

Student Mental Health



As COVID-19 continues to evolve with increasing measures from health authorities, provincial governments, and regional and/or local school boards you may encounter numerous inquiries within your communities, including those from families and inquisitive children.

Your students to some extent have had numerous conversations with parents, guardians and their peers regarding COVID-19 and the impact the pandemic has had on their lives. When speaking to students, take a balanced approach when speaking of scenarios involving their education, health and safety. Overall, there are two key considerations; to ensure you are providing reliable, age appropriate messages and information and to ensure your students recognize you as a primary source of advice and knowledge.

As added attention is given to student mental health, more research is being done to understand and help youth to become more resilient given the social complexities and technological advances of a constantly evolving world. The more we understand that not all families or individuals are alike, the more strategies we are able to create to overcome many of these issues.

What we know about student mental health:

- The majority of mental health disorders symptoms appear and may be diagnosed between ages 12 to 25¹, with 75% of mental health disorders first appearing among those 18 to 24 years old²
- 1 in 5 students in post-secondary school feel depressed and anxious or battling other mental health challenges³
- Mental health disorders represent approximately half of all diagnosed health concerns of young adults in the world (World Health Organization, 2010)⁴
- Data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information reported emergency department visits by those aged 15 to 24 seeking mental health or substance abuse treatment rose 63 percent and hospitalizations jumped 67 percent between 2006 and 2016⁵

As we begin to understand more about mental health in youth and young adults, it is important to ensure during their key learning and educational years, steps are taken to build strong resiliency and coping strategies.

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These key learnings will enable and empower many to endure and bounce back when they encounter the various challenges they will undoubtedly face throughout their formative years.

Support from parents; guardians; and teachers:⁴

As a key and influential support, there are steps and lessons that can be taken and applied throughout a child's life to build resiliency:

1. Teach self-care. Being a positive role model for children, it is important that you model proper self-care tactics. Children often learn self-care strategies from their primary care providers, so if the caregiver does not lead by example when it comes to self-care, the child often mimics similar negative behaviours and patterns in life. It is important for the child to learn the concept of "down-time" for recharging ones energy.

2. Nurture a positive self-view. Fostering positive self-esteem in a child can be a challenge. With so many external factors that contribute to self-esteem, it can be difficult to convince children regardless of their age that they are truly amazing and talented individuals. Helping the child reframe their hardships and helping them understand that current difficulties can help build strength and knowledge to handle challenges ahead are all appropriate steps in creating positive self-view. Helping the child learn to trust themselves in solving problems and making appropriate and ethical decisions is key to building stronger resiliency later in life. Teach the child to see the humour in life, and the ability to laugh at yourself.

3. Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook. Every student faces painful events and disappointment in their life. Receiving a poor grade, losing a friend, moving to a new school, or being bullied, physically, emotionally or online can all contribute to low-self-esteem and hinder an individual's perspective on their future. Looking at the situation in a broader context and keeping a long-term focus can help the student see that there is a future beyond the current situation, and that future is good. An optimistic and positive outlook enables students to recognize and see the good things in life. This

ability to focus on the positive allows them to bounce back from negative events more quickly, and show that life moves on after bad events.

Support in the classroom:

In the classroom and at home, there are steps which may be taken to help support students in maintaining positive mental health.

1. Create a safe classroom and learning environment.

Maintaining an environment that encourages positive mental health can be challenging. Ensuring the classroom is a safe environment that accepts diversity and fosters respect and empathy can help to support student learning. If you notice a student being bullied, intervene before the situation escalates and gets out of hand.

2. Move toward a goal. Teaching the student how to set reasonable goals and how to develop and apply a step-by-step approach moving towards their goal is helpful in educating them on how to manage expectations and reward. Celebrating each accomplishment and key milestones, rather than the entire goal, can help build the resiliency needed to move forward when facing adversity. Breaking down large assignments into small, manageable goals for students, and acknowledging their accomplishments along the way empowers and provides the inspiration to push forward.

3. Don't define the student by their weakness. Students are often labelled with having trouble with a subject or their learning abilities. This can lower self-esteem in students at a critical time of confidence building. Instead, focus on the things that the student is doing well, and frame the weaknesses as opportunities to grow and learn new things.

Support in post-secondary years:

Post-secondary student life is thought to be a time of self-discovery, freedom, and new social experiences. However, for some it can be very stressful, difficult to navigate, and an environment that may lead to greater risk of mental health disorders.⁴ Here are some options to consider when speaking to your student:

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- 1. Make connections.** Encourage students to make friends by getting involved in their community or at school. Often, students leave home for the first time and lose immediate connection to their existing support network of family and friends. It is helpful in the beginning of the student's post-secondary experience that they seek out opportunities to make connections with other people, so their support network can expand.
- 2. Maintain a routine.** When attending post-secondary schooling, it is easy for a student to get out of routine. It is important that there is some structure in place so the student builds a schedule that ensure they are eating, exercising regularly, attending classes, maintaining their homework and studying, and having adequate time to rest.
- 3. Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** Post-secondary school is a time when a child becomes a young adult, often learning about themselves through the various adversities and challenges they will face. Help them by taking a look

at the common challenges that await and reframe them as positive opportunities to grow and see "what they are made of", as this can help them build upon their individual self-discovery. Talking to them before they go off to school about the many things they may experience, and how they might overcome those difficulties, can help them develop tactics and the resiliency to face what is ahead.

- 4. Seek help.** One of the most important things that a student needs to know is to seek help when needed. Regardless of the support needed, mental health or academic related, it is important to talk through the challenges they are facing in order to overcome them. Speaking about challenges can help the individual process their feelings, bring logic to the situation, and help come up with solutions to overcome the current situation, and prevent it from happening again.



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Help for student's mental health:

There is a growing need for more mental health education and support for students of all ages. Paul Obermeyer, Program Director of The Residence at Homewood Health, an elite mental health and addictions facility in Guelph, Ontario, commented on some of the observed challenges that student clients have experienced when it comes to their mental health.

"Many of our young clients who are in school have been impacted by technological changes such as texting and online bullying. There is a growing concern that youth aren't able to disconnect from bullying, as technology allows them to be texted and attacked on their social media feeds."

There are a number of youth who struggle with their peers perceived "behind the scenes" life, they assume their peers life as being more glamorous and exciting than it really is. "The reality is what is often posted online is not reality. When youth compare themselves to their peers, they aren't seeing that this individual may have the same family, financial, friend or social challenges they too are facing. They think, 'my peers are living this glamorous life, and here I am at home on a Friday,' while in reality, their peers are facing their own fears and challenges. It is important to speak to your youth about this, so they develop positive self-esteem which can affect their mental health."

Paul suggested the following to support youth when it comes to building their resiliency and self-esteem, "the first step is building and fostering a relationship with your child to open the conversation about what they are facing. Talk about mental health and the strength to address ones challenges. Remove the stigma behind mental health. If there is a need for your youth to get treatment, programming that focuses on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and healthy lifestyles, can assist youth in recognizing how their thoughts affect their feelings, and develop coping strategies that will support them throughout their life."

Being a student has always been a challenge. No matter what age the student is, we have to work to create positive environments that foster learning and respect, while helping them to build resiliency so they can face any challenges that may come their way inside and outside of school.

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