

The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education



MENTAL HEALTH

10–20%
of youth are affected
by a mental illness

Defining “mental illness” and “mental health problems”

Did you know that a person with a mental illness can be without a mental health problem? Or that those with a mental health problem don't necessarily have a mental illness? These can be seen as two separate concepts.

“Mental illness” refers to conditions that can be diagnosed, such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and anorexia. It is estimated that one in five Canadians will experience a diagnosable mental illness at some point in their lives. These medical conditions, diagnosed by a medical professional, are usually long lasting, have pronounced symptoms and require medical treatment. Often symptoms of a mental illness are severe enough that they

cause significant distress or disability in social life, school, work or other important activities. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important for the recovery journey.

“Mental health problems” on the other hand, describe the more common struggles and difficulties that all people experience. Feeling stressed, upset, confused or overwhelmed is often in response to a demand or pressure, but such feelings usually pass and do not require medical treatment. Nevertheless, these feelings also have a real impact on one's mental health and our ability to thrive and enjoy life. Therefore, those experiencing mental health problems also benefit from help, support and understanding.

Step one

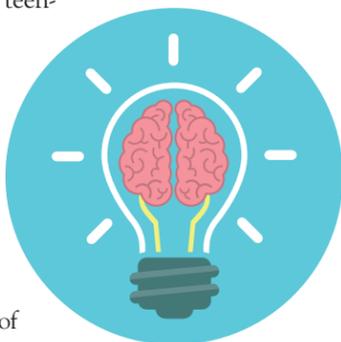
The first step in reducing the severity of mental illness is reducing the stigma that surrounds it, as this stigma is one reason why people do not reach out for the help they need to speed or assist their recovery.



There is no single cause of mental illness, and no one is to blame when someone develops a mental illness.

Is it mental illness or a mental health problem?

With young people, and teenagers especially, it may be hard to determine if what they are experiencing is a mental illness or if they are facing a mental health problem. Mental illnesses require attention from a professional, while mental health problems may simply need the support and attention of a caring adult.



While diagnosing a mental illness is only to be done by a mental health professional, these are a few suggestions to determine whether support and assistance is needed or if additional resources should be sought.

Mental health problems

- 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 and
- don't generally require professional help, but it may be useful.

Mental illness

- is a less common experience,
- symptoms may occur in response to an event or problem or they may occur spontaneously,
- symptoms tend to be more severe and long lasting and
- requires professional help, which is essential in order for a positive prognosis.

Symptoms of mental illness

Changes in thinking, mood or behaviour that are troubling, last longer than two weeks, or are interfering with everyday life should prompt an evaluation by a doctor or other mental health professional. A family doctor is a good place to start, as they can rule out any other causes for changes in thinking, mood or behaviour and can refer patients to another mental health professional like a counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker.

Symptoms vary with each person and type of mental illness, but the following are some of the common symptoms to watch for:

- Sudden withdrawal from friends and family
- Confused thoughts, delusions and/or hallucinations
- Extreme fears or anxiety that seem out of proportion to circumstances or events
- Lack of motivation for a prolonged period of time (longer than two weeks)
- Persistent feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Extreme mood swings between depression and mania, sometimes with overly reckless behaviour
- Repeated, unusual actions such as hand washing or checking of lights
- Unexplained physical symptoms such as nausea, trembling, fatigue or headaches
- Difficulty concentrating, maintaining attention and/or sudden irritability
- Disruption to usual sleep patterns
- Serious disturbance in eating patterns accompanied by a preoccupation with body image
- Talk or thoughts of suicide

What causes mental illness?

There is no single cause of mental illness, and no one is to blame when someone develops a mental illness. A complex interplay of factors affects the likelihood of developing a mental illness.

Brain chemistry

A chemical imbalance in the brain is caused by an imbalance of neurotransmitters, which can lead to symptoms such as depression, anxiety or stress reactions.

Psychological and social factors

It is commonly thought that mental illness can be triggered by a traumatic life event or situation, and/or prolonged stress. Some examples of traumatic events are child abuse and neglect, family violence, severe or prolonged stress and unemployment.

Genetics and heredity

Most mental illnesses are more common among close family members, which suggests that genetics plays a role. However, people don't inherit the illness itself; they inherit only the tendency to get it.

Personality characteristics

People who are prone to think, feel and behave in certain ways can influence their likelihood of developing a mental illness or experiencing mental health problems.

Mental health problems

Some areas of life that can bring on mental health problems include

Unmanaged stress

Stress is a part of everyday life, but when it is being managed in unhealthy ways (like self-harming behaviour) or is completely unmanaged, it can negatively affect mental health and even trigger mental illness.

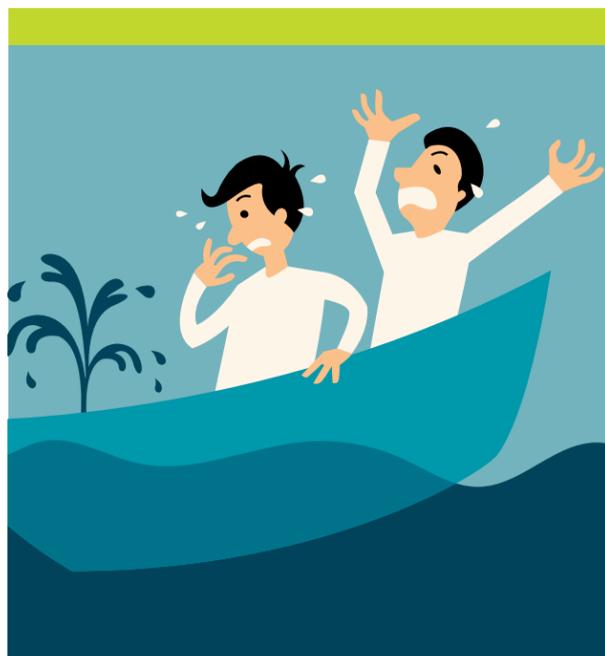
For more information on stress, healthy stress management and how to teach stress management skills to your students, refer to the Hats on for Mental Health lesson plans at www.canwetalk.ca.

Bullying and abuse

Many people who experience bullying or abuse live with fear and a constant threat to their physical safety. Even when bullying or abuse takes place over the Internet or comes in the form of verbal harassment, it effects the mental health of its target and those around them. Bullying should always be addressed by teachers and school officials. If a young person is being abused or neglected, inside or outside of the school, it is every citizen's legal obligation to inform the proper authorities.

Personality

Some people are more prone to experiencing upsetting feelings. Just like some people tend to be more confident or shy, being more sensitive is not a weakness but rather one



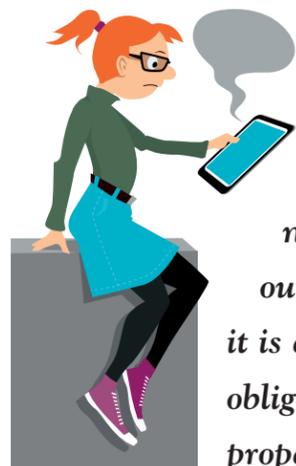
of the ways that people are unique. Unfortunately, this characteristic may put the person at higher risk of mental health problems.

Grief or loss

Separation, divorce or the loss of a family member or friend can be extremely painful events. Finding ways to cope and adjust to the changes wrought by these events is critical for everyone, but particularly for youth. How grief is handled can affect young people for years to come.

Physical ill health

Diseases, injuries and other physical problems often contribute to poor mental health, and sometimes physical causes (such as brain injury and drug abuse) can directly affect brain chemistry and contribute to mental health problems or even mental illness. Poor physical health can affect self-esteem and people's ability to meet their goals, which leads to unhappiness or even depression. In such cases, receiving the best possible treatment for both the physical problem and the resulting psychological consequences is key to optimal recovery to good mental health.



If a young person is being abused or neglected, inside or outside of the school, it is every citizen's legal obligation to inform the proper authorities.

Hat campaign raises mental health awareness in schools

Various awareness efforts set to roll during Mental Health Week

Shelley Magnusson
ATA Executive Staff Officer

As part of Mental Health Week, the Alberta Teachers' Association is encouraging all schools to relax their "no-hats" rules on May 3 to promote *Hats On for Mental Health*, a day-long campaign that aims to introduce the subject of mental health to students, to reduce stigma and encourage students to ask questions about mental health.

The Association's commitment to student mental health was solidified in 2009 when it entered into a partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). This partnership has become known as Healthy Minds, Bright Futures. The partnership's aim is to promote children's positive mental health, to increase awareness about children's mental health needs and to decrease the stigmatization often associated with mental illness.

In 2010 Global Television became involved as a full partner to provide a television campaign designed to build awareness for the Healthy Minds, Bright Futures campaign, with the long-term goal of helping parents, children and the community understand and recognize the importance of student mental health and the role of teachers.

The Association is working closely with CMHA and other partners to promote Mental Health Week in Alberta.

The ATA also developed the Can We Talk campaign, which includes a website and television advertisement that will hit the Global airwaves during Mental Health Week. Among the resources that are accessible via the Can We Talk website (canwetalk.ca) are lesson plans for teachers and a booklet entitled *Creating a Compassionate Classroom*, which contains a wealth of information that is important for parents, students and teachers.

Mental Health Week
May 1 to 7



Students should be encouraged to discover their own unique qualities and find confidence in themselves.

Defining "mental health"

Good mental health is not the absence of mental illness. Rather, it can be seen as a state of well-being that allows one to flourish and fully enjoy life.

Some of the factors that affect student mental health include

Feeling loved

When young people feel loved, trusted and accepted by their parent(s), guardian(s) and other adults, they are far more likely to feel comfortable, safe and secure. They are also better able to communicate and develop positive relationships. Supportive people also facilitate help-seeking behaviour for any trouble that may develop.

Self-esteem

This is the value we place on ourselves, our positive self-image and sense of self-worth. Students with healthy self-esteem generally have a positive outlook and are satisfied with themselves most of the time. Being able to identify and challenge negative self-talk positively affects our self-esteem.

Empowerment

Having the confidence to face challenges and take risks is important. Students should be encouraged to discover their own unique

qualities and find confidence in themselves. Being entrusted with important responsibilities and others having high but attainable expectations of them are both ways to develop feelings of empowerment, as is having skills so they feel capable of developing relationships, resisting peer pressure and dangerous situations, and resolving conflict. Feeling that they have control over their actions and the outcomes of those actions is important.

Self-actualization

It is important that students feel they are reaching their potential. They should be encouraged to use their best abilities to enhance their lives. Students, and all people, need to value themselves and believe they are worth caring for.

Optimism

Having a positive outlook on the world means that students can enjoy life and focus on the positive aspects. Being optimistic also includes being accepting that some things can't be changed. Being flexible to change helps a person adapt and make the most out of life.

Resilience

Life can be full of tough times. To be resilient, students need the skills to

learn from difficulties and bounce back from adversity. These skills can be taught and practiced at school.

Safe spaces

Physical safety but also having spaces where a person feels valued and cared for is essential to well-being. Being connected to an ethnic, spiritual, school or other community group and knowing of resources for support is important.

Not only should teachers and staff enhance the areas listed above for their own benefit, but we should do so because students need good role models in promoting good mental health. Making these aspects a part of everyday activities is one way to promote mental health in the classroom.

Refer to the Hats On! lesson plans for more ideas on how to promote good mental health in your students at www.canwetalk.ca.

Mental illnesses

are treatable, so

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Treatment for mental illness

Just as there are different causes and symptoms of mental illness, there are also many different ways to treat it. Remember, mental illnesses are treatable, so asking for help is critical to regaining optimum mental health. Healthcare professionals can work with their clients to determine the problem and prescribe the best treatment options for them. To contact a mental health professional, see our list of resources.

The Canadian Mental Health Association advocates for all types of care that help people find optimal mental health. The treatments that a mental health professional prescribes could include one or more of the following:

- Psychotherapy and/or counselling
- Medication
- Holistic treatments
- Community support services

The bulk of the information contained in this issue of The Learning Team has been adapted from *Creating a Compassionate Classroom*, a resource developed by the Alberta Teachers' Association in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association and Global Television. The booklet is available for download at canwetalk.ca.



For resources on mental health, visit
canwetalk.ca

Help is available



can we talk?

Kids Help Phone	1-800-668-6868
Rural Distress Line	1-800-232-7288
Suicide Crisis Hotline	1-800-448-3000
Bullying Helpline	1-888-456-2323
Mental Health Helpline	1-877-303-2642
Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-387-KIDS (5437)
Addictions Helpline	1-866-332-2322
Health Link	811
Local crisis line	(check online to see if your area has one)

If you have questions, contact the Canadian Mental Health Association in your community.

Share your thoughts

An electronic version of this survey is available online at surveymonkey.com/r/Learning_Team. This survey will close June 30.

The Learning Team readers are invited to participate in the following survey that will help shape the publication in the future.

1. Which of the following most accurately reflects your interest in *The Learning Team*?

- I look forward to every issue.
- When I find the time, I flip through it and read items that catch my eye.
- I read it when a colleague notes something of interest.
- I pass it on to colleagues, friends or family, but don't usually look at it myself.
- I have no interest in the publication at all.

2. How much of *The Learning Team* do you typically read?

- 10 per cent
- 25 per cent
- 50 per cent
- 75 per cent
- 100 per cent

3. How long do you keep each copy of *The Learning Team*?

- One month or less
- Until the next issue arrives
- A couple of months
- Indefinitely, as a reference

4. What format do you typically use to read *The Learning Team*?

- Print
- Both print and online
- Online

For questions 5 to 7, please respond on the following scale.

1 Not at all 2 A little bit 3 Quite a bit 4 Very much

5. To what extent does reading *The Learning Team* help you to understand issues in education?

1 2 3 4

6. To what extent does reading *The Learning Team* help you to strengthen your role in the education of children?

1 2 3 4

7. How appealing do you find the layout and design of *The Learning Team*?

1 2 3 4

8. How do you feel about the length of the articles?

- Too long
- Too short
- About right

9. Issues of *The Learning Team* are usually built around a specific theme related to childhood and/or education. For example, recent issues have focused on classroom complexity, truth and reconciliation, physical literacy, the maker movement, creativity and the importance of play and resilience. What topics would you like to see addressed in future issues of the publication?

10. I am a

- Teacher
- School administrator
- Parent
- Other caregiver
- Other (please specify) _____

11. My age is

- Under 34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

12. My gender is _____

13. My community is

- Calgary or surrounding area
- Edmonton or surrounding area
- Fort McMurray
- Grande Prairie
- Lethbridge
- Medicine Hat
- Red Deer
- Other city or large town
- Small town or rural

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Completed paper surveys can be sent to managing editor Cory Hare.

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The Learning Team

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