

NURTURING MINDS: SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS

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The speed and uncertainty of today's world bring their own set of challenges and risks to educational settings. Even students in the same classroom will carry with them a great variety of individual challenges. A reasonable amount of academic pressure and social and familial expectations can easily become too much. The young people in today's classrooms feel more pressure than those of previous generations. Mental health challenges are compounded by global and local crises, and many students experience deep sadness and frequent anxiety. Supporting mental well-being is not merely a kindness. It is fundamental for individuals to maximise their potential, completing their studies, and making positive contributions to society in the future.

Mental health can impact students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It can affect their learning capabilities, as well as their relationships with peers, teachers, and family, and how they handle stress. When students know that they have mental health support, they are more likely to actively participate in learning, get good grades, and have positive relationships. On the other hand, students with mental health disorders not addressed can be truant, struggle academically, and experience long-term mental health problems.

An early identification of mental health concerns and empathetic response through the appropriate resources can be transformative for these students. Knowing that they are not alone sends a powerful message that the student is seen, valued, and supported.

Developing a Supportive Environment: A solid support structure begins with developing a safe, supportive space for students, where they feel seen, heard, and appreciated. Just like schools, colleges, and universities take care of the physical health and academic needs of students, mental wellness needs to be equally prioritized.

Educators and staff need to be trained to notice when students are struggling, which might look like withdrawal or irritability, declining performance, or seemingly random changes in the student's behaviors, as well as how to best respond. And in addition to a structured, clear support system, something as simple as checking in with students to see how they are doing, being present and active listeners, or empowering students to talk openly about mental health and the supports they seek can help destabilize stigma and develop a culture of care.

Peer supports can have impactful outcomes. Peer-to-peer support, assisting students to reconnect, share and develop connections, can help carve out belongingness. Support groups and peer counselling programs give students a chance to express themselves safely, as there is no fear of judgment.

Available Resources and Services: Professional mental health services must be available to everyone. Schools should have in-kind counselors or psychologists, but they can also refer students to outside mental health services as needed. Tele-therapy is another viable and accessible option during times when there aren't in-person supports available. In addition to this, wellness initiatives (i.e., mindfulness sessions, stress management training, relaxation techniques) can provide students with tools to feel like they have some agency over their mental health. Several apps or online offerings have guided meditations, mood tracking, and mental health education programs that can be a fantastic addition to professional services.

Promotion of Healthy Habits: Mental wellness is intertwined with physical health. Help students create a healthy lifestyle (sleep! physical activity! balanced meals! screen time limits!). Healthy lifestyle habits guide resiliency skills and help reduce stress when students are feeling more balanced.

Schools also play a pivotal role in creating an appropriate academic workload, supporting healthy routines, and modelling positive behaviours. Educators could demonstrate self-care, encourage students to take breaks, and perhaps even promote rest.

The Role of Families and Communities: Support should not rely solely on the school. Support from the home is just as valuable. Families have a vital responsibility to endorse mental health practices with the student in the home space. Open conversations in the home, sustained effort, and patience go a long way to create a healthy space for students to flourish! Community organizations, faith communities, and local leaders can also provide a different layer of support through mentoring or youth-oriented programs or community outreach.

Situations causing adversity often call out our deepest vulnerabilities, but can also bring out our greatest capacity, the collective gift of humanity and empathy! If we embed mental wellness in the student experience, we give young people the opportunity to experience the complexities of today while building the resilience to address the challenges of tomorrow with confidence and hope.

Let's make a collective commitment to support the whole child as we foster both intellectual and emotional development. By fostering mental wellness, students can reach their full potential, and we can create the leaders of the future and the changemakers who will flood the world with compassion, creativity, and hope! Resilience.

References:

[https://www.mcmillenhealth.org/tamtalks/student-mental](https://www.mcmillenhealth.org/tamtalks/student-mental-health#:~:text=Students%20struggling%20with%20their%20mental,you%20could%20start%20the%20conversat)

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