

MENTAL HEALTH DISCUSSION GUIDE

CONSIDERATIONS.

Talking about mental health can sometimes be difficult for young people — especially those who are struggling or have experienced a difficult situation. There are some considerations we recommend you work through to make sure your lessons support a safe and positive experience for everyone.

Before facilitating a discussion on mental health with your group, reflect on the following questions. If you answer “no” to one or multiple questions, please discuss with your colleagues and/or Jack.org staff before proceeding.

- Is this an appropriate time to have a mental health promotion discussion?
 - If there has been a recent loss or traumatic experience in the school population/community, group setting mental health discussions are not appropriate. Instead, connect with mental health professionals and refer to our Resources section (at the end of this guide).
- Are mental health supports available in the school should students need/want professional help during or after the discussion?
- Have I considered the cultural, religious, and social backgrounds of my student population to shape a relevant and appropriate discussion?

Safety

At Jack.org, safety is a top priority. Just like physical health, safety when discussing mental health topics in classrooms means that we must take steps to reduce the potential for risk of preventable danger and harm. We want to ensure that the space and the topics discussed within it will not exacerbate pre-existing issues or create new ones.

This is a space:

- To discuss mental health advocacy (how we can understand and improve mental health in our communities)
- For honest, genuine dialogue about barriers to positive mental health, and ideas and strategies to overcome those barriers
- That is inclusive of all ideas and understandings of mental health: there is more than one way to perceive and experience mental health
- That is collaborative: we learn from one another and ensure all ideas and opinions have equal access to the space

This is not a space:

- For counselling: although we want to reduce stigma about seeking help for mental health, disclosing details about personal mental health struggles isn't appropriate for a classroom setting and should instead take place with a mental health support or professional in place
- To revisit or retell personal, vivid, or graphic details of a mental health struggle or challenge (we want to prevent oversharing and statements that might unintentionally negatively impact other students)
- For forced sharing: saying a space is safe does not mean it is, and students should have the ability to not share, should they not feel safe or comfortable doing so

Mental Health Support

It is important that students are aware of supports available to them during and after the discussion.

- Consider having a mental health support (guidance counsellor or social worker in or outside of the classroom available to speak with students)
- Virtual consideration: students could access free counselling services from Kids Help Phone by text (text CONNECT to 686868)

What if someone discloses their mental health experience?

A mental health disclosure is when someone confides or shares personal information regarding their mental health experiences. Please seek the advice of an administrator or refer to your school board policies regarding how to appropriately respond to a disclosure. If you suspect the student is experiencing a mental health crisis, ensure you connect them to professional support.

FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION.

Mental health advocacy can be as simple as taking care of your own mental health and educating peers, or as large as addressing the systems and structures in our communities that impact mental health. Acknowledge this spectrum and where your students might fall on it.

To determine how to approach mental health conversations in a way that will be most appropriate and relevant to your students, reflect on the following:

- **Demographics:** Consider location, age, race, culture, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, migrant status, gender, sexuality, languages, (dis)ability (including mental illness) that may be present among your students.
- **Attitudes/awareness:** Have you talked about mental health with this group of students before? How have they learned about mental health in the past (formally or informally)? What are the students' attitudes towards mental health?
- **Assets/strengths:** What are students passionate about? How do they spend their time outside of school? What important knowledge and perspectives exist already?

Examples:

- Self-care looks different for people (eg. finances, interests, ability), so adjust the discussion accordingly and validate what students already do.
- If vocabulary around mental health is new (e.g. due to age, culture), you may discuss mental health, stigma, and self-care more broadly to begin.
- For men, rural communities, and some religious or cultural groups, mental health may be heavily stigmatized, so you might focus on identifying barriers to seeking help and discussing how you could mitigate these barriers.
- With youth experiencing multiple forms of marginalization (eg. racism, financial stress) and youth with high mental health literacy, you might centre your discussion on the larger societal systems and structures that impact mental health.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.

Understanding Mental Health in Our Community

- The speakers shared statistics about mental health in Canada: 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness in any given year. Only 1 in 4 will get the help they need. Suicide is the #1 health-related cause of death for young people in Canada.
 - Do any of these statistics stand out to you?
 - Did any of these statistics surprise you? Why or why not?
- The speakers taught us the difference between mental health and mental illness. Mental health is a state of well-being that affects our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. A mental illness is a cluster or pattern of symptoms.
 - Why is it important to distinguish between mental health and mental illness?
 - Why is mental health important to you?
 - Why is it important to be aware of the mental health of people in our community/school?
- The speakers mentioned that a lack of knowledge and understanding of mental health can be a barrier to us reaching out for help.
 - What are potential gaps in knowledge about mental health in our communities?
 - How can we learn more about mental health?
- The speakers also mentioned that negative attitudes around mental health can be a barrier to seeking help.
 - How do we talk about or treat people experiencing a mental health struggle or crisis?
 - What can stigma look or sound like?
 - What can we do to change these attitudes/stigma?
- The speakers discussed a number of factors that can contribute to mental health stress.
 - What are some factors that affect the mental health of people in our community?
 - How do they affect your mental health?

Being There for Ourselves & Others

The speakers recommended seeking community supports if we experience a mental health struggle.

- What are some community supports available to us?
- Are these community supports easy for everyone to access? Why or why not?
- How would you improve these community supports?
- What might hold someone back from reaching out to their friends/family?
 - What can we do to change that for the better?

The speakers encouraged self reflection on how we can be there for ourselves.

- What do you consider to be self-care?
- What self-care do you already do?
 - How could you improve your current self-care practices?

The speakers introduced 5 Golden Rules of being there for others (see Resource List).

- Which Golden Rule(s) is the most challenging for you?
- How might you overcome that challenge?

Turning the Conversation into Change

What is one thing we can do today/this week to be better advocates for our own mental health?

- What about for the broader community?

How can we keep the mental health conversation going beyond today's discussion?

WRAPPING UP.

We recommend ending these discussions with a simple call to action and accountability (e.g. “What is one thing you’re going to do to take care of yourself and a loved one this weekend? We’ll be sharing what we each did during our discussion next week”). Reiterate that we cannot improve the mental health of our communities without taking care of ourselves first.

Remind students about community resources and where to go for support. It’s best practice to provide an up-to-date list of mental health resources in the community (see Resources below).

Thank students for participating and encourage them to keep the conversation going. Validate that there are many ways to take action on mental health in their lives.

RESOURCES.

Mental Health Supports

- [Kids Help Phone](#) (for all ages): 24/7, free counselling services available
 - By phone (1-800-668-6868)
 - By text (text CONNECT to 686868)
 - [Resources Around Me](#): Find mental health resources based on location
- [Wellness Together Canada](#) (for all ages): 24/7, free online mental health portal

Learn More about Mental Health

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) (CMHA): Learn more about specific mental illnesses and suicide prevention
 - CMHA [Myths about Mental Illness](#): A resource addressing myths about mental health that fuel stigma and discrimination
- [Jack.org Resources](#): Youth-friendly guides to specific mental illnesses, common misconceptions about mental health, and when to seek professional help
 - [5 Golden Rules](#): A pdf poster of our Be There resource

Get Involved

Join the Movement: Turn the conversation into action by starting a [Jack Chapter](#) at your school. Get access to online mental health training modules, ongoing coaching, and funding to take action on improving mental health barriers in your community!

For more information and any questions, reach out to Jack.org at Hello@jack.org