Classroom Adjustments: Mental health

| **TIMECODE** | **SPEAKER** | **CONTENT** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 00:00:00:00 | MARY | Jack would have a lot of thoughts, a lot of negative thoughts, and we created... He was into pirates back then, so we created a chest. And in that chest would be some issues that Jack had articulated to us when he was in a good headspace, so when he was lovely and calm, about how he was feeling. And on the back of that card would be, not a solution, but a way he can turn his emotions around. |
| 00:00:29:15 | SERPIL | That's Mary. She's talking about her son who is in high school now and has a number of resources to help him manage depression. |
| 00:00:37:18 | MARY | So, he doesn't take as long to get over things or deal with things. He actually has a great toolbox of strategies that you wouldn't even know he's applying them. So, going from being supported to supporting himself through it. |
| 00:00:54:18 | SERPIL | Hi, I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll discuss some adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students experiencing mental health disorders to participate on the same basis as their peers. Mary will tell us more about Jack's experience and his strategies for success at school, and we have a clinical psychologist to explain how mental health disorders can impact students in the classroom. We'll also hear from some teachers who are specialising in adjustments for students experiencing anxiety and depression and they've some great ideas for adjustments. |
| 00:01:50:03 | SIMON RICE | My name's Simon Rice. I'm a clinical psychologist and senior research fellow here at Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health. We're still fighting against the stigma that exists around mental ill health. And that is absolutely shifting, but we've got a long way to go. And we're starting to realise that mental health problems, it's not the minority of the population that it affects across a life course. It's almost all of us. So, we all have a different amount of stress and strain that we can manage and innate coping responses. And when our kind of stress bucket gets overfull and starts to overflow, that's when problems can arise. And so, ideally, in the longer term, I think it's a great strategy that we can try to give students a bit of an awareness around where their kind of stress bucket fits, what they can do periodically to support themselves to empty that, and communicate to others, "Hey, I'm a bit maxed out at the moment. I can't really cope with any more," in a way that fits, in a way that's OK with their language, in a way that others can understand. |
| 00:02:48:07 | SERPIL | Given the broad range of mental health disorders, Simon agreed that it would be most effective in this podcast episode to focus on depression and anxiety. |
| 00:02:58:18 | SIMON RICE | So, when we're thinking about depression, depression is a mood disorder. So, that students experiencing depression typically will have pretty profound thoughts of sadness. And, in extreme cases, they might have thoughts of not wanting to be alive or suicidal thoughts. But there are also lots of other kind of somatic symptoms. So, difficulties with their appetite, difficulties sleeping, difficulties with concentration. And these can have a really strong impact on how students are able to focus and be present in the classroom. |
| 00:03:28:11 | SERPIL | For Mary, she says depression gave her son a negative perspective. |
| 00:03:33:10 | MARY | Look, it's been very tough on Jack. He has a negative outlook on quite a few things that he tries and attempts. When he looks at things he tries to target, it's all, "I can't do it. I'm not built for it. I'm no good at it." And it's all that negative self-talk that does impact, not only his education, but his wellbeing. Some of the classroom adjustments that we had to make to help Jack was to start with giving him a break time. So, just a break to be able to go somewhere and pull himself together or go through his thoughts of what was happening. So, some processing time. When those simple strategies weren't in place, he just felt lost and became more introverted and really just pulled back more and isolated himself. |
| 00:04:27:12 | SERPIL | While Mary's description of depression with sadness and negative thoughts is common, clinical psychologist Simon Rice advises that responses to depression can come in many forms. |
| 00:04:40:12 | SIMON RICE | And one of the quirks of our diagnosis of depression is that for young people under 18, they don't necessarily have to have sad mood. They can have irritable mood. And irritability can look like frustration or maybe even kind of mild aggression. And so that can sometimes be missed. When it comes to anxiety, anxiety disorders are a little bit different. They're characterised by a marked fear and kind of a desire to exit a situation, to withdraw, to make sure that you're feeling safe or feeling very worried, and thoughts of worry that are kind of out of control. What anxiety can do in a classroom situation is really, once again, kind of block concentration efforts. It can really impede the learning and the memory process so it's hard for a student to take on new information or, indeed, learn a new skill. And so, aside from the specific mental health symptoms that anxiety and depression can bring, they can also have a profound impact in the classroom. |
| 00:05:36:01 | LINDA | Hi. My name's Linda. I'm the Disability Inclusion and Wellbeing leader for a primary school. We do have kids with some tricky behaviour. It might look like they're being really naughty and not following instructions. A lot of children, particularly from a trauma background who have high anxiety, can't sit still. So, they might be fiddling, they might be moving around the classroom, they might be refusing to come to school or refusing to do work. Sometimes, we have kids who are really quite highly anxious and have school refusal. We have quite a few kids who don't deal very well with transitions or change. |
| 00:06:12:15 | CAITLIN | So, I'm Caitlin. I'm a classroom teacher in a primary school. I have a student that is very high academically, very scared of failing, does have some school refusal. This particular writing genre that we were doing he'd never done before and he was so scared to be wrong. He would not write more than a sentence without coming and getting clarity that he was doing the right thing. |
| 00:06:37:24 | SERPIL | To help this student maintain a longer focus on the writing project, Caitlin broke down the exercise into steps that the student could personally check off. |
| 00:06:48:09 | CAITLIN | I will then have a checklist on their table that they have a whiteboard marker and they independently tick, and they go, "Yes, I have done that." And it's worked quite well. And if they haven't ticked it - "I haven't done that. I'm not ready to go and see my teacher and get it checked off." |
| 00:07:11:17 | SERPIL | Of course, that's just one example of the impact that anxiety can have on students. Caitlin says responses to anxiety can also be really varied. |
| 00:07:21:20 | CAITLIN | You can have kids that are really withdrawn, school refusal, upset externally. So, they're showing signs that they're scared or worried. But then you can have kids that just refuse to talk or lash out in their behaviour. Ones that just really struggle to make attachments, whether it's to their peers or to me or to any other teacher. So, you've got kids that really want to follow the rules and some that really are so defiant that they just want to do things their way because school may be the only chance or time that they have control over their own behaviour, their feelings and their emotions. |
| 00:07:56:23 | SERPIL | It sounds like structure and routine is a key adjustment with children with anxiety and depression. |
| 00:08:02:16 | CAITLIN | Absolutely. As a school, one of our policies in the classroom is to have a schedule board and that's a time schedule board. That can be quite general. They're, you know, 15-minute blocks. But then in my class there's three students that then have a personalised timetable as well that's written each day that, yeah, you've got your classroom schedule. Yes, but within that reading task, you're going to do 10-minute blocks or 5-minute blocks. And then it's all sectioned out. And I've found that that definitely, definitely helps. But then also enables us if we need to change one thing, we can just go, "Alright. Actually, you see that one activity? We're going to change that." But have that dialogue with that student, not just, "Oh, I'm changing reading now. "We're going outside." Because that can just blow up really quickly because, like, "Hang on a minute. I'm not ready for that." If you've got a child that's sensitive to sensory sort of things, then, "No, I'm not ready to be out in the cold," or "I'm not ready to be out in the heat, I haven't drank enough water." So, having that, it gives them enough time to process and go through it in their own time. |
| 00:09:02:07 | SERPIL | For the broader school team and visiting teachers, Linda recommends preparing a cheat sheet for each student's preferences. |
| 00:09:10:06 | LINDA | So, we have what we call an emergency teacher folder which has got the information of all the children. It's not as good as being able to have a natural relationship, but we also tend to make sure if there is a new teacher and we know a child might not cope, we might shuffle teachers around. We might shuffle support staff around. |
| 00:09:29:13 | SERPIL | So we now know that anxiety and depression can impact a student's ability to learn, but they both affect individual students in different ways. |
| 00:09:39:00 | SIMON RICE | An anxiety disorder or a depressive disorder will impact different people in different ways because they're each made up of clusters of different symptoms. And so they don't necessarily all look exactly the same. So, getting a sense of what might be the most significant parts of that diagnosis for that particular student is going to be important. We know from research that anxiety impacts on memory and short-term and our working memory. So I think low motivation is one of the symptoms that kind of co-occur with depression that young people really struggle with the most. If a student's low motivation is because of extreme or excessive fatigue, is there something that they can be doing to help that student feel a bit more activated? Can they be doing something a little bit physical during times over a longer lesson, for example? Using creative things like that can be a way to go. |
| 00:10:29:02 | SERPIL | Beyond low motivation, Simon points out that some anxiety disorders can make it hard for students to even get to school. |
| 00:10:37:07 | SIMON RICE | And so that's at the more extreme end where young people will get really stuck in kind of thoughts and patterns around concern about being negatively judged by their peers or authority figures, and that could be teachers. And that can really inhibit them to connect with others. It can force them to, in more extreme examples, not even want to go to school. |
| 00:11:00:18 | SERPIL | What about when kids are withdrawn and unmotivated? How do you amp them up? What are the adjustments that you make? |
| 00:11:07:23 | CAITLIN | One child who probably three out of the five-day week he would either refuse to come into the classroom because he had that fear of coming in and everyone looking at him, or he would come in and be under a table. And for him, it was...you have this amount of time to rejoin, and I would always put a timer on, a visual timer that he could see. So, it was a bit of a negotiation of, "Well, I can see you're still not ready. Do you need two more minutes?" |
| 00:11:45:10 | CAITLIN | And if they're at a point where they're nonverbal, it's two hands out, one hand is yes, one hand is no, point - yes or no. So, it's accommodating whether they're choosing to be verbal or not, not because they've done anything wrong, just because they're not ready. And then it can be we're about to do a shared reading, would you like to join the class or would you like to go straight into independent reading on your table? So, he can then choose the task. But some of the biggest challenges would be active participation, active learning and active listening, and also calming kids down. So, you have the extremes of getting kids to perk up. And then one's getting them to come down to a level where they're ready to take in new information. In our school, we have some really tactile resources. I use a lot of sand timers, and they can watch that come down, and that's their point - right, you need to be ready to join the class or join the activity. |
| 00:12:42:07 | SERPIL | In addition to making adjustments that become part of her daily teaching routine, Caitlin is an advocate for flexibility and lateral thinking. |
| 00:12:51:08 | CAITLIN | One student had such high anxiety around presenting and reading out loud. So, he and I sat in the office a few days before and he read it out. With his permission, I recorded it. Not with video, just with audio. And we edited it so that no mistakes and no stuttering and those sort of things. And he presented it to the class by standing up with his visual and the audio playing in the background. So, that was a good way for him to still be a part, still have that success, but not have that fear around it. And I played it back to him, he goes, "Oh, it actually sounds OK." |
| 00:13:27:16 | SERPIL | For another student, she found that using existing equipment slightly differently enabled him to fully participate in the class. |
| 00:13:36:03 | CAITLIN | He used to just whisper in my ear. So, we now have in every classroom a sound field. The teacher wears the control microphone. And then we also have a microphone that we can pass around to kids. And I found, with him, he loves having a microphone in his hand. So, he can nearly whisper and still be heard. So, having that technology in the room has done absolute wonders for the kids with that scared voice to still be heard even if they're not projecting. |
| 00:14:06:24 | SERPIL | And for the best results with adjustments, when it's possible, make them available to all students. |
| 00:14:13:17 | CAITLIN | We have some tactile blankets and pillows that kids can sit with and they're welcome to sit with it. And we've taught our kids from prep, really, about inclusion. So, nobody goes, "Oh, why has he or she got that, and I don't?" Our students are so understanding of the different needs of everyone, and those things are available to every child if they need it. We use noise-cancelling headphones. We've got quite a lot of kids that have sensory sensitivity, I guess, you would say. Every classroom has a number of those. They're not assigned to any child, and they're able to, without asking, go and access those for as long as they need to. |
| 00:14:50:18 | SERPIL | When it came to her son, Mary established a clear line of communication with his teacher and brought in his therapists as well. |
| 00:14:59:09 | MARY | So, we would share an email system. So, with his psychologist, occupational therapist and his speech therapist and myself and the teaching staff that were directly involved with Jack would be in on an email. So, we would email each other what we worked on on that session. So everybody was in the loop of what strategies we were using and what goal we were targeting. |
| 00:15:21:21 | SERPIL | In addition to emails, technology can also play a valuable role in supporting students with mental health disorders. |
| 00:15:30:10 | SIMON RICE | So, we've seen a move towards this digital revolution in mental health, and in particular, youth mental health, which is a great thing because young people are so digitally-connected. Going for those kind of apps or websites that do come with a recommendation, because, obviously, you don't want to be directing students to something that's not evidence-based or, at worst, could be potentially harmful. I think we have good evidence around lots of these online interventions these days. Many of them are available free of charge, and they're easily applied either within an individual's context or in a classroom environment. |
| 00:16:04:12 | SERPIL | Before recommending any apps or websites, Simon cautions approaching students with sensitivity. And the same goes for delivering instructions and feedback. |
| 00:16:14:19 | SIMON RICE | being aware that if a student is prone to depression or is in a depressive episode at the moment, any criticism, be that constructive criticism, could be really deeply internalised. So, thinking carefully about how you provide that criticism. Maybe it's done in a sensitive kind of one-on-one way as opposed in front of the entire class. I think helping students not feel overwhelmed in a given situation. Students who tend towards an anxiety profile probably feel overwhelmed as a matter of course. So, trying to impart a calm, grounded environment, enabling students to feel centred within themselves. And so some teachers might want to incorporate elements of grounding techniques or brief anxiety reduction, relaxation. Breathing, for example, doesn't have to take a long time, can be really useful. |
| 00:17:08:09 | CAITLIN | So, we do breathing strategies. We do relaxation strategies. And they're all being formally taught. And then they independently work out which one they want to do. |
| 00:17:24:15 | SERPIL | OK, so explain to me what a low-sensory room is. Is that just to, basically, ensure that they don't get a lot of stimulation? It takes away the stimulation. |
| 00:17:34:07 | CAITLIN | It can take away some of the stimulation. It's a quiet space. There are things like the big beanbag that is an anxiety therapy tool. Some of the weighted toys are in there. We often have the light off. So, you've only got natural light coming through. Particularly my classroom has tinted windows, so we don't get a lot of natural light. The unnatural light, I guess you'd call it, if you're having a bad day can really put pressure on these kids. So, it's a quiet space. There's not a lot of things on the walls. There's not always things out. So, it can be quite a blank bench space. They can hide under a bench if they want that really quiet, confined space. |
| 00:18:12:05 | SERPIL | And to remind us that each individual's experience of mental health disorders will be unique, Simon warns that low-sensory rooms won't suit every student. |
| 00:18:22:23 | SIMON RICE | For some students, that strategy might be really effective. For other students, it might be really important that they learn to self-manage any negative thoughts or emotions that they're experiencing and not necessarily distance themselves from others. We know that anxiety disorders, in particular, and depression as well, have an inherent motivation to withdraw from contact from others. And, at times, that can be unhelpful. At times, actually being connected and socially supported is what an individual student will need. |
| 00:18:53:11 | SERPIL | And to work out what those needs may be, Mary urges teachers to let the student be your guide. |
| 00:19:00:07 | MARY | My advice would be to listen. Just listen to that child. I know that you've got a lesson to deliver and you've got 25 plus students in that class. If a child is withdrawing or showing signs that something's not right, you may want to deliver that class and then take five minutes from somewhere, you know, and ask that student if you could help in any way or if everything's OK and what can you do to help them. |
| 00:19:35:10 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
| 00:20:02:23 | MAN | This podcast is supported by the Australian Government Department of Education for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability, or NCCD, Portal. Copyright 2019 Education Services Australia Ltd, unless otherwise indicated. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0, unless otherwise indicated. |