

A Guide for Academic Staff in Emergency

Israel Trauma Coalition

First, something important to know: the fact that you continue to teach is itself an act of resilience. Faculty who hold academic structure in place provide students with a vital anchor. Teaching during wartime is not business as usual — but continuity is a value. This guide will help you navigate between academic responsibility and psychological needs — yours and your students'.

1. The First Class — What to Say and How to Open

Intentional Opening — A Few Sentences That Prepare the Ground

Take 3–5 minutes at the start of each class for normalization and expectation-setting. Not as a mental health counselor, but as someone who sees whole people — not just students.

In the first class	"We're all arriving here under difficult circumstances. We'll try to work together, and I ask you to let me know if the pace doesn't feel right."
On expectations	"The material matters, and I'm committed to covering it — but not at the expense of the basics: that you feel safe and are able to function."
On flexibility	"If there's an alert — we'll follow the security protocol and return. If someone needs to leave the class — that is completely legitimate."
On emotional silence	"I don't expect you to leave your difficulties at the door. If it's hard — say so, privately or in class."

2. Helping Students Be Available to Learn — Practical Tools

Mental Preparation Before Teaching Begins

- ◆ Open each class with a brief 60–90 second cognitive grounding exercise: 3 deep breaths + an anchor phrase — "We're here, in the classroom, and we're about to work on..." This brings the brain back to the present moment.
- ◆ Introduce a "Cognitive Parking Lot" at the start of class (physical or digital): any distracting thought — write it down, park it, move on. The brain knows it won't be lost, and can turn its attention to learning.
- ◆ Open with a clear boundary-setting phrase: "We've brought things in from outside — we're parking them here to the side. In X minutes we'll come back to them. Right now we're in the classroom." — A frame, not an emotional opening.

During the Class — Maintaining Attention

- ◆ Work in blocks of 20–25 minutes with a built-in break — 'Now 2 minutes away from the screen, stand up and breathe.'
- ◆ Explicitly signal when the most important part is coming: 'Now we reach the core of the lesson — I'm asking for 5 minutes of full focus.'

- ◆ Encourage writing questions on notes during discussion — reducing cognitive load, 'working memory management'.
- ◆ Use the 'Thinking Partner' method: every 20 minutes — a question for pairs for one minute, then return to the full group.

3. Flexibility Around Alerts — Without Sacrificing the Material

An alert is not just an interruption — it is a physiological experience that affects the nervous system. After returning from the shelter, a student's brain is in a state of heightened arousal for up to 15–20 minutes. Continuing immediately from where we stopped — is simply ineffective.

Return-to-Class Protocol After an Alert

Step 1 — Safety	Make sure everyone is back. Do not begin until the class is full.
Step 2 — Grounding (2 min)	Ask: 'Who is here right now?' — a quick count. Then: '3 breaths together — breathe in... and out.' Allow students to release the energy.
Step 3 — Cognitive Bridge (1 min)	Say aloud: 'We stopped at...' and summarize in 2 sentences what was said before the alert. This helps the brain 'switch back on.'
Step 4 — Decide Together	Ask: 'How many minutes do you think we need before we continue?' — sharing a sense of control.
Step 5 — Structured Resumption	Return with a simple first activity (not new material) — a question, a discussion, a brief summary.

What to Do If an Alert 'Stole' a Large Part of the Class?

- ◆ Prioritize the core — state at the opening what the two most important things are that they'll leave with today.
- ◆ Send a written supplement after class — 'What we didn't get to, here it is briefly' — limited to 10 lines.
- ◆ Post a short recording (5–7 min) of topics not covered — preferable to extending the class.
- ◆ Don't try to 'cram' missed material — it creates overload and reduces absorption.

4. Self-Regulation for the Instructor — Emotional, Cognitive, Physical

You are not only a content deliverer. You are also modeling regulation for your students. When the instructor stays calm and focused — the class calms down. When they 'fall apart' — it is contagious. Self-regulation is a teaching tool.

Emotional regulation	Before entering the classroom: ask yourself 'What am I bringing with me right now?' and tell yourself: 'Right now I am teaching. Everything else can wait.'
Cognitive regulation	Write yourself 3 key points before the class and keep them in front of you. This protects your attention from scattering.

Physical regulation	Breathe before entering the classroom: 4 seconds inhale, 6 seconds exhale. Drink water. If standing — the posture is more stabilizing than sitting.
Managing intrusive thoughts	If disturbing thoughts arise during teaching — acknowledge them quietly: 'I notice this. I'll deal with it after class.'
Boundaries and roles	You are an instructor, not a therapist. You can see difficulty, refer to support, and not take the pain home with you.

5. Responding to a Struggling Student — and to Disruptive Events

The Student Cannot Concentrate — What Do You Do?

- ◆ Don't ignore it and don't suggest 'trying harder'. See them: 'I can see this is hard right now — what do you need?'
- ◆ Offer a 'bridge': 'Stay in class and try to catch what you can — I'll send the material.' Not all or nothing.
- ◆ After the class — send a short message: 'I noticed it was difficult. I'm here if you'd like to talk.'
- ◆ If you identify a recurring pattern — refer to the academic resilience center or the counseling unit.

A Difficult News Event Happened Just Before Class

- ◆ Acknowledge briefly and move on: 'I know that X happened. Now we're here.' — One sentence only. Don't ask "how are you feeling" and don't invite sharing — this opens an emotional field that is hard to close.
- ◆ Don't open an emotional discussion — instead, anchor in the here and now: "X happened. Right now we're in this room, together. Let's take 3 breaths and bring our focus back here."
- ◆ Then say: 'We continue — not because it doesn't matter, but because continuity is part of our resilience.'
- ◆ If the class is not available — shorten, adapt, and don't push complex material when the container is empty.

Useful Phrases for Any Situation

When there is tension in class	"Let's return to focus — 3 breaths together, and then we continue."
When a student cries	"That's completely okay. Take the time you need. We'll continue slowly."
When there is anger	"I hear you — that anger makes sense. I want us to talk about it after class."
When a student refuses to continue	"I suggest you step out to get some air — and come back when it feels right. There will be no consequences."

6. When and How to Refer to Professional Help?

Part of your role is to identify — not to diagnose. Three situations require immediate referral:

Talk of self-harm	Respond quietly and privately. Refer immediately to psychological counseling services. Do not promise absolute confidentiality.
Prolonged dysfunction	If a student has been absent for an extended period and is not responding — make contact through the student union
Exceptional difficulty in class	Contact the resilience liaison at the institution for discussion and guidance on how to proceed — they are

Mental Health Helplines

***5486**
National Resilience
Center

1201
ERAN — Mental First Aid |
24/7

1800-363-363
NATAL — Trauma & Stress
Victims | 24/7

Remember: asking for help is strength, not weakness. You too are entitled to support.

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