



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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Holiday Stress- Why Do Students Fall Apart Right Before the Holidays?

We know that our students navigate challenges throughout the year. However, behavior and experience show us that holiday breaks seem to be a more intense time.

Holiday breaks can amplify situational protective and risk factors present in our student’s lives. **Risk factors** are characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes. **Protective factors** provide buffering. Protective factors are associated with a reduced likelihood of negative outcomes or lower a risk factor’s impact. Risk and protective factors come from public health.

The supports and consistency of school pause, and daily life sets in during a time of heightened, festive attention. For our students, holiday breaks may mean:

- More exposure to family dynamics (both positive and negative)
- Family dynamics may increase in intensity
- Parenting or visitation plans may be adjusted or changed
- Travel, hosting, or visiting bring different places and faces
- Schedule shifts that increase time with others or reduce time with others
- Concerns or adjustments related to finances and food
- Balancing expectations and reality, and navigating the comparisons among peers and friends

The time before holiday breaks is a time of preoccupation. Who can know if joy or worry, or both, fuel student anticipation? For some families, this is an exciting time that promises celebration. A time that some of our students don’t want to end. However, for other students this is a time of uncertainty and unmet expectations, a time where anticipation turns from excitement into anxiety, and for a few anxiety shifts to despair. Even adults may find themselves fluctuating between feeling excited, stressed, and anxious.

The vast difference between the adult and student experience, however, is that adults are the decision-makers of the changes. Students are along for the ride with little-to-no control in the frenzy of break. It is understandable that our students who feel the least amount of control during the days leading to break might begin to seek a sense of control through a variety of behaviors.

As educators and trusted adults, we can use the time leading up to holiday break as protective and reassuring. We can dedicate ourselves to inclusion, working to keep our students with us, with the class, and within the school. Keeping students close may help them feel secure in a time of magnified expectation and anticipation.

Coping with anticipation and managing stress are lifelong skills. As is the development of coping through anxiety and painful experiences. To be resilient, to develop trust, and weather tough times happens with practice. Holiday break is an opportunity for us to support students in developing and coping with uncertainty and excitement, and all the feelings in-between.

This article was contributed by:

Mandy Paradise, M.Ed.

Project AWARE Program Supervisor

Secondary Education & K12 Supports

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

Ph: [360-725-6248](tel:360-725-6248) | Cell: [360-402-3580](tel:360-402-3580)

Email: mandy.paradise@k12.wa.us

Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

825 Fifth Avenue SE, Olympia, WA 98501 | (360) 357-9535 | www.wsascd.org

