One of the most important things you can do for your students is to be aware of potential symptoms of mental illness such as fatigue, withdrawal, sad or overly anxious, difficulty interacting with friends or peers, a drop in school performance, mood swings, lethargic, loss of interest, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, lack of energy, and poor attendance, etc. These are your first clues that something is not right.

Here are some general suggestions for classroom strategies to use with these students:

a. Allow students to have water bottles at their desk, since many medications cause dry throats.
b. Give extended time on assignments.
c. Make special contact with the student each day as they arrive or leave to develop connectedness.
d. Keep a record of a student’s problematic behavior to help you see trends.
e. Provide expressive outlets, such as journal writing, creative writing, drawing, or role-playing.
f. Provide an individualized academic instruction plan, which may include deadline extensions, tutors, or online coursework.
g. Have an alternative form of evaluation available, so the student can use their strengths.
h. Allow tests to be taken in another room or in a quiet place.
i. Teach organizational strategies and provide study guides.
j. Put outlines on the board of the day’s activities.
k. Encourage use of daily planners or agenda books.
l. When asking questions, allow more time for the student to respond.
m. Provide for opportunities to develop social skills, such as group work or peer partners.
n. Allow a note taker to help students who have difficulty concentrating.
o. If a student has an oral presentation, allow them to have a friend videotape their presentation, and then show it to the class.
p. Promote resilience – help them feel connected by helping others when possible.
q. Help them develop short-term achievable goals. Recognize and reward small improvements (e.g. finishing on time.)
r. Develop a culture of acceptance and a safe working environment in the classroom, where they feel protected.
s. Provide normal routines and well-structured assignments.
t. Encourage students to contact the counselor or health office for support.
u. Use humor in the classroom to relax the atmosphere.
v. Create a team with school staff to give the student support.
w. Be a good listener! Allow the student to express their thoughts.
x. Maintain regular communication between home and school.
y. Keep comments factual and positive, noting improvements when possible.

If working with students or parents, avoid using language that appears to diagnose the student, like “depressed”, and focus on specific observations instead.

“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”