



Home > Before You Teach Guides

# Discussing Mental Health in the Classroom.

# Considerations

Before using these resources with your students, it is important first to consider the following.

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.

## Please consider the following questions:

Have I considered the cultural, religious, and social backgrounds of my student population to shape a relevant and appropriate lesson?

Have I made arrangements to ensure support is available for any particularly vulnerable youth?

Are mental health supports available in the school should students need/want professional help during or after a classroom activity, lesson, or unit? If so, am I aware of how to connect students with these supports? If not, are there mental health supports outside of the school I can connect them with?

Am I able to notify families and other community members that a mental health lesson is occurring and equip them with resources to talk about mental health at home?

**If you answered no to any of these questions, this may be cause for concern. Please speak with your colleagues (e.g. curriculum lead, administrators, Student Success/Guidance Departments, school board support) to ensure both you and your students have the necessary support in place.**

# 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.

## Setting Boundaries and Expectations

When delivering mental health promotion education in the classroom, it is important to be clear about what the space is and isn't.

## 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.

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, socio-economic 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.

# 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

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## 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](mailto>Hello@jack.org)