

How to Support High School Seniors

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be especially stressful for high school students. Fear and anxiety about classes and assignments, college admission requirements, paying tuition and other concerns may feel overwhelming and cause strong emotions for students and their families. Many seniors and their families feel they have “lost” some of the best parts of their senior year, and many end-of-year senior traditions and rites of passage remain in question.

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) is **committed to supporting seniors** to ensure that they have everything that they need to succeed; and to make a successful transition to college, work and adult life.

There are several actions ODE is taking to address these concerns:

1. Proposing potential adjustments to high school graduation requirements.
2. Providing guidance on supplemental education and learning support opportunities.
3. Providing guidance on graduation pathways.
4. Providing guidance for students whose personal or family health or economic circumstances require them to place post high-school plans on hold.

ODE and your school are also committed to supporting graduating seniors’ emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

It is important to remember that **everyone reacts differently to stressful situations**. How each person responds to the outbreak can depend on their background, experience, access to information, social support and the community they live in.

Things you can do to take care of yourself

Emotions like fear, sadness, anger, frustration and anxiety are natural responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. Many of us will experience some or all of these feelings and others as we cope with the Coronavirus. One of the best ways to deal with these emotions is to do things that help us to feel better. These might include:

- Taking breaks from watching television; playing video games; listening to, watching or reading the news; and being aware of how social media affects your mood.

Mental Health and Social Supports



- Making time to regularly visit with friends and family online or by telephone, if you have access.
- Doing your best to get plenty of sleep, eat healthy meals and exercise regularly.
- Taking time to relax, unwind, do things that you enjoy or try something new.
- Talking with trusted adults about concerns and feelings.
- Avoiding alcohol and drugs.
- Having conversations with others about things other than the Coronavirus outbreak.

What schools can do for high school seniors

If schools and districts are able, they should plan to offer a “virtual support system” to students to support their emotional and mental health needs. There are a number of guidelines available to help schools design virtual student support services, such as:

- The American School Counselor Association's [guidelines](#), [position statement](#) and [webinar](#) related to providing virtual school counseling support services.
- The National Institute on Mental Health’s [child and teen coping strategies](#) for reducing stress related to traumatic events.
- [Guidelines](#) developed by the National Association of School Nurses and National Association of School Psychologists on how to talk with students about COVID-19.

Depending on seniors’ needs, some additional mental and emotional supports that schools may want to consider providing include:

- Offering supervised/staffed digital forums for seniors to connect, manage stress and anxiety, share positives and acknowledge the challenges they are dealing with.
- Inviting seniors to suggest ideas on how to connect or implement new/different rituals to mirror senior year traditions that may not be possible while current social distancing and safety measures are in place.
- Providing opportunities to share and connect for racially/culturally/linguistically specific students such as racial/cultural/linguistic affinity groups and or culturally responsive community groups.
- Regularly updating students and families on where basic needs can be met or where supports are located in the community (food, housing support, financial support, etc.).
- Reassuring seniors that colleges nationwide are being asked to provide flexibility with final admission selections, including completion of specific course requirements, and increase support for this year’s seniors’ transition into higher education.

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When to ask for help

We are all in this situation together. Particularly during the school closure, students, their friends and their families may feel alone, afraid, anxious and unsure of what to do. It is important to talk with a trusted adult if you are experiencing three or more of the following for *more than a few days at a time*:

- Feelings of sadness, depression or a lot of irritability.
- Feelings of hopelessness or panic, or having ongoing worries about the future.
- Feeling a lack of interest in activities that you used to enjoy.
- Having significant changes in your appetite or weight.
- Having significant changes in your sleep patterns.
- Feeling that you're too tired to move, work or play most of the time.
- Feeling hyper or agitated most of the time, or having a very hard time relaxing.
- Feeling worthless or very guilty.
- Having a very difficult time concentrating and making decisions.
- Having thoughts of, or plans to hurt yourself or others.

If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed a lot, or frequently experience three or more of these signs of distress, it is important to talk with someone or to ask for help.

If you or someone you know is experiencing severe emotional distress or is suicidal, GET HELP IMMEDIATELY by contacting one or more of the following:

- Call **911** or your local crisis line
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK** En español: **1-888-628-9454**
- Crisis Text Line (**text "HOME" to 741741**)
- **The [Teen Line: 1-310-855-HOPE \(4673\)](#)**
- National Youth Crisis Hotline: **1-800-448-4663**
- [Find Crisis Services in Your County](#)
- Substance use help: **[1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](#)**
- For Peers: [warmline.org](#) links to warmlines in every state or chat [Lifeline Crisis Chat](#) or [Crisis Text Line](#).
- For Youth: [Oregon Youthline website](#) or call **877-968-8491** or text **"teen2teen" to 839863**
- For LGBTQ: [Trevor Project website](#) or call **(866) 488-7386**, for a 24-hour toll-free suicide hotline or [Trans Lifeline](#) at **1-877-565-8860**