



Parent/Caregiver Handout

INTRODUCTION

We all want good mental health and well-being for our children (and ourselves!). We want them to thrive during times of stability and during times of stress. We want our children to know how to care for their own well-being and how to use effective coping and support strategies during challenging times. That's why school boards are introducing **MH LIT: Student Mental Health in Action** (Student MH LIT), a series of lessons about mental health and well-being for secondary school students. The lessons have been developed by School Mental Health Ontario with input from educators, students, and mental health professionals.

OVERVIEW OF LESSON

This lesson in the **Student MH LIT** series focuses on the pressure, tension, nervousness, and sometimes worry we can feel before or during tests, exams, and other types of assessments and evaluations.

Content covered in the lesson includes:

- ▶ Most students feel stress when they are about to write a test or exam, or when they are performing in some other way (like giving a presentation or playing a sport or musical instrument).
- ▶ There are many reasons students feel test and exam stress (e.g., lack of preparation; lack of resources such as a place to study; past experiences of not doing well; overfocusing on getting a certain mark or how friends, classmates, or siblings are doing; pressure from parents/caregivers; taking classes that aren't a good fit; issues outside of school; study style; having several tests within a short period; and many others).
- ▶ The changes in schools over the past few years have also impacted the way we have taken many tests and exams, which can influence how we feel about them.
- ▶ Doing well on tests and exams is a skill we can practise and get better at. There are strategies that can help, including building healthy routines (like getting enough sleep), study and test-taking strategies, challenging unhelpful thoughts, and relaxation strategies.
- ▶ Knowing how stress shows up in our bodies, feelings, behaviours, and thoughts can help us choose strategies that will work and use them early so we minimize the impact of stress on our schoolwork and mental and physical health.
- ▶ If strategies aren't enough, it's probably time to talk to an adult who can help find more support.



Did you know...

- ▶ Stress can be a positive thing! Some nervousness can help motivate us to work hard, focus, and perform our best. It shows a test or exam is important to us.
- ▶ If stress gets too big, it can get in the way of our ability to study for tests and exams and to show what we know while we are taking them.
- ▶ The key is to keep stress in a range that works for us. That's what the lesson is all about!

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR TEEN'S LEARNING IN THESE LESSONS?

Continue the conversation! Talking about mental health together is a great way to extend the learning. Ask your teen about the lesson. Here are some conversation starters to try:

- ▶ What did you learn?
- ▶ What is taking tests and exams like for you?
- ▶ Have you ever felt stress related to your academic success at school? When? What did it feel like?
- ▶ Has test and exam stress changed for you over time (such as when you changed schools or grades, or during the pandemic)?
- ▶ Does test and exam stress help you do your best, or does it get in the way of taking tests and exams? Is there anything that helps if/when that happens? Is there anything I can do or any other support that you need?
- ▶ Have you tried any of the strategies you learned about? Which strategies work for you? Are there any new ones you'd like to try?
- ▶ Was there anything from the lesson that stood out for you or surprised you? Was there anything else you were hoping to learn?
- ▶ Has anything changed in the way you think about test and exam stress?

The lesson is kept at a general level. However, sometimes talking about mental health can give rise to strong feelings. You may also want to check in with your teen to see how they are feeling and to encourage them to participate in some wellness activities. Wellness activities are things we enjoy and that give us a sense of well-being (e.g., spending time outside, listening to music, talking to a friend, meditation, journaling, traditional cultural and/or faith practices, and so on).



HOW CAN PARENTS/CAREGIVERS HELP?

Secondary school students who helped develop the lesson said parents/caregivers could help them with test and exam stress in the following ways:

Help your teen study and be prepared for tests and exams. For example:

- ▶ Help your teen be at their best by eating as well as possible, getting enough rest, and engaging in physical activity appropriate for their fitness level and health.
- ▶ Help your teen minimize distractions in the area where they work and study, if possible.
- ▶ Help your teen get organized with materials, set aside time to study or to complete projects, prioritize the work, and break down long-term projects into smaller pieces.

Help your teen calm stress. For example:

- ▶ Help your teen focus on learning and doing their best, rather than achieving a certain mark.
- ▶ Help your teen avoid comparing themselves to classmates, friends, and siblings.
- ▶ Help your teen have realistic expectations instead of expecting perfection (which can lead to disappointment).
- ▶ Help your teen notice self-criticism and use more helpful self-talk instead. For example, instead of, “I’m going to fail,” try...
 - “I am well prepared. I read all the material and reviewed it carefully, and my study notes were good.”
 - “I’ll focus on what I will do, not on the marks I will get.”
 - “This isn’t my best subject, but I’ve been studying consistently so I’ll be able to do my best.”
- ▶ Help your teen know they can ask for help and that you are there to support them.

Help calm your teen when they are disappointed with a mark or test result. For example:

- ▶ Remind your teen that one test isn’t going to determine their entire future or happiness in life.
- ▶ Reassure your teen that their grades don’t determine their worth as a person or your love for them as a parent/caregiver.
- ▶ Validate that your teen’s mental health and well-being are more important than a mark on a test.

RESOURCES FOR PARENT/CAREGIVER LEARNING

While your teen learns about mental health, you can, too! Here are some resources to support you:

- ▶ [CMHO Family Care Centre](#)
- ▶ [Mental health and well-being](#)
- ▶ [CMHA Ontario](#)
- ▶ [School Mental Health Ontario](#)
- ▶ [AboutKidsHealth Resource Hub](#)



SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

As part of every lesson, your teen's school will discuss how and where students can access supports such as trusted adults (e.g., family members, coaches, cultural and faith leaders, Elders), community professionals, and helplines. It can help to have some resources available at home, too. Consider placing these on a fridge, cupboard, or other easily accessible space.

Find help in your community through <https://cmho.org/findhelp>

- ▶ **Kids Help Phone Call:** 1-800-668-6868 Text: CONNECT to 686868
- ▶ **First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line Call:** 1-855-242-3310
- ▶ **Black Youth Helpline Call:** 416-285-9944 or toll-free 1-833-294-8650
- ▶ **LGBT YouthLine Text:** 647-694-4275
- ▶ **Trans Lifeline Call:** 877-330-6366

For more suggestions about how to support your teen, see the following School Mental Health Ontario resources for parents/caregivers:

- ▶ [How to Talk With Your Child When You Feel Concerned](#) (webpage)
- ▶ [Noticing Mental Health Concerns for Your Child](#) (info sheet)

If you feel your teen needs additional support, you can also connect with your school to help you determine the next steps.

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Supports are also available for adults. If you feel you might benefit you can contact your family doctor or go to <https://www.ontario.ca/page/mental-health-services> to find local resources. You may also wish to visit [Wellness Together Canada](#). Parents/caregivers can also contact [Kids Help Phone](#) for support.

If you have questions about the lessons, please reach out to your teen's teacher or principal/vice-principal. Your school is there to help.

