We work together with Ontario school districts to support student mental health
**Class Conversation Starters**

**Returning to School:** Promoting and protecting mental health and well-being in our schools and classrooms.

While mental health and student learning have always been important in Ontario schools, there has never been a time when uniting these priorities has been more essential.

To be ready to learn, students need to feel a strong sense of safety, belonging, and well-being at school. The classroom is an excellent place to promote and protect student mental health. Teachers can use these cards as conversation starters to develop a welcoming and caring classroom that supports learning, wellness, and equitable outcomes for all students.

Promoting and protecting mental health and well-being as we return to school is the foundation for setting conditions for students to thrive.

Together, we welcome students warmly, build their mental health self-care and social-emotional skills, reduce stigma, and encourage help-seeking.
**Class Conversation Starters**

**How to use**

Teachers are welcome to use these conversation starters as they see fit to open a discussion with their students.

* Choose a theme most relevant to your students today
  - **Seeking Help** orange cards 1–5 pages 5–14
  - **Helping a Friend** purple cards 6–10 pages 15–24
  - **Healthy Sleep** magenta cards 11–15 pages 25–34
  - **Handling Stress** green cards 16–19 pages 35–42
  - **Ice Breakers** cyan cards 20–25 pages 43–54

* Pick a card and ask the question on side one
* Let the students lead the discussion
* Some prompts and suggestions are available on the back of each card for additional ideas
  - *This is not an exhaustive list and suggestions may need to be adapted to suit your school*
If you’re having a hard time when you are at school, who could you talk to?
If you’re having a hard time when you are at school, who could you talk to?

* Friend
* Teacher
* Guidance Teacher
* Chaplain
* Coach
* Principal
* Kids Help Phone (text CONNECT to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868)
* Other ideas?
If you’re having a hard time when you are at home, who could you talk to?
If you’re having a hard time when you are at home, who could you talk to?

* Parent(s)/Stepparent(s)
* Guardian(s)/Caregiver(s)
* Sibling(s)
* Extended Family (e.g. grandparent, aunt, uncle)
* Elder or Knowledge Keeper
* Coach

* Cultural or Spiritual Leader
* Family Friend
* Neighbour
* Kids Help Phone (text CONNECT to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868)
* Other ideas?
What are some apps you could use to help your mental health if you’re having a hard time?
What are some apps you could use to help your mental health if you’re having a hard time?

* HealthyMinds, Royal Ottawa Health: Problem solving tool, help manage emotions and cope with stress
* MindShift, Anxiety Canada: Strategies to support relaxation and manage anxiety
* Be Safe, ConnexOntario: includes personal safety plan and localized resources
* mood by mindyourmind, ConnexOntario: track your mood and sleep patterns
* Other ideas?

www.smho-smso.ca
If you want to reach out for help from a caring adult, what is the first thing you could say to someone?
If you want to reach out for help from a caring adult, what is the first thing you could say to someone?

* “I was hoping I could talk to you about something?”
* “I have a tough situation; it’s really bugging me...Can I talk to you about it?”
* “I’ve been feeling ________ lately, can I get your thoughts, and maybe your help?”
* “I’m wondering if you can help me or maybe you know someone I can talk to?”
* “I need some help with something.”
* “Can we talk?”
* Other ideas?

TRY:
Student help-seeking resources by School Mental Health Ontario
www.smho-smso.ca
What do you know about Kids Help Phone?
What do you know about Kids Help Phone?

* A service for children and youth ages 4-21. They can help regardless of how big or small your problem is.
* You can call (1-800-668-6868) or text CONNECT to 686868 to talk to someone 24/7.
* All calls/chats are anonymous and confidential. You do not have to share your contact information.
* You do not need to be in crisis to reach out to Kids Help Phone – maybe you just need someone to talk to because you:
  - had a fight with a parent or guardian
  - broke up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
  - lost a pet
  - got a bad mark on a test
  - Other ideas?

FOR MORE: Kidshelpphone.ca
If a friend you know needs help, what would you say to them to help to validate their feelings?
If a friend you know needs help, what would you say to them to help to validate their feelings?

By validating someone’s feelings you’re letting them know it’s okay to feel the way they do. Feelings aren’t always logical but they’re always valid. Ideas:

* “I’m here for you…”
* “I’m listening….”
* “I care about you.”
* “I can see how you would feel upset about that because ________ and because…”
* “That sounds really hard and it makes sense that you would feel________ because…”
* Other ideas?

**TRY:**
5 Golden Rules from BeThere.org – a good guide for how to talk to a friend struggling with their mental health.
How can you tell that a friend needs help?
How can you tell that a friend needs help?

* They may start to isolate themselves from others
* They may show changes in mood (sad, anxious, irritable)
* They might start to have trouble at school with grades, attendance, finishing things
* They might start acting differently, saying unusual things or doing risky activities
* They might not be keeping up with their hygiene, sleep or nutrition
* They might start using substances excessively
* They may give away prized possessions
* They may tell you they are struggling or have thoughts of harming themselves
* Other ideas?
If a friend told you something that made you really worried about their safety, but then asked you not to tell anyone, how could you respond?
We all keep some secrets: romantic interests, birthday gifts, regrets, etc., but when it comes to safety, it’s important not to keep secrets. That’s part of being a good friend.

* You could say: “I really care about you and I need to make sure that you’re safe, so I can’t keep this to myself. Let’s try to get some help together.”

* You could say: “I’d rather lose you as a friend than have something bad happen to you.”

* You could say: “This feels too big for the two of us. I’ll come with you. We need extra help for this.”

* Other ideas?
If a friend doesn’t want to talk to anyone at school or at home about something serious that’s bugging them and you are worried or scared for them – what should you do?
If a friend doesn’t want to talk to anyone at school or at home about something serious that’s bugging them and you are worried or scared for them – what should you do?

* Call or text Kids Help Phone or call a local distress line to talk through what your next steps could be
* Tell a parent/guardian or another helpful, safe adult who will guide you on how to take action. You should not carry this by yourself
* If you think there’s an immediate safety risk, call 911
* Other ideas?
If a friend told you something on-line that makes you really worried about them, what could you do?
If someone shares their mental health struggle with you on-line that’s a sign that they trust you.

* Follow up with them, but consider when and where you bring it up. If possible, go somewhere they feel comfortable, or set a good time to talk online.

* Allow enough time to hear them out. Try something like, “Hey, you mentioned the other night that you were really stressed... I just wanted to check in. How are you feeling today?”

* Talk to a trusted adult to get additional help. It’s not all on you.

* You can tell them to call Kids Help Phone
  - You can offer to call your friend and Kids Help Phone in a 3-way call. Remember to set appropriate boundaries — there is additional help available.

* If you think there’s an immediate safety risk, call 911.

* Other ideas?

TRY: 5 Golden Rules from BeThere.org – a good guide for how to talk to a friend struggling with their mental health.
How much sleep should the average teenager get per night?
How much sleep should the average teenager get per night?

* 8 – 10 hours per night

* Sleeping for 8-10 hours a night helps to improve:
  • Physical health
  • Emotional well-being
  • Quality of life

FOR MORE:
Canadian Children Getting Enough Sleep,
Public Health Agency of Canada

www.smho-smsso.ca
How much sleep does the average teenager get per night?
How much sleep does the average teenager get per night?

* 6.5 – 7.5 hours

* Suggestion for follow up:

**Why do you think, on average, teenagers do not get enough hours of sleep each night?**

- Staying up late
- Screen time before bed
- Doing homework late at night
- Texting and chatting with friends at night
- Looking through social media at night
- Watching TV, YouTube, or Netflix at night
- Not having a bedtime routine
- Other ideas?

FOR MORE:
Canadian Children Getting Enough Sleep, Public Health Agency of Canada

www.smho-smso.ca
What are some ways that you can help yourself fall asleep at night?
What are some ways that you can help yourself fall asleep at night?

* Avoid screen-time at night – blue light from devices interferes with healthy sleep
* Keep your sleep space as dark and cool as you can
* Try to go to sleep at the same time every night
* Develop a bedtime routine (e.g., listen to music, bathe, read, etc.)
* Other ideas?

FOR MORE:
Tips to Support Better Sleep in Youth, CHEO

www.smho-smsso.ca
How is your sleep different now than when you were a little kid?
How is your sleep different now than when you were a little kid?

* Teens tend to have irregular sleep patterns across the week which can affect their biological clocks and impact their quality of sleep. Compared to younger kids, teens typically:
  • stay up later
  • sleep in later on the weekends

* Biological sleep patterns shift toward later times for both sleeping and waking during adolescence — meaning it is natural to not be able to fall asleep before 11:00 pm.
What are some of the consequences of not getting a good night’s sleep?
What are some of the consequences of not getting a good night’s sleep?

* Limits your ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems. You may even forget important information like names, numbers, your homework or even a date with a special person in your life.

* Makes you more prone to pimples — lack of sleep can contribute to acne and other skin problems.

* May lead to difficult behaviours, such as yelling at your friends or family, or being impatient.

* Limits your control over feelings of hunger and fullness. This may impact your appetite and cause you to snack at night or overeat late in the day.

* May increase your use of caffeine and nicotine.

* Contributes to illness — lack of sleep can impact your immune system response.

* Leads to difficulty using equipment safely and to driving while drowsy.

FOR MORE:
Canadian Children Getting Enough Sleep, Public Health Agency of Canada

www.smho-smsd.ca
How does your body and mind feel when you’re feeling anxious due to stress?
How does your body and mind feel when you’re feeling anxious due to stress?

* Hard to concentrate
* Racing heart
* Sweaty palms
* Upset stomach
* Headache
* Shortness of breath
* Issues sleeping
* Other ideas?
What is the fastest way to calm your body when you’re feeling anxious due to stress?
What is the fastest way to calm your body when you’re feeling anxious due to stress?

* **Deep breathing:** when we feel stressed, our hearts might race, and our breathing might change. Deep breathing exercises are a great way to calm our bodies.

TRY: Deep breathing exercises for youth from jack.org/covid
If we were to ask teens across the country what stressed them out the most, what would they say?
**SUGGESTIONS**

If we were to ask teens across the country what stressed them out the most, what would they say?

* School – homework, assignments due, exams
* Home life – siblings, expectations from parents
* Not knowing what will happen after high school
* Extracurricular activities – work, volunteering
* Fitting in and relationships with peers
* Other ideas?

www.smho-smsso.ca
What are some healthy ways to cope with stress?
What are some healthy ways to cope with stress?

* Talking to someone
* Getting enough sleep
* Physical exercise
* Hobbies – do something you love
* Deep breathing
* Muscle relaxation
* Visualization
* Changing our thoughts with positive self-talk
* Giving gratitude
* Using a helpful app
* Other ideas?

TRY:
jack.org/covid
A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?
Would you rather:

have the ability to fly or the ability to live underwater?

Why?
A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?
Would you rather:

it always be winter or always be summer?

Why?
ICEBREAKERS

A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?

Card 22
Would you rather:

have 3 feet or 3 hands?

Why?
A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?
Would you rather:

only be able to whisper or
only be able to shout?

Why?
A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?
Would you rather: have a cat or a dog? Why?
A few fun group conversation starters to keep the conversations going

Would you rather?
Would you rather:

speak the same language as dogs or be able to climb trees like a squirrel?

Why?