
- Cameras should be optional. Discuss the pros and cons with your child and be prepared to advocate on their behalf if needed.

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31

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**Validation**

- Avoid toxic positivity. It is natural for us to want to reframe and refocus on the positive, however doing so without truly hearing what your child is communicating can invalidate their feelings and exacerbate feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.
- Acknowledge that things are not fair, that they are experiencing losses, and that things are difficult.

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32

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**Questions and Comments**



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