



FALL 2017

HALDIMAND-NORFOLK HEALTH UNIT

Student Health CONNECTION

A resource for school staff and teachers

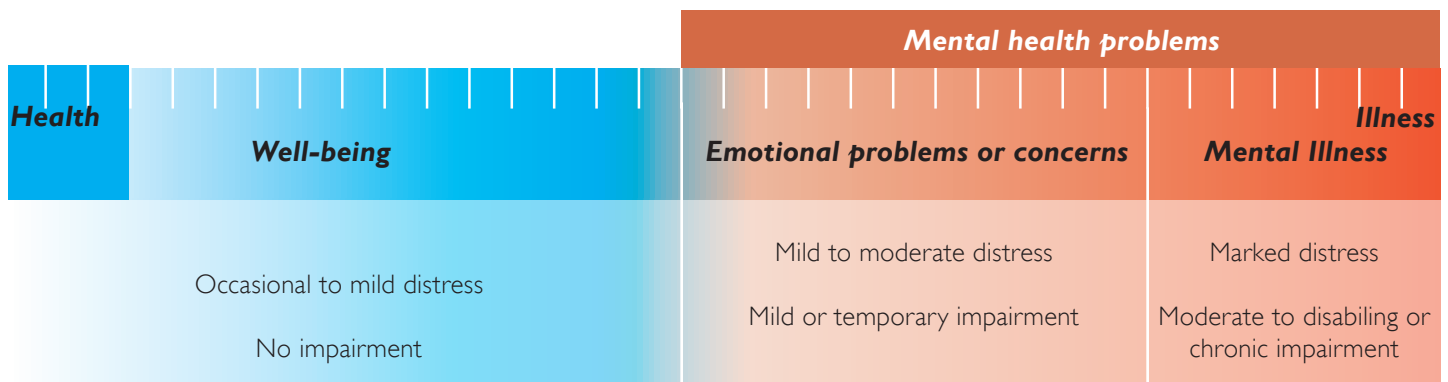
MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS Start the conversation!

1 in 5 children and teens have a mental health disorder and half of these begin before the age of 14 (WHO).

As a new school year begins, students often experience feelings of excitement, stress, nervousness or fear of changing schools and meeting new friends. Knowing how to recognize and help students cope with these feelings is an important part of promoting mental health and well-being in your school community.

It might be helpful to think about mental health and well-being as existing along a continuum. We all deal with stress in different ways with our own coping mechanisms. Some of us, students included, have a more difficult time recognizing and managing stress, and thus find it difficult to cope. This leads us to the mental illness end of the continuum; and is why being able to recognize the signs and behaviors of mental health problems is so important.

Mental Health - Mental Illness Continuum



The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. This is evidenced by positive emotional and spiritual health, supportive relationships, and connectedness to one's community, academic success and being able to identify life purpose and set goals.

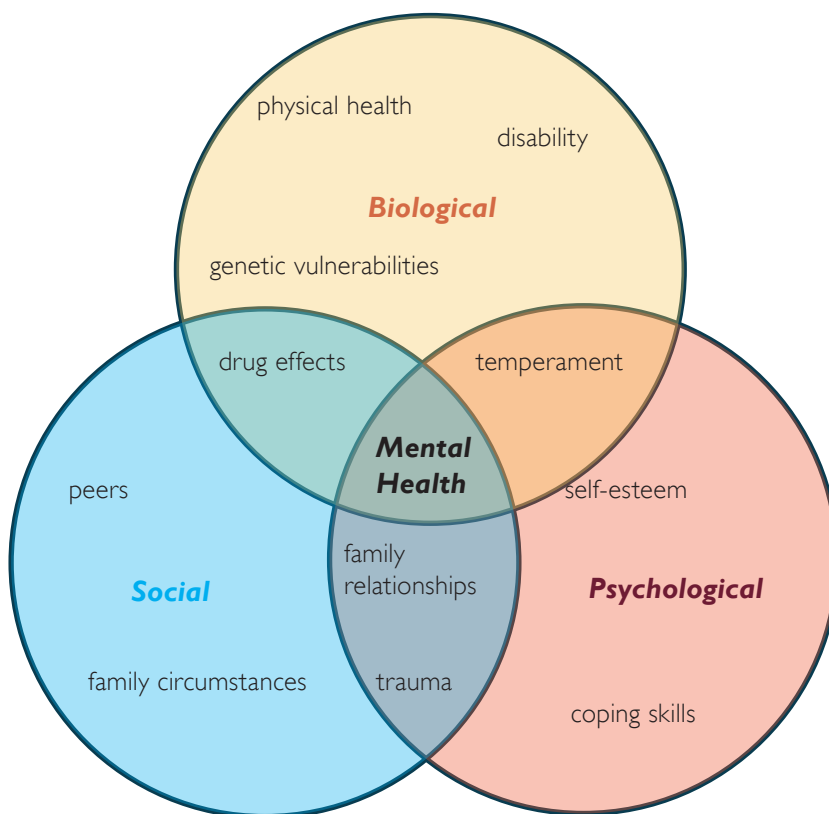
The brain and mental illness

The brain controls our thinking, perceptions, emotions, physical activities and behaviours. It provides us with cues about how to react and adapt to our environment. When the brain suffers an injury or is impaired, a mental illness may arise affecting the person's normal functioning. Mental illnesses are complex and similar to other illnesses; there are many different causes and earlier treatment leads to better outcomes.

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Your role:

Schools have an important role in identifying students who may be having mental health issues. As an educated professional, you have a unique opportunity to observe student behaviors during academic work, recess/spare time, extra-curricular activities and peer relationships. It can be difficult to address your concerns with the student, teachers and the parent(s)/caregiver, but this is an important and necessary step.

You may see students in your school community with a range of mental health problems:

- **Eating disorders.** Can manifest as an obsessive fear of gaining weight (have an unrealistic perception of body image), obsessive calorie counting or uncontrollable eating habits such as repeated binge eating and purging (vomiting).
- **Self-esteem issues.** Commonly characterized as feelings of hate or dislike for oneself, blame, guilt, undeserving of happiness and being disconnected or disinterested in school, community, social aspects of life.
- **Depression.** Signs include overwhelming unhappiness, hopelessness, negative thoughts about oneself, change in physical behaviours (poor sleep and eating patterns) or losing interest in things the person normally enjoys (sports, movies, friendships etc.).
- **Anxiety.** May be characterized by overwhelming fear or worry; obsessive compulsive behaviours (routine habits that interfere with activities of daily living); phobias or

uncontrollable panic disorders; or post-traumatic stress disorder (disruption in sleep, eating and normal reaction patterns as a result of a traumatic event).

- **Self-harm or self-injury.** Females are twice as likely to engage in these behaviours: cutting, self-poisoning, burning, self-inflicted hitting. It is the deliberate attempt to harm oneself and is often done without conscious intent to commit suicide. Young people may engage in self-harm as a way of coping with problems or emotional distress. To them, self-harm behavior may provide a distraction, a feeling of numbness or be a way to communicate pain or distress to others.
- **Suicidal behaviors.** A state of mind that is filled with self-hatred, rejection and overwhelming helplessness. It is important to identify if the person has a means, or a way to enact the threatened behaviour and this requires immediate help and attention!

Students with developmental delays, physical disabilities or learning problems may be at higher risk for mental health problems. These young people often need special support and remediation to build social and interpersonal skills.

Learning to recognize the signs and behaviors associated with common mental health issues is important:

- **Emotional/behavioral signs:** withdrawn, low self-esteem, hopelessness, unstable moods, extreme fear

or anxiety, drastic change in personality or behavior, signs of depression, impulsivity including poor judgement and overwhelming frustration

- **Academic signs:** easily distracted, severe forgetfulness, decline in grades and difficulty participating at recess or in large groups
- **Social behaviors:** lack of communication, inappropriate social behaviors and uncontrollable anger or self-harm behaviors (cutting, burning etc.)

For example, you may notice students struggling with school work, acting out in the classroom, showing signs of uncontrollable anxiety when preparing for a test or having troubled relationships and conflicts with teachers, friends or family. While some problems may last for only a few days, other students may show signs that a problem is lasting for more than a few weeks. When mental health issues interfere with a student's ability to learn, it can affect their success at school. If this is the case, there are a number of ways you, the members of the school community, can help.

Stop the Stigma by starting the conversation!

1. Find a quiet space; hallways and classrooms full of students are not good places for these conversations.
2. Use everyday language that students will understand.
3. Start by letting them know the limits of confidentiality; build a safe, supportive environment.
4. Identify the needs of the student(s).
5. Establish goals that promote social-emotional skills and a sense of self-efficacy.
6. Provide links to resources; Public Health Nurse, Child and Youth Worker, STAR Counsellor, Social Worker, family physician

Remember that even if the student is responsive and accepting of your help; this is not a cure and they will still need understanding and support in the future. In Ontario, physicians are qualified to diagnose mental health issues, but teachers have an important role in observing behaviors and connecting the child to the appropriate resource. The most effective strategy to help the student, is one in which the student, parent/guardian, mental health professional and the school community work together in the treatment approach.

How to help:

- Designate a wellness room at your school. A quiet, comfortable and safe space with calming music, books and resources available.
- Create an "action team" as outlined in the Be Well Campaign Kit (GEDSB), available from the Health Unit.
- Talk about stress with students. Discuss stressors and coping strategies.
- Promote exercise, yoga and the concept of mindfulness and deep breathing.
- Promote healthy lifestyle choices; sleep, nutrition and physical activity are vital to overall well-being.



**Resources:**

Haldimand-Norfolk REACH Available Services

Crisis 1-866-327-3224,
www.hnreach.on.ca

Other mental health services HN REACH offers (separate from crisis line):

Walk-in counselling every Tuesday
12-6:30pm, up to age 18

ROKS workers in high schools

hnsignal.ca is a peer support group for the LGBTQ community (age 14-24; supported by HN REACH)

granderie.ca/bewell

www.mindyourmind.ca

Hope More- hopemore.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association

thinkFull – managing stress (phone App)

References:

Canadian Mental Health Association

World Health Organization

kidsmentalhealth.ca,

HNREACH,

teenmentalhealth.org

Your School Health Team

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