

# Maintaining Meaningful Teacher-Student Connections During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Partners for Healthy Lives

Great Lakes Mental Health  
Technology Transfer Center  
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January 2021

# MHTTC Words Matter

The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED  
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND  
ACCEPTING OF  
DIVERSE CULTURES,  
GENDERS,  
PERSPECTIVES,  
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED/  
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS  
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR  
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND  
FREE OF LABELS

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND  
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

RESPECTFUL, CLEAR  
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH  
OUR ACTIONS,  
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

Adapted from: [https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Recovery-Oriented-Language-Guida\\_2019ed\\_v1\\_20190809-Web.pdf](https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Recovery-Oriented-Language-Guida_2019ed_v1_20190809-Web.pdf)



# Thank You for Joining Us!

## A few housekeeping items:

- If you are having technical issues, please individually message Kristina Spannbauer or Stephanie Behlman in the **chat section at the bottom of your screen** and they will be happy to assist you.
- If you have questions for the speaker, please put them in the **Q&A section** at the bottom of your screen.
- We will be using automated captioning during the presentation today

# Thank You for Joining Us!

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- A copy of the power point slides, as well as the recording and handout will be available on the MHTTC website within two weeks.
- You will be directed to a link at the end of the presentation to a very short survey – we would really appreciate it if you could fill it out. It takes about 3 minutes.
- Certificates of attendance will be sent out to all who attended the full session. They will be sent via email and take 7-10 days.

A close-up photograph of several social media icons on white, 3D keyboard keys. The icons include Pinterest (red circle with white 'P'), Snapchat (yellow square with white ghost), Instagram (purple-to-orange gradient square with white camera outline), Facebook (blue square with white 'f'), and Twitter (blue bird). The keys are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with some keys partially visible and others more prominent. The background is a light gray surface.

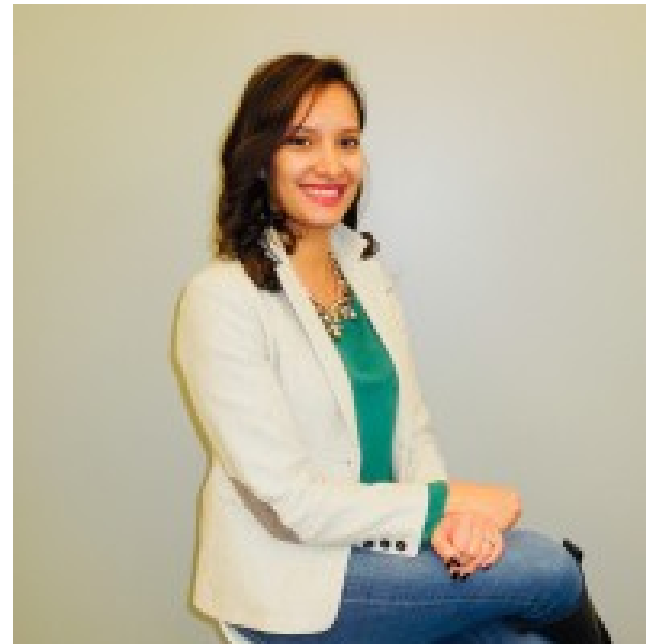
## Follow Us On Social Media!

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# Presenters

- **Angela Begres** is a licensed clinical social worker who did her training at the University of Chicago, where she obtained her MSW.







Partners for Healthy Lives

# Maintaining Meaningful Teacher-Student Connections During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Angela Begres, LCSW



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# Learning Objectives

- Highlight benefits of developing meaningful connections with students
- Discuss ways to build student relationships
- Self-care strategies for teachers and other supports



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How are you  
feeling today?



Humans are social creatures and have a deep biological and neurological need for interaction, so it follows that research has found that positive relationships in children's lives play an important role in students' ability to learn and cope.<sup>5</sup>



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# Challenges Facing Positive Teacher- Student Relationships

- Chronic absenteeism
- Poor past experience
- Low-income or POC
- Behavioral or learning disorders.



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# Teacher-student relationships can promote school success in the following ways



- Strengthen academic achievement
- Reduce chronic absenteeism
- Promote self-motivation
- Strengthen self-regulation
- Improve goal-making skills



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# Notable barriers students faced during COVID-19

- Changes in daily routines
- Lack of predictability
- Increased fears about their safety and the safety of loved ones
- Extended periods of isolation
- Loss of a loved one
- Limited access to food and safe shelter
- Ongoing safety and security concerns (abuse, neglect, exposure to violence)



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It is important to explore innovative ways to maintain school connectedness, build relationships and cultivate a positive climate within the new safety guidelines.



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# Maintaining connection

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**Sense of Community:** Create a school and classroom community no matter where instruction is taking place. Maintain connections virtually and based on social distancing guidelines with students, families, and community partners.

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**Positivity:** Prioritize uplifting staff and students by sharing positive actions and behaviors through announcements, social media posts, newsletters, and/or bulletin boards.

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**Summer Contact:** Offer virtual connection opportunities during the summer months so students can bond with peers and staff.

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**Build Familiarity:** Help young children get familiar with their new environment through pictures, social stories, videos of the building, or “meet and greets” with teachers.

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**Belonging Routines:** Create a classroom motto, song, or chant that is repeated at the beginning or end of class every day.

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**Relationship Building/Personal Sharing:** Provide an outlet for staff and students to share about their personal lives through show and tell, pictures, stories, or virtual tours.

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**Mask Comfort:** If schools choose to use masks, add smiles or creative drawings to them when possible.

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**Shared Project:** Complete a class project together, virtually or in person. Assign different sections of the project that can be pulled together for a final project.

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# Trauma-Sensitive Practices

- Presently, all students and staff have experienced a traumatic event due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Experiencing trauma does not automatically indicate there will be significant impacts.
- Some students will return to school emotionally and physically healthy and ready to learn. Others may return to school facing more difficult circumstances. These students may be in a physiological state that does not feel safe and consequently will not be ready to learn.
- Acknowledging that students have had various experiences, it is essential to meet students where they are.



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# Ideas to consider for implementing trauma-sensitive practices in the school:

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**Professional development:** Provide professional development for staff about stress and trauma before the school year begins.

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**Self-care space:** Have a staff self-care space in the break room with items for staff and a process for teachers to support each other emotionally while at work.

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**Fidgets:** Create a list of budget-friendly fidgets and prepare staff and students for how these can be used effectively in the classroom. *It is important to follow health and safety guidelines regarding cleaning and sharing.*

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**Relationship building:** Facilitate activities that nurture pre-existing relationships between students and adults and help create new trusting relationships with students.

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**Mindfulness:** Facilitate activities that teach skills like mindfulness. Breathing exercises, yoga, or meditation can be taught and practiced as a standalone lesson or incorporated as part of another lesson. Practice these skills and re-teach as necessary.

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**Self-calming:** Facilitate lessons that teach students self-calming strategies. Practice these strategies and provide feedback to students.



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# Ideas to consider for implementing trauma-sensitive practices in the school

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**Trusted adult interaction:** Allow for children to visit trusted adults if time and schedules allow. Give students opportunities to write notes to trusted adults (home or school) and have the option to deliver these notes.

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**Counseling referrals:** Plan with staff to discuss any counseling referrals that may be needed. Have a shared process and plan in the building for how and when students will be referred.

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**Calm kit:** Create a calm kit with children where they can have things like a fidget, putty, paper and pencil, pipe cleaners, or other things they can use to calm themselves or help regulate their emotions. *To support health and safety guidance, students should have their own items rather than one shared kit.*

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**Classroom environment:** Set up the classroom in a manner that is aware of sensory needs, such as dimmed lighting, reduced smells, calm music, etc.



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# How to Build Relationships With Students During COVID-19



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# Maintain weekly or daily check-ins



Complete a worksheet in which students circle an emoji that describes their current mood.



“Thorn and rose” game in which students share one positive and one negative thing about their week.



Be creative with engaging students



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# Build peer-connections, buddy systems

- This will help assemble a greater sense of community and develop social-emotional skills for the students.
- One simple idea is to open the video conferencing classroom a few minutes early to provide the students with a chance to talk with each other.



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# Let students know that you care

- **Send them a message** to let them know you are thinking of them and regularly check-in on their well-being.
- **Celebrate successes** and milestones – this can be done in many ways (positive feedback, digital badges, a funny video).
- To the extent possible, **personalize assignments** (or let students do so) by incorporating student interests.
- Provide students **opportunities to share** things about themselves with you and their classmates (younger students may enjoy a virtual “show and tell” and older students could respond to writing prompts that allow them to talk about something they love).



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# Find ways to build engagement

- Joke of the day
- Weekly virtual field trips
- Daily virtual amusement park rides
- Yoga and meditation videos
- Mystery reader video calls
- VIP shout out each week
- Virtual spirit week



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# Language to help foster connections

- **Probe**
  - Tell me more about that.
  - I want to make sure I understand.
  - Can you explain a little more?
- **Communicate caring**
  - Your teachers care a lot about your success.
  - Your teachers all want to make sure you're getting your needs met.
- **Validate emotions**
  - That must be so difficult.
  - I see you and I'm here for you.
  - I can only imagine how much that impacts you.
- **Stay solution-oriented**
  - It sounds like a lot has been happening that is out of your control, and that sounds really frustrating.
  - What are some things you do have control over – something small you can do to start to make things better?"

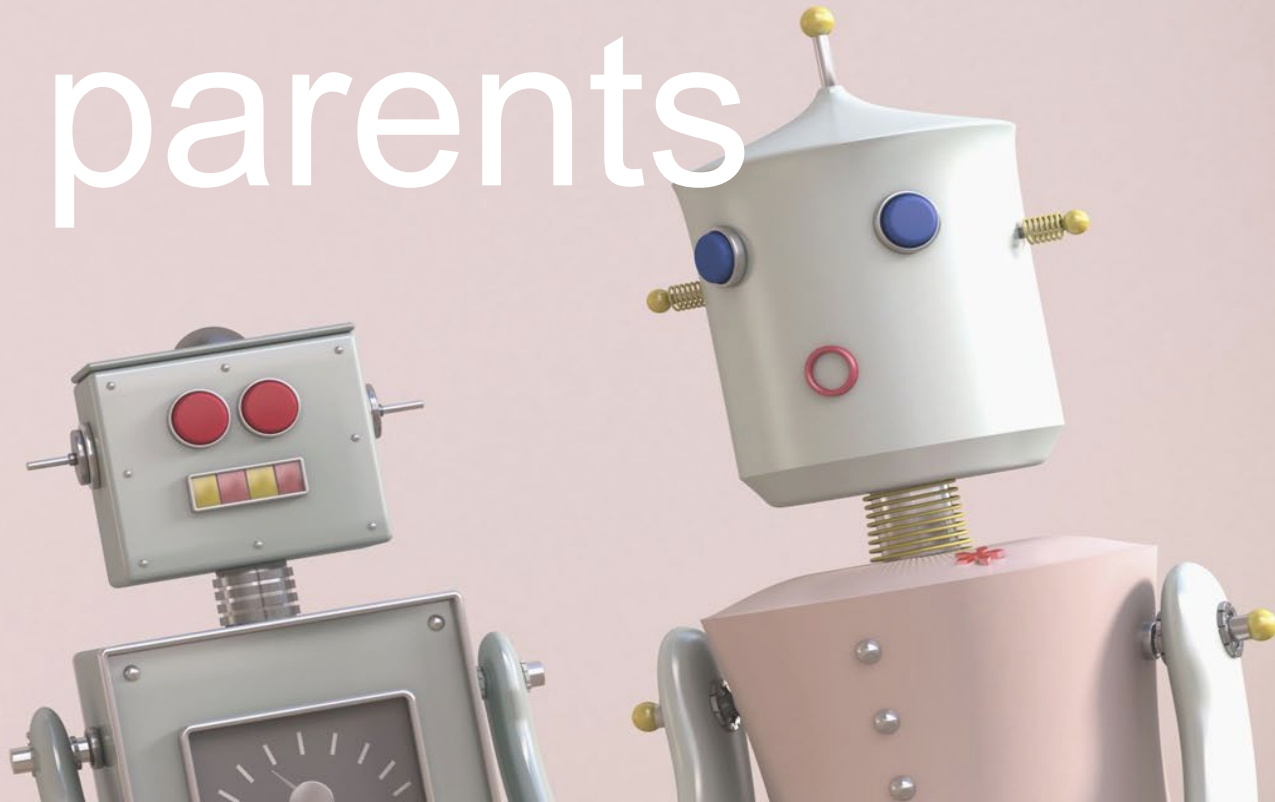


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# Connect with parents



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# Don't forget about parents and teachers

- Positive connections between parents and teachers have been shown to improve children's academic achievement, social competencies, and emotional well-being<sup>4</sup>.
- When parents and teachers work as partners, children do better in school and at home.



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# Don't forget about parents and teachers



## Communicate

Frequent, two-way communication is important to stay apprised of what is happening at school, and to let teachers know important things about your child.



## Consistency

Creating a routine and providing consistent opportunities to enhance your child's learning at home reinforces the notion that you and their teacher are working together to support them.



## Collaborate

A collaborative, cooperative partnership involves planning and problem-solving to develop specific, positive strategies to help children achieve to their highest potential.



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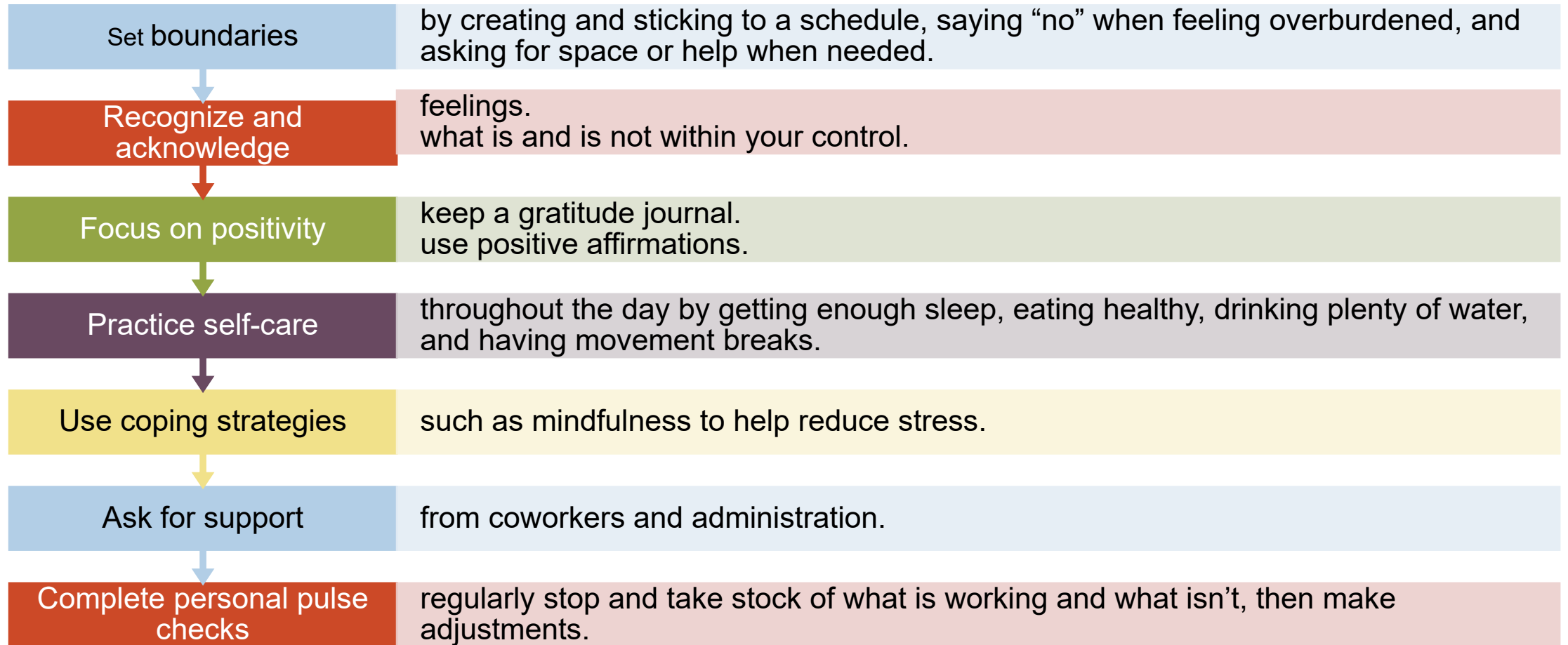
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“There is a cost to caring.” - Charles Figley

# Self-Care During COVID 19



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# Resources

- **Findtreatment.gov**
- **Michigan peer-run warmline**
  - (888) PEER-753 ((888) 733-7753).
  - It's available every day from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m.
- **National Helpline:** Treatment, referral, and information 24/7
  - <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline/>
  - 1800-662-Help (4357)
- **National Institute of Health**
  - Social wellness toolkit
  - <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/social-wellness-toolkit>



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# Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
  - [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
  - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- **Crisis Text Line**
  - [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)
  - Text “START” to 741-741
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness**
  - <https://www.nami.org>
- **Maintaining Meaningful Teacher-Student Connections Handout**



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# Additional Resources

- Great Lakes MHTTC Suicide Prevention Resource Guide
- States in HHS 5: IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, and WI
- Great Lakes MHTTC Products and Resources

<https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/great-lakes-mhttc/product/great-lakes-mhttc-suicide-prevention-guide>



# Stay in Touch

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# Questions



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