



Special Considerations for School-Based Mental Health Promotion and Literacy Initiatives

While the foundations and guidance noted in this toolkit may be helpful for student engagement initiatives generally, some additional and specific considerations for student-involved mental health promotion and literacy activities are highlighted in this section.

Student initiatives centred on mental health promotion generally aim to:

- enhance knowledge about mental health and well-being,
- nurture mentally healthy attitudes and beliefs,
- reduce stigma,
- assist with identifying signs of mental health and addictions problems, and/or
- build awareness of local resources and supports.

Often, students gravitate to such initiatives with a particular interest in learning more about mental health and/or a desire for advocacy and making change. Some might join because of lived/living experiences of mental health problems, which can be personal or related to the experiences of family and/or close friends. Student mental health initiatives require careful planning to ensure they:

- are strength-based and focused on wellness;
- are supportive for students with good mental health, as well as for those who may be experiencing mental health problems or more serious mental illnesses;





- are identity-affirming; and
- produce the intended positive effects, such as helping students build skills for maintaining good mental health, reducing stigma, or raising awareness about how and where to seek help when mental health problems arise.

This resource outlines considerations to ensure a supportive and effective environment for students engaging in mental health promotion and literacy initiatives.

Mental health promotion and literacy may occur in many different spaces as there are close connections between student mental health and learning. Consider opportunities to embed mental health and well-being in various spaces and initiatives as part of the day-to-day school experience.

Ensure the mental health initiative you are planning is aligned with your board/school mental health strategy and action plan and is a good fit with your community. Consult the following resources for guidance.

- [School Mental Health Decision Support Tool: Student Mental Health Awareness Initiatives – Version for School Administrators](#)
- [Decision Support Tool for Classroom Teachers – Checklist for Educators for the Planning of Student Mental Health-Related Activities](#)
- [School Mental Health Decision Support Tool: Peer Support Initiatives](#)
- [Peer Support Reference Tool for Students](#)
- [Your board Mental Health Leader](#)

Setting up:

Supporting student initiatives requires the active practice of consistent learning, unlearning, evaluating, and reflecting. Review [Actions of a Caring Adult in Student Engagement Initiatives Related to Mental Health](#) and engage in the actions and reflective exercises to be a caring adult for the students you serve. Include time for your own learning about mental health. You will feel more comfortable in your role if you are equipped to answer questions that students may have about mental health promotion.

Check-in with yourself

Caring for our mental health, like physical health, requires awareness and practice. Taking time to engage in activities that help us feel strong and hopeful, every day, can help with developing good habits of mind. However, all of us struggle with maintaining our mental health from time to time, particularly under circumstances of stress and strain. Those of us who have a biological predisposition towards mental illness(es) have to work harder at times to keep balance. Take time to consider your connections and experiences related to mental health and mental illnesses and whether this is a suitable moment for you to take on this role. Your mental health matters, too. If this isn't the right time for you to approach the topic, pause before speaking with students and reach out for support if needed.





Check out this tip sheet on [Personal Resiliency](#) for some self-care reminders. There are also supports for mental health associated with most Employee Assistance Programs, and free resources are available in many communities. You can visit [Connex Ontario](#) to learn more.

Build your knowledge

While you support students with growing their mental health literacy, you can develop yours, too. A great place to start is with [School Mental Health Ontario's website](#).

Here are some additional resources that may support you:

- Free online mental health literacy course for [educators](#) and for [school leaders](#)
- [Student MH LIT modules](#)
- The [Prepare; Prevent; Respond](#) resource for parents/caregivers also includes helpful information about suicide prevention

Know your schools/community pathways to support

It's important that you familiarize yourself with your school and system's pathways to support students with a mental health problem, should the need arise. Consult with your principal/vice-principal or board mental health leader if you are unsure of the supports in your community.

The following resources can help you to be aware of the resources, personnel, and pathways within your school for help:

- [Circle of Support and System Pathways – Flowchart, Planner and Desk Reference](#)
- [ONE-CALL Desk Reference](#)
- [Find a community mental health resource](#)

Engage co-facilitators

Consider inviting another educator or student support staff member to co-facilitate the initiative with you, if available. Having someone to co-facilitate allows one of you to focus on supporting the conversation while the other can monitor how students are receiving information, answer questions, and address any issues that may arise. If you are not a mental health professional or student support staff member, discuss the initiative with someone who has this expertise. For example, a child and youth worker or other student support staff can help with mental health promotion and literacy initiatives, while school social workers, psychology staff or other school mental health professionals can help if some level of clinical support is needed. If you have concerns about a student participating in the initiative, you can consult the school mental health professional supporting your school. Depending on the nature of your initiative, you can share something about the activity with the school mental health professional(s) attached to your school for guidance.





Consider the timing

Consider meeting mid-week, in the morning or mid-day to give more opportunity to monitor students following the meeting and determine if anyone needs support. Though your focus should be on strengths and wellness, the dialogue can land differently if someone is experiencing a mental health problem. Should a meeting be scheduled at the end of the day, ensure that at the end of each meeting, there are reminders to check in with allies, friends, parents and/or caregivers about available supports. Be sure to offer support and helpline information at the first meeting, and refer back to it as needed. Avoid scheduling meetings or activities related to mental health on Fridays.

If your school is in postvention (i.e., responding after a death by suicide of a student or staff or community member), carefully consider any initiatives related to mental health or suicide prevention. These should always be discussed and supported by a mental health professional. Some actions, while supportive generally, can be harmful during the time of postvention.

During the initiative:

Build relationships

Establish relationships with and among students and co-create a supportive and caring culture. Relationships and a caring culture take time to develop. Model honesty, empathy, and reliability by listening actively to others. Use games and activities to help students get to know each other better and have fun. Keep the tone strength-based and uplifting. Whenever possible, open and close the space with a focus on wellness, belonging, hope, and joy.

Here are some activities that might help break the ice and build relationships:

- [Class Conversation Starters](#)
- [Grab & Go Tools: Simple Learning Activities](#)

Support student mental health literacy

Recognize the range of understanding of and prior knowledge about mental health, mental illnesses, and substance use. Provide opportunities for students to learn more about mental health to set them up for success. Discussing a variety of definitions with students can help create space for them to share their understandings. Consider ways you can learn from these understandings.

Recognize and appreciate that mental health and mental illnesses may be understood and supported differently across cultures and communities. Western approaches to mental health, which tend to be more individualistic and skill-based, may not resonate with all students and their families. Hold space for different ways of knowing and being related to mental health and well-being.





Check out [Wayfinder](#) for resources you can use to teach about mental health. This K-12 resource helps educators sequence their mental health promotion and literacy efforts across the school year. This resource includes links to specific resources related to mental health literacy, like [Student MH LIT](#) modules, to wellness promotion strategies like those found in [Everyday Mental Health](#) and [Faith and Wellness](#), and to stress management techniques like those found within the [Virtual Field Trips](#).

Create a common purpose and goal

Work with students to define your purpose (e.g., reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, help peers build wellness skills, etc.) and related goal(s) (e.g., a project or initiative). Ensure that the purpose and goal(s) align with the needs and interests of students and with the broader mental health goals of your school or system.

Establish clear boundaries for the initiative, like what it is focused on. Listening to someone else's negative experiences with their mental health can be unhelpful for students who are struggling with their well-being. Create an understanding that this is not a forum for personal disclosures about mental health problems, family experiences, etc. If students would like to share personally, they can be invited to speak privately with the caring adults involved. For example, you might say, "Our time will be focused on the goals we've decided on for this initiative. For support with individual mental health problems, please see..."

If a student does start to make a disclosure during a group meeting, you may redirect them using a statement such as the following: "Thank you for sharing. This is important, and I want to give it the time and attention it deserves. Let's check in after the group."

Develop group agreements and expectations

Develop group agreements to foster supportive environments. Discuss what students might need to feel comfortable participating in the initiative. Note how the words we choose can be supportive, neutral, or hurtful. While "sharing your truth" can be affirming, it is important to recognize that one person's truth is not the only perspective in the room and that words have weight and impact. As a group, discuss agreements for how experiences are shared, with a view to kindness and compassion for those in the room, and for those who are not. This can include pausing before sharing a challenging situation and being mindful of how someone's words may impact others. For example, you might ask, "What do we all, me included, need to keep in mind in this space?" or "What does a judgement-free space look and feel like to each of you?"

Discuss how to provide and receive feedback, including when someone has felt hurt or unsettled by something offered in the group. For example, you might ask, "How do you like to give and receive feedback?"

To help guide discussions around supportive group norms, see [Tools for student groups: developing accountable and healthy group agreements](#) and [How to Foster and Maintain Supportive Spaces for Black Youth](#).





Share resources

Regularly share information about available mental health resources and support within the school and community, including resources available after school hours. Reiterate resources at the end of meetings and/or in easy-to-access places such as school websites. Encourage students to share their work in the initiative with their parents/caregivers, so parents/caregivers can provide support at home if needed. For example, you might say, “Share something new you’ve learned here today with a parent/caregiver. Ask if it is new learning for them too.”

This resource is part of our [Student Engagement Toolkit](#).

