



QUICK FACTS FOR PARENTS

Learning about Mental Health

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses in life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. (World Health Organization, 2014).



UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is part of our overall well-being and relates to our ability to enjoy life, maintain fulfilling relationships, and cope with adversity and stress. It gives us a sense of spiritual, social and emotional well-being.

There may be times, however, when we experience mental health problems in which our thinking, mood, and behaviour limit our ability to function successfully in parts of our daily lives.

Some mental health problems are mild and temporary. Others can be more serious, last longer, and require specialized and intensive treatment. Mental health problems can affect anyone, regardless of age, education, or social position. The first signs often appear in childhood or adolescence.

WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN AT SCHOOL ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

Throughout the curriculum, students are taught living skills that provide a strong base for their future mental and physical well-being. These are skills that give a person a positive sense of self, that help them form and maintain healthy relationships, think critically and creatively, solve problems, and make wise decisions. Learning and talking about mental health can increase understanding of mental health issues and reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems. Key things that students learn across the curriculum include:

- understanding mind-body connections and the role of physical activity in supporting mental health and overall well-being
- understanding factors that contribute to emotional well-being, recognizing sources of stress, and developing the adaptive, management, and coping skills needed to deal with adversity and stress
- developing self-awareness and the ability to recognize warning signs of emotional difficulty, and understanding how to respond to them and seek support
- developing communication and social skills and the ability to identify and build healthy relationships
- understanding possible connections between substance abuse, addictions, and mental health, and knowing how to get help
- understanding the causes and nature of mental illness and ways of reducing the stigma and stereotypes associated with it.

Schools have an important role to play in building skills, knowledge, and habits that help mental well-being and can reduce the risk of social and emotional problems. Learning about mental health can help students both academically and socially, and create support for students who are experiencing social or emotional difficulties.

If you have worries about your child's mental health, discuss your concerns with a health-care professional.

WHAT DO YOUNGER STUDENTS LEARN?

Students in Grades 1-3 learn to describe their emotions, appreciate the benefits of healthy active living for their mental well-being, and understand the importance of positive relationships with other children and adults. Learning in these areas helps students develop self-awareness and also includes strategies for seeking help.

In Grades 4-8, students learn strategies for maintaining mental well-being, coping with stress, and asking for help when they feel worried or sad. Topics that require greater sensitivity or maturity – managing anger, preventing bullying, and using social media responsibly, for example – are also introduced gradually at this time. In addition, students learn basic information about some common mental health and substance use problems, about ways of reducing the stigma associated with mental illness, and about supporting friends with mental health problems. One of the most important things students learn at this stage is that help-seeking is a skill, not a weakness, and that students should talk with a caring adult if they need assistance with their thoughts and feelings.

WHAT DO OLDER STUDENTS LEARN?

Secondary school students learn more about the signs and symptoms of mental health problems as well as ways of checking the accuracy of on-line health information and finding sources of support. They also cover complex topics like substance use and other harmful behaviours, cyberbullying, responding to stress and peer pressure, and suicide prevention. Teachers are advised to introduce these topics with care and sensitivity, and to select resource materials in consultation with school board mental health professionals.

MORE INFORMATION

ABCs of Mental Health

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/Welcome>

A source of expert information about child development, signs and symptoms of difficulty, and supportive strategies that can help at home and school.

Parents for Children's Mental Health

<http://www.pcmh.ca/>

PCMH is a support and advocacy network focussed on child and youth mental health. Parents who have children experiencing a mental health problem might value insights and resource recommendations from parents who have “been there”.

Children's Mental Health Ontario

<http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/parents/introduction.php>

Fact sheets and links to resources about child and youth mental health and information about getting help from Ontario's mental health system.

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Routine interactions with children provide them with much of the psychological support they need, but there may also be times when it is important to talk to them directly about mental health issues. These situations may arise if a child, or someone close to them, is showing signs of mental health problems.

Starting these conversations is not always easy, but the following tips may help:

- Help them describe their emotions (e.g., “You look like you feel sad. Saying good bye can be hard. I feel sad too.”)
- Look for opportunities to talk informally in a relaxed setting.
- Let the discussion develop gradually over time rather than trying to cover too much in one conversation. Children may need time to become comfortable talking about their concerns.
- If children are uncomfortable speaking directly about their own feelings and experiences, approach the issues indirectly. Talk about imaginary situations or about characters in books or television programs.
- Let them know that you are there to talk and help, and that their mental health, like their physical health, can change over time.

If your child seems to be struggling with a mental health disorder, he or she can be referred to a mental health professional for further assessment and treatment. Ask your child's teacher if she or he has noticed behavioural changes, and discuss ways in which the school might provide support. Check with your family doctor about possible medical reasons for changes in behavior or emotions.