

Background Information for Teachers: Be Kind to Yourself and Others

Why address Mental Health in Schools?

We all want our students to be successful in school and in life. Students, who are healthy -- not only physically, but also socially, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally -- are more likely to do well in school. Mental health, school success and life success are strongly linked.

How is Mental Health different from Mental Illness?

It is important to make a clear distinction between mental health and mental illness. Just as we can enjoy good physical health even though we may have a physical illness, we can have good mental health even though we may have a mental illness. Just as we can eat healthy food and participate in physical activity to stay physically healthy, there are things we can do to contribute to our own mental health and the mental health of others.

Mental health is about how we feel about ourselves, how we behave, how we think, and how we relate to others. It means being able to cope with the normal stresses of life and have an effect on others in positive ways. The Public Health Agency of Canada describes positive mental health as “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity”.

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/mhp-psm/index-eng.php>

What can Schools do?

Schools can:

- create a positive social climate where students feel safe, cared for and that they belong
- help students develop skills to cope with stress, adversity, trauma or tragedy
- help students develop healthy relationships
- reduce stigma through education
- help build pathways to care

Mental health promotion is embedded throughout the Health & Life Skills Curriculum in the Wellness Choices Outcomes and Relationship Outcomes in elementary and junior high school and throughout the Career and Life Management curriculum in high school.

To be most effective, promoting mental health should use a comprehensive school approach which includes:

- Education for students and their families to create awareness and develop skills
- A school environment, including policy, that creates “a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging.”
- Partnership with parents, school councils, local businesses and community agencies.

What does the Junior High Mental Health Kit: Be Kind to Yourself and Others include?

This kit was created to address mental wellness for grade 7-9 students. It was developed collaboratively by Alberta Health Services – Edmonton Zone (Addiction Prevention/Mental Health Promotion and Public Health) in partnership with Edmonton Public School Board and Edmonton Catholic School District.

The lesson plans/activities in this kit address topics throughout the Alberta Education Health & Life Skills Program of Study. In addition, each lesson has take home activities to support the learning at home. There are separate lesson plans for each of grades 7, 8 & 9 on the following topics:

- Healthy Relationships
- Hope
- Stress
- Body Image
- Healthy Eating, Active Living & Sleep
- Cyber Bullying
- Substance Use
- Mental Illness and Suicide Prevention (specifically for Grade 8)
- Transition to High School (specifically for Grade 9)

Before you Start: Information you need to know!

- Before teaching these lessons, you may want to inform parents that you will be talking about mental health and to invite their participation in the take-home activities included in each lesson. A sample parent/guardian letter follows.
- Be prepared to refer students who need support. Be familiar with referral procedures in your school district. We encourage you to complete the template provided and list local resources to support youth and families. Your community may also have a 211 list of “Resources for Mental Health” such as the example given for Edmonton.
- The “Teacher Guide” section of this kit provides a way to introduce mental wellness to your students.
- The student “Quiz” will help to identify which topics are important to address first.

Using this Resource Beyond the Classroom:

- Another way to use the lesson plans is to organize a Student Mental Wellness Fair and rotate students through activity stations based on the lesson plans. The stations could be facilitated by a teacher, school nurse, or even an older student. Training older students to facilitate the stations helps them to develop leadership skills and be involved in peer education within their school setting. If you organize a Student Mental Wellness Fair, you may want to invite parents to attend the event. Consider incorporating the event into your Demonstration of Learning/Student Led Conferences. This is especially effective if students are leading the education station. There is a greater chance that parents will come to the event if their child is doing a presentation.
- You could use the lesson plans as part of broader monthly or weekly themes around mental wellness. Each month or week could focus on a different topic from the kit while bulletin boards, announcements, and activities could support the message.

Other ways to promote mental wellness in your school community:

- Use a whole school approach involving students, parents and community partners to create a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that may include some of the following:
 - Gathering information from various groups about how welcoming and caring the school is from their perspective. (Consider using the Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool, <https://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/safeschools>.)
 - Brainstorming ways to promote mental wellness, e.g., positive recognition events, staff wellness events, peer mentoring.
 - Ensuring that inappropriate behaviours such as teasing and bullying are addressed with consequences that focus on collaborative problem solving, reconciliation and restorative practices rather than punitive measures.
 - Teaching social emotional learning skills.
- Encourage parents to start talking about positive mental health with their families. Alberta Education’s Mental Health Matters has created conversation starter cards which include: questions that can be used during dinner or while driving; suggestions for fun family activities to help families stay connected; and reminders that build healthy relationships. <http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/7838007/mhm-tipsheets-junior-senior.pdf>
- Put wellness articles into the parent newsletters or on the school website. For articles that can be used, check out the “Healthy Children, Healthy Teens” newsletters for parents on the Alberta Health Services website: <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/9539.asp>.

- Educate staff about the early warning signs of mental health concerns for students, themselves and their colleagues. It is important to know what to do if they recognize problems (make sure to complete the template with your community resources). Talking about mental illness does not make it worse. Some of the most common mental health concerns in youth are anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Consider becoming a trained Mental Health First Aid responder. For more information go to the Mental Health First Aid website at www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca.