

# WELS COMMISSION ON LUTHERAN SCHOOLS



## PREPARING FOR A NEW SCHOOL YEAR: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES PLUS THE POWER OF GOD'S PROMISES

By Laura Reinke, MS, MFT

Going back to school typically creates an air of excitement with new books, seeing classmates, meeting teachers, and a return to the structure and routine of school. This year, however, returning to class will likely bring excitement coupled with concerns over safety, adjustment difficulties, and academic challenges.

What might students be struggling with this fall, and what can teachers do to prepare for students' unique emotional needs in the classroom?

### A NEW CONTAGION: ANXIETY

Students returning to school this fall most likely be experiencing anxiety, a natural reaction to stress. No doubt, every teacher, student and family in our culture has experienced a significant amount of stress the last several months. Anxiety is accompanied by bodily tension and worrisome thoughts. And, it is highly contagious. Therefore, anxiety within a classroom can spread rapidly. What's a teacher to do?

#### 1. ACKNOWLEDGE.

Teachers can help students better understand anxiety and their emotions in general by first identifying them by name. Using emotion emoji cards (such as "Mixed Emojis" by Hoyle) or a downloadable emotions chart from the web can help students' identification of emotions. Greeting students at the classroom door or starting the day with a discussion of "How are you feeling today?" can help teachers and students alike be more aware of their feelings and feel more comfortable expressing them. Labeling an emotion such as fearful, nervous, excited, annoyed, proud, or calm helps provide a label to a student's physical symptoms. Acknowledging emotions also normalizes what a student may be experiencing without discounting or trying to mask underlying feelings.

#### 2. COMMUNICATE COPING BEHAVIORS.

While we cannot control our emotional reactions to stress, we can control our response to it. Teachers can plan simple activities integrated into their daily routine which help promote healthy coping for anxiety (and other emotions). Making time for a mindfulness break during the day can help increase student attention and decrease stress. One good resource is 21 Days of Mindfulness Bootcamp by Fablefy. (You can find specific videos on YouTube). Another resource teachers can utilize is the MindUP curriculum ([mindup.org](http://mindup.org)). This curriculum was designed to help address the social/emotional needs of students while enhancing classroom effectiveness. Teachers can utilize the website's online library of instructional videos or review grade-specific curriculum available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) (search MindUP curriculum).

### 3. COMMUNICATE STRUCTURE.

In addition to the discussion and management of emotions, teachers can rely on structure and good communication with parents to facilitate students' ability to effectively return to classroom learning. Take the opportunity to communicate with families about protocol and changes in routines before the return to school. This will help students feel more confident about what to expect in the classroom.

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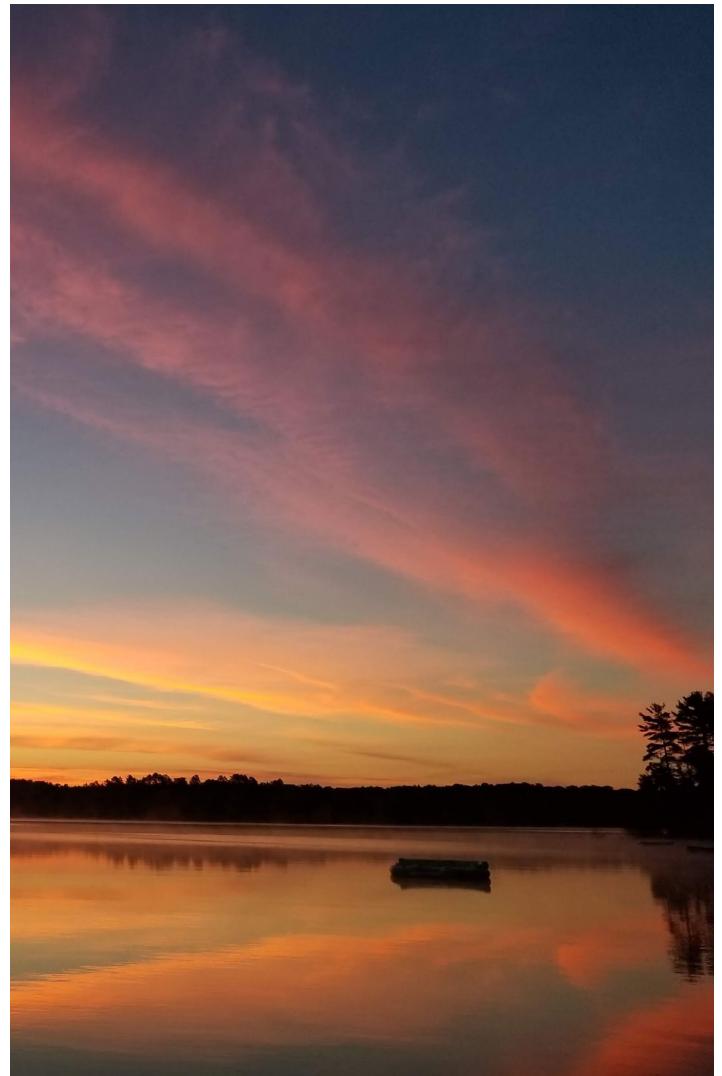
Teachers are not immune to the challenges of living in a COVID-19 world. So, it is important for teachers to take care for themselves as they return to school. Teachers can benefit from finding a support system of other faculty, as well as supportive friends and family who will allow them to share their emotions and anxieties. Teachers also can promote their own positive coping strategies to manage stress. Here is a website that provides 101 different ways to cope with stress: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/how-manage-stress-101-tips-you](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/how-manage-stress-101-tips-you).

As a mental health professional, I believe in the above strategies as essential tools for everyone – students and teachers alike – to protect their emotional well-being. When we combine these practical strategies with the strength God provides in His Word, we have the very best approach to any and every stressful situation. While we cannot control the spread of COVID-19 or the look of the classroom learning environment in the fall, we can take heart in God's promises as we prepare to faithfully serve those He places in our care.

**Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Matthew 6:34**

**I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. John 16:33**

**I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13**



Laura Reinke is a Marriage and Family Therapist with Christian Family Solutions, a provider of Christian counseling care and services. Learn more at [ChristianFamilySolutions.org](http://ChristianFamilySolutions.org).