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# Cracking the Code of Student Emotional Pain

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# Cracking the Code of Student Emotional Pain

 [www.edutopia.org/blog/cracking-code-student-emotional-pain-lori-desautels](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/cracking-code-student-emotional-pain-lori-desautels)

Every instructor wants to crack the code -- to determine just what children and adolescents need to transform feelings of defeat, cognitive and emotional exhaustion, and outright hostility into something positive. They want to connect with students whose stress response states are chronically activated. They want to help learners know that they are more than just their genetics or their history. They want to share with their most fragile students that the traumas of their past can *strengthen* rather than harden their minds and hearts. No one needs to live in constant conflict and pain.



## Interpreting Negative Behaviors

Because the brain is a vulnerable and habitual organ, people in pain often cause others pain. When students feel threatened, they protect themselves in any way that they can. They lie, manipulate, and terminate relationships when their peers perceive them as unsafe and unpredictable. Such behaviors may be interpreted as a form of communication. Instructors can, however, begin to see underneath those undesirable behaviors and recognize that behind every act of defiance or misbehavior is strength. And teachers can begin to mirror this strength to our most vulnerable young people and show them where they are strong by asking, "What went wrong?" instead of the more typical question, "What is wrong with him?"



## Where to Begin When Students and Teachers Feel Stuck

The questions below are excellent discussion starters for eliciting student perspectives, feelings, and thoughts that youths might never disclose otherwise:

1. What do you want?
2. Do you have a plan?
3. How can I help you?
4. What are your resources?
5. What feels difficult?
6. What could be the best possible outcome?
7. What is the worst thing that could happen?
8. Is your interpretation really true?
9. How do you know this?

10. What is a first step in improving this situation?

When instructors listen with open and sensitive minds, they can identify whether a student's responses are unwarranted. This is an opportunity to validate what was heard and to simply be present.

## Resetting Expectations

Below are three collaborative processes that will help students reset expectations and rethink outcomes when they face an academic, emotional, or social challenge.

### 1. Rewiring Student Brains

As note takers, teachers can record a list of bullet points or keywords for the students as they share feelings and thoughts. These lists can be woven into a story that students compose as a work of art to share. It is the instructor's purpose to help learners perceive themselves as experts in their lives. As co-designers, we can fashion a diagram or mind map that illustrates students' thoughts and feelings to help them understand new options and opportunities, and to perceive their challenges as something that can be conquered. Our brains are wired for change, and they rewire with every new experience, thought, and relationship. This is the greatest miracle of a living system.

### 2. Learning From Emotions

It is the instructor's responsibility to share 21st-century brain research with his or her students. Neuro-anatomy discoveries during the 1990s enabled us to observe active images of the brain's metabolic processes. As a brain responds to a directive or image, its feeling and cognitive lobes ignite. We now understand the role of emotions, perspectives, and stress on [brain function and learning](#). Sharing this information with students can empower them to employ improved methods of self-assessment, thus enhancing their personal responses to stimulation and improving their sense of efficacy.

### 3. Teacher Well-Being

There is nothing more significant in the student-teacher relationship than the instructor's self-awareness and self-care. Our emotional states of mind (our non-verbal affect) seep into our relationships with students. What we feel and experience is intimately and quickly picked up and mirrored by our students. Contagious brain states cannot be ignored. To counter negative contagion, I have embarked on activities that I enjoy: yoga, reading, and walking in nature. Every day I plan two activities -- no matter how small -- that fill me emotionally, enhancing my relationship with my students. Detaching from student choices is critical to my well-being.

As the poet Mary Oliver once stated, "The only life you can save is your own!" Moreover, what teachers see as wrong or negative can be the very best possible experience that a student needs for emotional and social growth. As Dr. Vicara Satya Mary Connelly says, "Wake up and be well; practice until there is nothing left and then some. The only life you can save is your own, so treat yourself with ferocious love and compassion."

As a teacher, what self-care practices do you engage in? And how do you help young people work with and learn from their emotions? Please share your thoughts below in the comments section.