

Identify barriers to learning and wellbeing, and ways to ease cognitive stress and overload

A suggestion for implementing the strategy 'Develop inclusive teaching practices' from the Guide: [ILEs](#)

Includes:

- Ask students what can help
- Consider student perspectives
- Reduce students' stress
- Understand the affective network
- Monitor student overload
- Useful resources

Inclusive Education

From

Guide: [Planning innovative learning environments \(ILEs\)](#)

Strategy: [Develop inclusive teaching practices](#)

Suggestion: [Identify barriers to learning and wellbeing, and ways to ease cognitive stress and overload](#)

Date

28 June 2026

Link

inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/planning-innovative-learning-environments-iles/identify-barriers-to-learning-and-wellbeing-and-ways-to-ease-cognitive-stress-and-overload

Ask students what can help

Emotion and cognition are inextricably linked in the brain. Ask students what you can do to help them learn.



Video hosted on Vimeo <http://vimeo.com/100662365>

Closed Captions

Source:

[Ministry of Education, inclusive education videos \(NZ\)](#)

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/2950799>

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Consider student perspectives

The ways classrooms are organised and managed can create anxiety for some students.

Discuss possible triggers for anxiety with students and identify ways to reduce them:

- ✓ working in large, open spaces
- ✓ lining up in cramped spaces
- ✓ speaking in front of the class
- ✓ group work
- ✓ changing layout of furniture
- ✓ changing layout of rooms and spaces
- ✓ changes to routine
- ✓ lots of choices
- ✓ unable to see, read, or hear information
- ✓ noise levels
- ✓ bright lights and glare
- ✓ moving around the school with large numbers of people at once.
- ✓ hot seating (no fixed desk).

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Reduce students' stress

Triggers	Strategies
Surprise at a new task	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Plan ahead where possibleUse multiple representations to support the new tasks (visual, audio)Prepare students for transitions, ensure all students hear and see what is coming next
Negotiating spaces that may regularly change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provide online and paper mapsProvide models that students can manipulate and talk aboutPrepare students for changeCreate familiar spaces that stay the same
Frustration with materials and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Allow students to choose what might work best for themOffer choice and variety (digital and non-digital)Introduce new tools with supported guidance
Social interactions and working collaboratively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Offer options for students to work alone or in a groupLet students know ahead of time the groups they will be working inProvide verbal or visual prompts to support and promote collaborative interactionExplicitly teach skills required for working collaboratively with othersGive direct instruction supported by visual and audio cues how long the activity may go for
Test or assessment anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Be clear about the purpose and share this with your studentsOffer multiple ways for students to express their understandingPrepare students ahead of time with exemplars and opportunities to practice
Noise levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Offer headphonesProvide quiet spacesProvide calming spaces
Moving around crowded and large rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Define areas by colour, add visuals and clear labelsCreate accessible, uncluttered pathwaysHave a home base where students can return to if feeling overwhelmed
Self Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Guide students to recognize when they are enjoying their learningBuild upon personal strengthsSupport students ability to solve problems

Source:

Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga

<https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz/assets/inclusive-education/slide-images/Emotional-triggers-1.jpg>

[View full image \(925 KB\)](#)

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Understand the affective network

Some learners are highly engaged and motivated by spontaneity and novelty, while others are disengaged, even frightened by those aspects, preferring a predictable routine.

To create environments that are safe for all learners, teachers need to:

- develop a pedagogical understanding and sensitivity to learner differences in order to challenge learners without ridicule or demotivating them
- ensure the physical or online space where learning takes place contributes to student learning and well-being rather than creating stress
- adopt approaches that enhance students' motivation to learn – this includes: using student interest and expertise, providing authentic contexts for learning, and utilising technologies.

To build further understanding, explore the videos and supporting resources from the Alberta UDL Summer Institute 2011 relating to the UDL principle of [multiple means of engagement](#).

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Monitor student overload

Students experience cognitive stress and overload when a task or situation is overwhelming.

Cognitive fatigue accumulates. The student's performance may deteriorate as the day progresses, or toward the end of the school week or term.

- ✓ Regularly connect with the student and parents to discuss their workload and what is happening at home.
- ✓ Work with the student, and their family, to prevent overload. For example, negotiate in advance expectations around completion of tasks.
- ✓ Find out what the signs of the student being overloaded are.
- ✓ Find out what triggers overload for the student.
- ✓ Discuss with the student what support they need to self-manage when they are overloaded. For example, use a break card, withdraw to a quiet space, tell the teacher they are overloaded.
- ✓ Agree as a class: how to communicate if something is too hard, how to ask for help, how we look after our friends and recognise when they are stressed, where we can go if we are stressed.

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Useful resources



The impact of physical design on student outcomes

Read time: 94 min

This report summarises research aimed at better understanding design features of learning spaces in the context of learning and achievement. Topics covered in this report include: lighting, heating, acoustics, indoor and outdoor spaces, and furniture considerations.

[Visit website](#)

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