



Mental Health: The Next Frontier of Health Education

Promoting student health and well-being in school has long been a component of education. Traditionally, sports and physical education programs have stressed the importance of staying physically healthy through exercise. More recently, school-based sexual education and nutrition programs have informed young people about the importance of sexual health and good eating habits. But mental health – a fundamental part of student health and well-being – still remains largely absent from the education agenda.

According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders are the single largest health problem affecting young people. In Canada, approximately 15 to 20 percent of children and adolescents suffer from some form of mental disorder – one in five students in the average classroom. Furthermore, most major mental disorders onset prior to the age of 25, making adolescence a critical time for the prevention and treatment of mental health problems.

Mental disorders can lead to serious consequences if untreated. They may impede emotional well-being and social development, leaving young people feeling socially isolated, stigmatized, and unhappy. They may also present significant barriers to learning, leading to chronic absenteeism or school drop-out.

Early and effective treatment of mental health problems can improve social and behavioural adjustment, school performance, and learning outcomes. The earlier they are addressed through appropriate interventions, the more likely that beneficial effects will be achieved in both the short and long term.

For all of these reasons, addressing the mental health of young people should be a priority for schools.

Addressing Youth Mental Health in Schools

The school environment is an ideal place to begin the work of addressing mental health. Not only does the school offer a simple and cost-effective way of reaching youth, it is also a place where mental health can be linked with other aspects of health, such as physical health and nutrition, and with learning. How can we facilitate this development in our schools?

First, schools can implement mental health promotion strategies by improving mental health literacy through curriculum development and application, which may enhance knowledge about mental health, change attitudes in both students and teachers, and decrease the stigma associated with mental disorders.

Second, schools can identify young people at risk for or living with mental disorders.

Third, schools can educate their personnel to understand mental health issues and recognize mental disorders.

Finally, schools can improve students' mental health by becoming sites for mental health care delivery.

The role of schools in the delivery of physical health is already well established. A potential starting point for the integration of mental health care into existing school health systems is the implementation of 'gatekeeper training', in which teachers and student services personnel learn how to identify and support young people at risk for, or living with, a mental disorder. Such a system would link education professionals with health providers to allow for more detailed assessment and intervention when needed.

The presence of an on-site mental health provider (such as would be available through a school health clinic) may also provide teachers with the support they need.

One of the biggest obstacles facing youth with mental illness is the social stigma, which continues in spite of increased understanding and improved treatment of mental disorders. School-based anti-stigma activities present an opportunity to enhance understanding of mental illness and improve attitudes towards people living with mental illness among teachers, principals and administrators, parents and community members, and most importantly, among the students themselves.

One example of a school-based anti-stigma tool currently in place in a number of institutions across Canada is *Transitions: Student Reality Check*. Aimed at first-year university and college students, *Transitions* integrates information about mental illness, suicide, addictions and mental health self-help, and access to campus counselling and professional services with information about time management, interpersonal relationships, sexual activity, and financial planning. By framing mental health problems alongside issues encountered in the normal course of young adulthood, it helps to normalize and de-stigmatize mental illness and mental disorders.

Integrating Mental Health in Schools: Steps to Success

There is growing recognition among educators across Canada that mental health issues must be addressed at the policy level if they are to be considered a priority. A successful policy should provide support for school programs and staff; connect schools with community programs; commit to early intervention, crisis intervention and prevention; support a mental health care referral system; and promote positive social and emotional development.

An important element of a school mental health strategy is the development and implementation of age-appropriate curricula to promote social-emotional development, prevent mental health and psychosocial problems, enhance resiliency, identify youth at risk for mental health problems, and provide ongoing educational support to young people during and after recovery.

For such programs to be successful, teachers need to be provided with training to understand mental disorders and basic supportive counselling skills within the context of a well-conceived and cohesive framework that involves collaboration among organizations and institutions from all sectors of society.

Mental health is a fundamental component of student health and well-being. By integrating mental health policies and programs into the education system, we can improve knowledge and reduce the stigma that still surrounds issues of mental health. However, it is only by listening to and working with students, teachers, guidance counsellors, school health nurses, and administrators, and by properly evaluating what we do, that we can make sure such programs are successful. We have the knowledge and capacity to put these ideas into action – let's meet the challenge!

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