

A Little Book of Courage for the Big Pandemic

ACTIVITY GUIDE



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Introduction

As we return to on-site school, students will be returning with a wide range of new needs. Not only will we not know the ways in which the pandemic has affected them, we have no past experience to guide us in meeting these new needs. There will be students returning who – for the first time – are now abuse survivors. Others may have anxiety about whether it is safe to be at school and mingling with others. Still others may find it difficult to be away from home because of concerns about family members who are long haulers or are otherwise health impaired. Students will bring these and other unpredictable challenges when they return to school.

The range of participation and actual learning for students this past year is varied and wide. Many tried hard and adjusted well in distance learning and some didn't join a single class this year and everything in between. We can't know what was happening in the lives of many who didn't participate well. The abilities of parents to provide the kind of support students needed were often limited by other demands they had for work or other responsibilities.

It is safe to say that, although many may not have been learning much in academics, all were learning something much more primal, challenging and foreign. All were finding their way in an altered world that isolated and sometimes wounded them. We need to allow ourselves to think about the numbers of families who lost jobs, homes and even loved ones. Living in an existence we experienced as dependable, it was a shock for a family that was once financially stable to suddenly have to depend on food banks and community support.

In a news interview, one high school teacher lamented that her usual failure rate was 5% and that this past year it was over 40%. She was, like the rest of us, looking at a very narrow measure of student performance: answers on tests and completion of homework and projects. If we are wise, we will look at this through a different lens. We need to set aside past expectations, models and assumptions. Given the realities of life for students and staff, it isn't really accurate to say that 40% of her students were failing. Instead, perhaps this is a reflection of the impossibility of our educational system to instantly create a new model, use new technology, reach students who are undeniably out of reach and teach in new ways without even knowing what the future held. Everything about this was untested. Never before experienced. Entirely without familiarity for predicting the future. Rather than seeing students as failing, it is our educational system that was failing them.

Because we've never been here before, our former assumptions about academic success and trusting evidence-based measures is now entirely questionable. None of the assumed environmental supports exist in the same way. If ever there were a time when rethinking education was possible, it might be now. If ever there were a time when that is critical to do, it is essential to do so now. We need to meet students where they are. We need to address the needs of the whole child, not just the academic demands of our education system.

This series of activities is designed to help school administrators and staff expand their thoughts about what students will need as we return to on-site school. Based on concepts in [A Little Book of Courage for the Big Pandemic](#), these activities don't tell you what to do. Instead, they provide the opportunity to examine how the students' world has shifted. They give insights so you might grasp where we are now. And we can't begin to know how to get to our "new normal" until we figure out our starting point, which is a new place. This is your starting point for making effective decisions!

Chapter 1: Beginning at the End

What strengths have given your staff and families the courage to move through this time?

How did you see people in your school and community creatively meet unexpected needs?

What appreciations do you have for co-workers and others in your workplace?

How might we garner shared participation to will provide for those who need more support?

What is one action step you could take as a school?

What is one action step you could take as an individual?

Chapter 2: Moving Forward

Using the timeline, make notes on it that show your process and where you are now.

Add to that notes about the ways you recognize others' journeys have been quite different.

How will these differences impact school climate, social fabric and common support?

How might the challenges people have faced impact the teaching and learning process?

How might you ask or learn where others are in their recovery in a considerate/kind way?

What is an action step or activity the school might take to address this area?

What is an action you might take as an individual?

Chapter 3: Living With Uncertainty

At what other times in your life have you coped during an extended time of uncertainty?

Upon what skills did you draw or what new skills did you develop?

How does that inform you about others' process and perhaps their greater struggles?

How will the continued uncertainty impact students and staff as you move toward the new normal?

What are some compassionate and helpful responses for those still struggling with uncertainty?

What is an action step or activity the school might take?

What is an action you might take as an individual?

Chapter 4: Quieting Anxiety

Mark where you see yourself in regard to how strict or lenient you were regarding safety measures including wearing a mask, sanitizing often, remaining strictly inside your bubble, and so on.

Masks
Sanitizer
Bubbled

Don't need
that stuff

Very cautious

Not cautious

Now add a few people onto the continuum whose views of this were both much more and much less strict than your own. It is most helpful to consider people who matter to you most.

How did those differences affect relationships, family gathering and grieving losses?

How might the range of differences in this regard cause rifts or challenges for staff?

Describe your reaction early on when you first realized that the pandemic was going to be big.

Anxiety interferes with learning. How will the school acknowledge and address anxiety for students?

What is one action step the school could take to address this issue with staff?

What action will you take as an individual?

Chapter 5: Facing Grief and Depression

Our losses range from continual smaller losses, like informally gathering with friends, to those who had a family member die. Identify where you are on this continuum, then add names of others who are on either side of where you are.

Lesser
losses



Greater
losses

In addition to our individual experience, we have suffered a significant collective loss. How is this collective loss evident with your staff/school?

The tasks of grieving are both individual and shared. Having an organized means of paying tribute to our shared loss is a crucial and helpful step in recovery. What ideas can you generate for a creative process that would facilitate your school's recovery from this communal loss?

How might each classroom have a similar shared experience?

What is an action step or activity the school might take?

What is an action you might take as an individual?

Chapter 6: Managing Trauma

What symptoms of trauma have you experienced and what have you noticed in others?

What sensory experiences activate those symptoms in you and others?

How might we consciously avoid triggering ourselves and others in the classroom and at school?

Trauma significantly interrupts ability to learn. How shall we take that into account in our expectations of student participation? How might we support those who struggle with trauma?

Mindfulness is the one activity that is most universally helpful in coping with trauma. How will you incorporate this into your students' lives so they can cope more effectively?

What is an action step or activity the school might take?

What is an action step you will take as an individual?

Chapter 7: Recovery

What strengths have sustained you and are supporting your recovery/journey forward??

What strengths do you have as a school community?

What could you create in your classrooms that represents your shared strengths?

How might you help students, staff and parents learn and support use of “naming/taming/reframing”?

How might it look to create a participatory project that pays tribute to the losses and promotes positive imaging of our shared future?

What is an action step or activity the school might take?

What is an action step you will take as an individual?

Chapter 8: Family and Community

It will be helpful to learn what level of impact from trauma your students are still negotiating. Hearing others' stories and experiences can be helpful in giving students courage to share how they're doing. How might you facilitate that in the classroom and "normalize" our shared journey and challenges?

What might an activity be that reveals classroom social fabric and promotes growth?

What about being able to learn of family and staff needs?

How might teachers create a means to hear how students are doing on a somewhat ongoing basis? A weekly check-in activity that gives some kind of feedback to teachers without students revealing private or inappropriate-to-share family information would be just one option. (See suggested activity)

How might we create activities that include families? (See suggested tree mural activity)

What is an action step you will take as an individual?

Chapter 9: For the Future

On a separate sheet of paper, either as an art activity or in writing, envision and reveal your image of an acceptable or perhaps even enlightened “new normal.”

Using the recovery timeline, help students identify where they think they might be and, as a group, share ideas for how they can mutually support one another's recovery. How might you organize this?

Using the timeline, look at how this relates to the range of experiences for staff. What can you as school staff might create as an ongoing means of supporting those who need it most?

How might we acknowledge and support those who are most stable and able to provide support to those who need it most?

How might we celebrate our accomplishments?

What is an action step or activity the school might take?

What is an actions step you will take as an individual?

School Specific Activities

ENVISIONING A LIVABLE “NEW NORMAL”

Find a way for students to “map” or graph continuing challenges for families. This could be done without students having to reveal their own family’s struggles.

- Teachers could solicit anonymous contributions from students writing on slips of paper “families still struggle with...” The teacher can lead a discussion on each of the statements.
- A graphic could be drawn indicating how challenging students thought each one might be.
- Students could write their ideas for how families could cope or manage these challenges on post-it notes (again, anonymously) and the teacher could post them on the board.
- After some discussion about the comments, students might identify what they think people have learned by managing through this past year.
- To take the concept further, each idea could be posted with the category it most closely addresses

Several activities based on the timeline from the book *The Little Book of Courage for the Big Pandemic*:

- Use the graphic of the timeline. For this exercise, just do a brief, general presentation of the concept of the three lines. Note that, of course, individual people will not actually be exactly on one of those lines, but that the graphic is a starting place for understanding that we’ve each had different experiences and challenges during this time.
 - Invite students to give examples (without needing to self-disclose about their own family) of what kinds of things may have happened for people on each of the three lines.
 - Now generate conversation about how people get through difficult challenges... we get through tough times together. Invite students to give examples of how neighbors, community members, organizations and others found effective ways to help those in need.
 - Generate further discussion on the value of community and shared support.
 - Point out how essential it is for our stabilization and recovery that not all people experience “the worst.”
- Using the timeline, focus on the three endpoints – that most people will come into the new normal coping at about the same level they did before the pandemic, but some will still be struggling for a longer time while others will have reinvented themselves or in some way “soared” to a new capacity because of the pandemic.
 - Using either small groups or a whole class discussion, ask students to identify any examples they can of how someone “soared” and created something new or better because of the pandemic. This activity fosters hope.
 - “Necessity is the mother of invention.”
 - Sometimes when things are going along pretty easily, we’re not motivated to invent, create or upgrade how we do something.
 - Examples might include general categories (Restaurants and food banks worked together to feed homeless. Car manufacturers figured out how to retool to make ventilators instead of auto parts.) And individuals started new businesses because they had time on their hands, like one woman who started baking cookies and now has a thriving business.
- Along with that, look for how you might encourage students to think of “soaring”. What new goodness might we create because of this?

A WORD ABOUT THE ARTS

There is likely no single better group healing mechanism than the arts. Whether theater, music or the visual, the arts reveal to us insights we can't find in conversation. They allow us to express ourselves when words fail us. And they bring us together in groups that bond quickly over a shared and meaningful experience. If there were one additional staff person to be hired to make the greatest difference in a school, it could be to hire a full time art therapist who works with many modalities of expression. It would be worth looking back through all of your action steps to see how many might be better addressed by the arts than by more traditional approaches. All the way through these next couple of years, bringing arts to the fore will serve schools and everyone in them well.

INVOLVING FAMILIES OR COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN ACTIVITIES

One consideration in creating participatory art activities is to look for the presence of unique skills and talents those in your community have. Here are a few examples of how a community-school collaboration or a community-led activity provided a great support for coping, adjusting and healing.

- **Art night.** An artist organized a school/family evening that included art activities for students and family members. There were supplies so creative projects could be done, but there was also a template with an activity designed to reveal strengths to each individual.
 - The template was of a tree with bare branches, also showing the roots below the soil line. Participants were invited to draw leaves on the tree and label them with the strengths they realized they have. Then on the roots, they wrote names of people who support and nurture those strengths. Some students added activities that they realized were part of their support as well, such as “marching band” or “theater.”
 - A huge mural could also be created on a wall using the same concept. The artist could create the outline of the tree, branches and roots. Participants could draw leaves that are labeled with strengths that exist in the community, noting on the roots the individuals and organizations in the community that support that growth.
 - This activity is based on an actual event, and the remarkable woman who organized it also pulled together community resources and volunteers to provide a barbecue dinner to families, had a bluegrass band playing in another room and had other group activities and games in the gym.
- **A Community Build.** Following the shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, a community member organized the [building of an ornate, beautiful pagoda](#). It took months to build. School staff, students and community members could participate at will. It was finished and stood for some number of weeks, and then – as planned – was set on fire and burned to the ground. This symbolized the recognition of the grief and magnitude of the horrific loss, but also created a moment when the symbolism was about moving forward together.
- **Bonfires.** There are a number of bonfire activities. Some are hosted by organizations that provide grief counseling, but some are just general annual events when community members throw something on the fire that symbolizes something they'd like to let go of... their anger about a divorce, loss of a loved one, whatever is heavy on the heart. These don't have to be big fires! Use a small metal outdoor fireplace or fire pit. Each person could simply throw in a pinecone that has a little slip of paper with a written message tucked into it. You could use small sticks and yarn for people to wrap their message around the stick and secure it with the yarn.

- **Memory Boats/Wish Boats.** If your town has even a good sized creek, find a gathering space where tables can be laden with pieces of bark, flowers, small branches, ribbons and origami paper and patterns/instructions. Each person writes a message on the origami rice paper and then folds it into a chosen shape. That becomes a centerpiece on the bark, and then it is all decorated with the flowers and other flora. When everyone is ready, walk down to the creek and float them off downstream. Make sure that all ingredients for the boats are entirely organic and not harmful for wildlife in the stream.

SUPPORTING THOSE WHO STILL STRUGGLE

Consider organizing several ways for staff, students and families to let you know how they're doing and what they still need.

- Put together a couple of ways to use surveys. Surveys need to be something people can complete in just a few minutes, but can also include a few text boxes so those who want to give more information, provide insights that weren't included in the survey questions or have questions they want answered. Surveys work from elementary school on up.
- Provide prompts for teachers to use to lead classroom discussion or for small group activities that allow students to identify struggles without revealing personal information. (Our 5 Radical Minutes program is a daily program that does just that! www.5radicalminutes.com)
- Engage students and staff in brainstorming supports or services they could provide for needs they recognize.

AND FOR EVERYONE

Ritual can have a way of helping move us forward. The pandemic has impacted every single one of us, but in very diverse ways. One very helpful way of bringing the community together in common support is to create an intentional gathering in which some kind of ritual or meaningful actions are taken. Think about what it could look like to have several people give input and help organize a gathering that acknowledges how difficult it has been; to pay tribute to the many people who put their lives at some level of risk – and in some cases, grave risk - to keep the world working for the rest of us. It could be a one time affair, it could be annual or bi-annual. It should have a positive focus that:

- speaks to the concept that our getting through difficult times is facilitated by others,
- that many others played a role in our survival
- that we're in this together
- that at some point in life, most of us will need to lean heavily on others
- that we are looking now toward what we hope will be an endpoint to the masks and precautions
- that it is worth looking back to take stock in what we've survived
- that to journey forward, we need to know where we are.
- that ritual and planned activities can help facilitate our movement from being stuck in our perceptions of the event to expanding our view and finding new meaning, leading to the possibility of moving forward.

The way we survive difficult times is together. Now is a time for us to build the social fabric that will most support our students in building resilience, strength and courage. What we do in the next year will have life-long implications for them. It will also play out in our society as a whole over time. We need to do our best to think outside the box. Let go of assumptions. Find a more helpful pathway. Guide and support students in the bigger journey of life. If we do this well in the short run, academics will better fall into place over time.

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. How what we learned will be helpful in life? In our community's recovery?
2. How has this changed our community?
3. What subtle changes do we recognize in how life has changed and will likely be a part of our "new normal"?
4. Why do we grieve?
5. How do we begin to recognize the hundreds of micro-losses Covid wrought?
6. Why is Covid is trauma-inducing?
7. Why is the trauma sometimes more difficult to recognize in this case?
8. What is the story of hope in all of this?
9. How can these insights be helpful for managers, leaders, administrators?
10. This is not just a self-help book, not just for those who are struggling. Who else needs this kind of information?
11. How can these insights be helpful for those who love others who are still struggling with either long-haulers syndrome or who have lingering trauma?
12. How could this information be helpful for leaders?
13. We are all in this together, not just for your individual experience, but for our shared new normal. How can I build community around these new insights?
14. What gifts do I bring to help support the forward journey for my family and community?
15. What are some actions I could take, organize or support?

If these activities have been helpful, consider these additional resources:

A LITTLE BOOK OF COURAGE FOR THE BIG PANDEMIC

The first, best option for this particular set of considerations is to order [A Little Book of Courage for the Big Pandemic](#). This resource fleshes out the concepts presented in this set of activities with insights that provide context for sound decision-making as we move through this next year or two. Some districts are purchasing the book and using the book club questions (following) as an over-the-summer study group, preparing teachers for what lies ahead.

CLASSROOM-BASED SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING SPECIFIC TO PANDEMIC RECOVERY:

[5 Radical Minutes](#) has a meaningful daily activity for all grades, K-12. This program is designed to bring each student into a meaningful exchange with all others in the classroom repeatedly over time. 5 Radical Minutes was re-written over the summer of 2020 to address the adjustments, challenges and skills for surviving the pandemic and resulting isolation in the best shape possible. It now has been rewritten once again to provide a daily mechanism for students to cope with our new experience of school. This program aligns with the guidelines for The American Rescue Plan, addressing the social and emotional residual students will bring to school with them, coming out of isolation.

CRISIS TEAM TRAINING FOR RESPONDING IN THIS UNIQUE TIME

While most districts have crisis response teams, many don't have in-depth consistent training as new counselors/social workers/mental health professionals come on board. Additionally, the unique circumstances due to the pandemic provide challenges never before faced. [Crisis Management Institute's training for crisis response teams](#) has been amended to meet these challenges in more flexible and effective ways. The goal is that support will come from surrounding buildings or districts rather than a building handling crises alone, so we call these crisis responders who will "fly to meet other's needs on a moment's notice" as Flight Teams. Options include having your own district or ESD staff take the Facilitator Training so you can offer this training on your own schedule, using your own staff to lead the effort to keep your team on the cutting edge.

Check out our website for resources, courses and materials: www.cmionline.com

Please email any time to see how we might more uniquely meet your need: info@cmionline.com