

Common Threads for Inclusive Education



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Emotional and Mental Health

PLANNING YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY

How can I be aware of and respond to the emotional and mental health needs of students in an inclusive learning environment?

FIRST STEPS

An inclusive learning environment, in which diversity is embraced and every student is welcomed, cared for, respected and safe, provides a foundation for the development of positive emotional and mental health. The Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2018b) outlines teachers' responsibility to be aware of and facilitate responses to the emotional and mental health needs of students. This includes maintaining a learning environment that promotes positive emotional and mental health; identifying students who may be at risk of mental health problems; and connecting students with appropriate supports and services, as required. Provincial legislation and school jurisdiction policies and protocols guide teachers in supporting students who may be at risk of mental health problems.

Every child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.

—Walsh 2015



It is estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder—the single most disabling group of disorders worldwide.

—<https://cmha.ca/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>



The Alberta
Teachers' Association



Every child needs to learn how to deal with life experiences to establish a state of positive emotional and mental health for life.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

The terms *mental health* and *emotional health* are often interchanged, but are two different aspects of well-being. Mental health has to do with the *head*—your thoughts and actions, while emotional health has to do with the *heart*—your awareness of your emotions and the ability to manage and express emotions in an age-appropriate manner. A positive balance between these cognitive and affective states is essential to maintaining good health.

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to his or her community (WHO 2014). A range of factors influence mental health, including life experiences, learning and working environments, and social and economic conditions. People who are mentally healthy

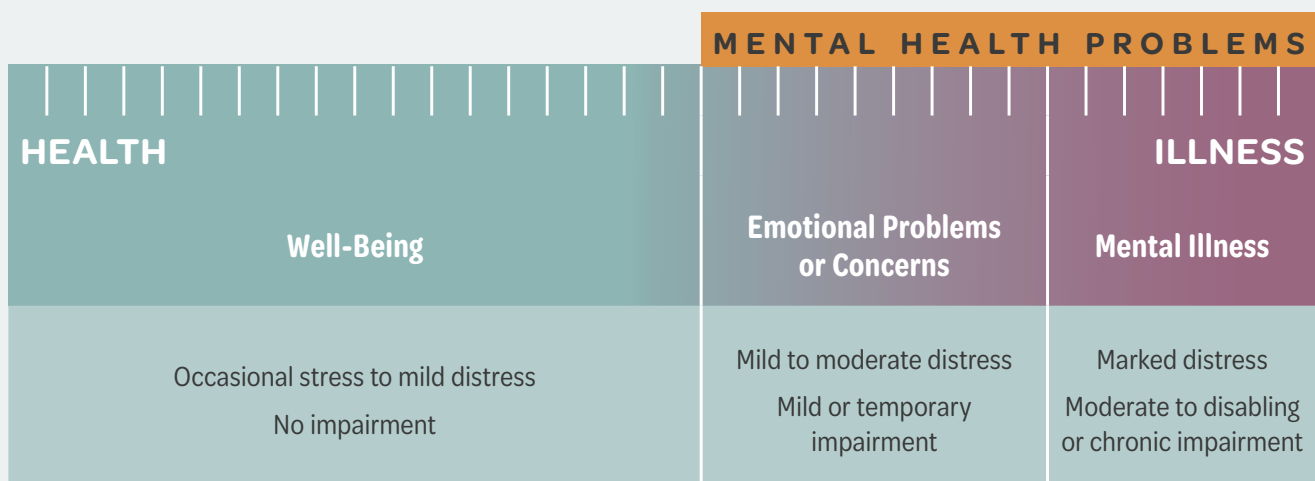
- have a sense of contentment,
- can deal with stress and bounce back from adversity,
- have a sense of purpose and meaning,
- can build and maintain fulfilling relationships,
- are flexible and can adapt to change,
- balance work and play, rest and activity, and
- have self-confidence and positive self-esteem (Alberta Education nd).

How an individual responds to and recovers from life’s challenges can be an indication of whether they have positive mental health, mental health problems such as emotional distress, or a mental illness in need of professional support.

Emotional health deals with how we manage our feelings, particularly at those times when we get upset or agitated. Emotional health is often connected with happiness, optimism and resilience. Positive emotional health is characterized by being able to accurately identify and monitor one’s own feelings, appropriately express their reactions and facilitate their behaviour despite intense affective states. As a result, people with positive emotional health can deal better with stressful events, maximize their potentials and perceive their lives as fulfilling. Emotional health has been viewed as an extension of mental health that includes the ability to appropriately manage emotional responses in both pleasant and unpleasant situations (Pyramid Healthcare 2019).

Is It a Mental Health Problem or a Mental Illness?

Mental health is not fixed but, rather, exists on a continuum. Positive mental health does not mean that a person is happy and cheerful all the time. Everyone will have times when they feel sad, afraid or frustrated, for example. How an individual responds to and recovers from life’s challenges can be an indication of whether they have positive mental health, mental health problems such as emotional distress, or a mental illness in need of professional support.



Mental Health—Mental Illness Continuum

Source: MHealthy—University of Michigan Health and Well-Being Services. 2012. “Understanding U: Managing the Ups and Downs of Life—What Is Mental Health?” ©2020 Regents of the University of Michigan. Used with permission.

Mental health problems describes the common struggles and difficulties that all people experience at different times throughout their life. Feeling stressed, upset, sad, confused or overwhelmed is a common response to life challenges, but such feelings usually pass and do not require medical treatments. Nevertheless, these feelings also have a real impact on one’s mental health and the ability to thrive and enjoy life. Therefore, students who are experiencing mental health problems can benefit from support, understanding and attention from a caring adult (Alberta Teachers’ Association [ATA], Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA] and Global Television 2015).

Mental illness is alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with significant distress and impaired functioning in one or more areas of life. *Mental illness* refers to a condition that can be diagnosed by a medical professional. The effects of mental illness may be temporary or long lasting. Early diagnosis and treatment by a professional are very important to the recovery journey. Mental illness affects people of all ages, education, income levels and cultures. In 2017, Alberta Education quoted a CMHA estimate that 10 to 20 per cent of children and youth in Canada experience mental illness (Alberta Education 2017).

It is difficult to determine whether students are experiencing a mental illness or facing a mental health problem. Teachers are not expected, or qualified, to diagnose mental illness, but there are a few suggestions to determine whether the student needs some support or additional resources are required.

For more information:

- Alberta Education. “Mental Health in Schools.” www.alberta.ca/mental-health-in-schools.aspx
- Alberta Health Services. “MORE: Mental Health Online Resources for Educators.” Free, online professional development modules designed for K–12 educators. www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page9167.aspx
- Canadian Mental Health Association. Mental health brochures. <https://cmha.ca/document-category/mental-health>

Mental Health Problems	Mental Illness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are a common experience of negative or upsetting emotions or thoughts; • are generally triggered by an event or problem; • are usually associated with emotions and behaviours that are not very severe and are relatively short lasting; • don’t generally require professional help, but it may be useful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is a less common experience; • includes symptoms that may occur in response to an event or problem or may occur spontaneously; • includes symptoms that tend to be more severe and long lasting; • requires professional help, which is essential in order for a positive prognosis.

(ATA, CMHA and Global 2015)

TEACHERS' LEGAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Teachers occupy a unique position of trust because of their work with students. Consequently, teachers are bound by legal and professional responsibilities to ensure student protection and safety. The Alberta *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*¹ requires professionals, such as doctors, social workers and teachers, to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the police or to child welfare agencies. Children who are being abused or neglected may exhibit behaviours that reflect their emotional and mental distress. If you suspect that a child is experiencing or is at risk of child abuse, neglect or sexual exploitation, you must take action. Most abused children are not able to help themselves; by acting, you may be preventing a child from being hurt, or even killed, and from having lifelong emotional problems (Alberta Health Services nd).

Most school boards have policies and protocols that guide teachers in how to report suspected child abuse. In addition to school board policies, the Alberta Teachers' Association offers the following guidance:

Unless a teacher has special training or assignment in counselling, avoid counselling students who display signs of sexual, emotional or mental vulnerability. In these situations, a teacher should avoid dealing with a student alone. At minimum, teachers should consult regularly with the teacher counsellor in the school or with someone else with expertise in this area and keep a record of such consultations. [Note: any discussions with counsellors and/or administrators should be general conversations that do not reveal the identity of the student.]

Because many teachers have trusting relationships with their students, you may encounter a scenario where a student discloses an incident of sexual abuse or other incidents where they were victims of a crime. Students' complaints are not to be discounted, but most teachers are not trained to counsel or investigate such incidents. Therefore, teachers should refer these issues to their school's counsellors. Where a school does not have a counsellor, teachers are advised to call [Teacher Employment] Services for direction.

Where you believe a child is presently at risk, you have a positive duty to report it using the Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-387-5437 (KIDS) (ATA 2019).



Teachers have a unique relationship with their students that assists them to identify when children are facing challenges that would not otherwise be addressed.

For more information:

- Government of Alberta. "How to Help and Report Child Abuse, Neglect and Sexual Exploitation." www.alberta.ca/how-to-help-and-report-child-abuse-neglect-and-sexual-exploitation.aspx
- Government of Alberta. "What Is Child Abuse, Neglect and Sexual Exploitation." www.alberta.ca/what-is-child-abuse-neglect-and-sexual-exploitation.aspx

Call the Alberta Teachers' Association, Teacher Employment Services, for confidential, personal advice on reporting abuse, neglect and sexual exploitation.

Phone 1-800-232-7208 or, in the Edmonton area, 780-447-9400.

PROMOTING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers' work to support emotional and mental health has three components: promoting positive emotional and mental health in the learning environment, identifying students who may have mental problems and supporting them in the school, and identifying and facilitating an appropriate response to students who may require individualized mental health supports and services. The response to intervention (RTI) framework is a three-tiered approach in which schools and teachers monitor and support all students and target interventions and strategies for struggling students who require additional resources.

Universal Strategies (Tier 1)

Universal strategies are incorporated into the learning environment for all students. These strategies work to enhance positive emotional and mental health by ensuring a caring and safe environment, teaching students strategies for healthy living and developing personal resilience.

Welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment

A welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment provides students with a sense of security, a sense of identity or self-concept, a sense of belonging, and a sense of personal competence. A learning environment that supports positive emotional and mental health is one in which

- healthy, respectful and positive relationships are fostered;
- students feel that the adults in the school care for them;
- diversity is respected and students' strengths are celebrated;
- student learning needs are addressed using strategies such as differentiation and universal design for learning;
- there are clear and consistent behaviour expectations;
- support is provided to students who are impacted by inappropriate behaviour, as well as to students who engage in inappropriate behaviour; and
- parents are welcomed as partners in student learning.



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When teachers recognize that a student has mental or emotional health challenges, employing the RTI framework will help create a support plan for the student.



Health and personal living skills can be incorporated into various lesson plans where topics relate to the development of positive mental health.

Mental health instruction

The goals of providing mental health instruction are to reduce stigma, increase awareness and develop a safe zone to talk about mental health. The health and personal living skills and career and life management programs include specific learner outcomes related to mental and emotional health; however, there are other programs in which these topics can also be addressed, including English language arts, social studies and physical education.

Social-emotional learning

Social-emotional learning focuses on helping students develop social-emotional skills that are essential for working with others; building resilience; achieving goals; reducing bullying and racism; and reducing risk-taking behaviours such as substance abuse.² The five competencies of social-emotional learning, identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), are

- self-awareness—the ability to recognize emotions and assess one’s strengths and challenges;
- self-management—controlling emotions and impulses, managing stress, self-motivation, and setting and achieving goals;
- social awareness—identifying others’ emotions, showing empathy and understanding others’ perspectives;
- relationship skills—building healthy relationships, communication skills, conflict resolution, working, playing and learning from others; and
- responsible decision making—making wise choices and evaluating potential consequences.³

Teacher resources to support mental health instruction:

- Alberta Teachers’ Association, Canadian Mental Health Association and Global Television. Creating a Compassionate Classroom: Mental Health Lesson Plans. canwetalk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/COOR-79I-2016-03-CWT-lesson-plans.pdf
- Alberta Health Services. “Schools and Educators.” www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page2909.aspx

Teacher resources to support social-emotional learning:

- Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada). “Emotional Well-Being Education Activities.” <https://phecanada.ca/activate/phe-home-learning-centre/emotional-well-being-education-activities>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). <https://casel.org/>

Not all stress is harmful, and positive stress promotes growth.



Resilience

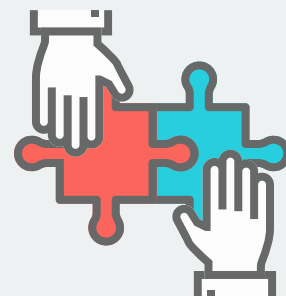
Resilience is the ability of individuals to withstand and rebound from adversity. Learning to cope with manageable stress is central to developing resilience. Not all stress is harmful, and positive stress promotes growth.⁴

There is strong evidence that the characteristics associated with resilience and the coping strategies to adapt to stressors can be learned and supported. The following research-based strategies can foster resilience:

- Provide unconditional positive regard in a caring and safe environment to foster resilience and hope.
- When correcting student behaviour, always empower; never disempower, ridicule or punish.
- Set up community service situations in which students who need to build resilience can learn from helping others.
- Maintain high expectations, reasonable limits and consistent routines.
- Encourage positive, supportive relationships with caring adults.
- Integrate affective and cognitive development into teaching and learning (Wolpow et al 2009).

Teacher resources to build resilience:

- Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Compassionate Schools. *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success*. www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/compassionateschools/pubdocs/theheartoflearningandteaching.pdf



Targeted Interventions (Tier 2)

Targeted interventions are those that support students who are experiencing a mental health problem; they can be used as a proactive measure when tragedy strikes a student or the school community.

Trauma-informed practice

Trauma is defined not as the event itself, but rather as a response to one or more overwhelming stressful events in which one's ability to cope is dramatically undermined. These experiences may lead to a host of social, emotional and academic difficulties that can interfere with the student's ability to learn at school. Trauma-inducing experiences can include physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse; witnessing abuse in the home; having a parent with substance abuse or mental health issues; or living in a home with an adult who has spent time in prison or an Indian Residential School.⁵ Intergenerational trauma is usually seen within a family in which the parents or grandparents were traumatized, and each generation of that family continues to experience trauma in some form. Direct survivors of these experiences often transmit the trauma to later generations when they don't recognize or have the opportunity to address their issues.⁶ Trauma-informed practice works to provide the student

with a calm, safe, predictable and supportive learning environment in which staff members understand how trauma affects behaviour and emotions. Students who have experienced trauma need opportunities to learn social-emotional strategies to express their emotions and positively relate to others.

Crisis support

Many school jurisdictions have developed crisis support plans to guide school responses to a tragic school event, such as the death of a student, or a community disaster, such as a fire or flood. Crisis support plans include trauma-informed practices and supports to help students deal with the emotional stress. Teachers should review their school jurisdiction's crisis support plan to be prepared in the event of a tragedy.

For more information:

- Alberta Education. "Trauma-informed Practice." www.alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice.aspx
- Alberta Education. *The Heart of Recovery: Creating Supportive School Environments Following a Natural Disaster*. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/9781460135037>



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Using targeted interventions allows teachers to address a student's response to a stressful event that can interfere with a child's ability to learn.

Individualized Interventions (Tier 3)

A small number of students who have a particular mental problem or mental illness require individualized interventions. This level of support may include access to specialized expertise, community-based services or a clinical setting.

Medical and behavioural disorders

Some students who have a diagnosed medical or behaviour disorder may require a student support plan to help them cope at school. A student support plan is developed in collaboration with the student support team, including parents, a school district psychologist and mental health practitioners, to identify strategies to support the student at school.

Working with the student support team, teachers should

- meet with the student and parents early in the school year to discuss how the school can support the student's strengths, interests and areas of need;
- learn about the disorder and how it may affect learning and social and emotional well-being;
- develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about the student's condition and successful strategies; and
- collaborate with the school and/or jurisdictional team to identify and coordinate any needed consultation and services.

Emergent interventions

In some instances, teachers may have information that causes them to be concerned about a student's mental or emotional health. Whenever possible, talk with the school counsellor or principal about your concerns. These colleagues may have additional information about the student, can assist in contacting the student's parents and are knowledgeable about the school district protocols for reporting and referring students to mental health services. Remember that your responsibilities are student safety and to get the student the understanding and supports they may need to be happy and successful.

For more information:

- Alberta Education. "Understanding Medical and Disability Information." www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/index.html
- Ontario Ministry of Education. *Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-Being*. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf

School principals may have additional information about the student, can assist in contacting the student's parents and are knowledgeable about the school jurisdiction's protocols for reporting and referring students to mental health services.



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NEXT STEPS

There is growing evidence on the long-term value of promoting the positive emotional and mental health of children and youth. Students who have positive emotional and mental health are resilient, cope with change and adversity, are successful learners and build healthy relationships (Alberta Education 2018a). Understanding and supporting positive emotional and mental health in schools is a shared responsibility of families, teachers, school jurisdictions and community partners. Building protective factors in the learning environment and in the home can help to balance negative factors in the lives of children and youth. When students exhibit worrisome thoughts, feelings and behaviours, teachers should work with families to facilitate access to the appropriate supports to protect the student and help them to recover. Working collaboratively with colleagues and student support teams, teachers can effectively respond to the emotional and mental health needs of the students and help them to be successful at school.

CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING

1. What school jurisdiction policies and protocols support student mental health? These policies may include reporting abuse, referring students for assessment, alcohol and substance abuse policies, bullying prevention, antiracism and so forth.
2. What actions have you taken in your classroom to promote the development of positive emotional and mental health?
3. What strategies do you use to maintain positive mental health in your work and personal life?
4. How can you promote and support a schoolwide approach to emotional and mental health that benefits all members of the learning community?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Alberta Education. *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*. https://education.alberta.ca/media/3576206/working_together_to_support_mental_health.pdf
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Alberta Teachers' Association and Global Television. *Can We Talk?* www.canwetalk.ca
- Ontario Ministry of Education. *Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-Being*. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf
- Alberta Education. *The Heart of Recovery: Creating Supportive School Environments Following a Natural Disaster*. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/9781460135037>
- Alberta Health Services. *Schools and Educators Resource Centre*. <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page2909.aspx>

Editor's note: URLs in this text were verified on July 17, 2020.

NOTES

1. <https://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/c12.pdf>.
2. "Social-Emotional Learning." Alberta Education. <https://www.alberta.ca/social-emotional-learning.aspx>.
3. "Core SEL Competencies." Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>.
4. "Resilience." Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>.
5. "The Problem: Prevalence of Trauma." Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-problem-prevalence/>.
6. "Intergenerational Trauma, Healing, and Resiliency." Crisis and Trauma Resource Institute. <https://ca.ctrinstitute.com/blog/intergenerational-trauma/>.

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- World Health Organization. 2014. “Mental Health: A State of Well-Being.” Available at http://origin.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/#:~:text=Mental%20health%20is%20defined%20as,to%20her%20or%20his%20community (accessed July 17, 2020).