



MENTAL ILLNESS
in the CLASSROOM:
How Educators Can
Help Students Succeed

Ingle International cares about you and your students

www.studyinsured.com

INGLE[®]
INTERNATIONAL

Mental Illness in the Classroom: How Educators Can Help Students Succeed

By Sakina Rizvi, PhD Candidate in Pharmaceutical Sciences and Neuroscience

Teachers are an invaluable resource for facilitating student development academically—and mentally. For educators, mental health is a serious issue that cannot be ignored. In a national survey¹ of over 3,900 Canadian teachers, half of them reported that 10% of students have a mental health issue that is not being addressed, while another 10% have received a formal diagnosis but are not receiving the support they need. And in a recent survey of Ontario school boards,² 92% of teachers reported having to deal with a mental health problem, while 93% felt their training had not adequately prepared them to deal with these issues. So, what can you as an educator do when faced with mental health issues in the classroom?

1. Educate yourself before educating others.

Studies³ show that public literacy on mental health matters is poor. There is a lack of understanding of psychiatric terms, failure to recognize symptoms, as well as inadequate knowledge with respect to the causes of mental health problems. This can be problematic when communicating with parents or health care practitioners about a student's mental health issue. Make your first step informing yourself by

seeking out information from reputable sources. The following websites are a great place to start:

- Canadian Mental Health Association: <http://bit.ly/bmDyIH>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: <http://bit.ly/187rK7m>
- Children's Mental Health Ontario: <http://bit.ly/futUt5>
- Teen Mental Health: <http://bit.ly/2HiaHk>
- The Hincks-Dellcrest Centre: <http://bit.ly/1aF2qLQ>

These sites will have information you can trust, online tutorials, and links to important resources that include training programs for schools⁴ or workshops you can attend.⁵ For further information on local resources available to you, be sure to check your school's guidelines on how to handle mental health in the classroom.

2. Be culturally sensitive.

We live in an increasingly multicultural world, and as such, understanding cultural beliefs⁶ with respect to certain behaviours and mental health concerns is paramount when dealing

with a student and their family. While stigma regarding mental health is universal, the likelihood for treatment seeking varies considerably from country to country. In some cultures, it is common to go to one's extended family for help prior to accessing care, while in others, individuals might choose to turn to spiritual figureheads primarily.

3. Create awareness.

One way to open the door for communication with your students is to build mental health awareness⁷ around your school or in your classroom.⁸ Your efforts will help increase mental health literacy and decrease stigma. Providing students with the foundation they need to recognize their own symptoms at an age-appropriate level will help them gain an understanding of what they are feeling and demonstrate to them that you are empathetic and approachable. This will help create a safe environment for a student before you take the next step and talk to him or her directly about what you think might be wrong.

4. Work with students.

A good practice is to document a student's problematic behaviour. Keeping a record of past behavioural issues will give you an opportunity to notice trends, and will show parents that you have been thoughtful and have not jumped to any conclusions. When working with students, avoid using language that sounds like a diagnosis (e.g., "depressed"), and focus on symptoms

instead. Labelling a student, especially early on in life, can be damaging to their progress. On the other hand, highlighting their achievements and positive attributes before discussing problematic behaviour or poor performance is critical. This useful handbook⁹ includes signs to look for as well as strategic tips on how to work with students who may have a mental health problem.

5. Work with parents.

When discussing a student's mental health with a parent, there are a few things to keep in mind.¹⁰ First and foremost, this is a delicate and difficult topic for any parent to absorb. Add to that the fact that many parents may have poor mental health literacy, and their perception of the cause of the student's behaviour may be different than yours. Watch out for parents who may feel that they are being blamed for the student's symptoms or poor performance, and do your best to steer away from vocabulary, tone of voice, or facial expressions that could be misconstrued as placing blame. Be sensitive, don't be accusatory, and lay out your specific goals for discussion to keep the conversation on track.

Teachers play a powerful role in a student's life and have a unique position of influence. The steps you take to help a student recognize and deal with a mental health issue can have an incredible impact on their future success, so take that first step! And definitely, don't ever ignore the symptoms.

¹ Understanding teachers' perspectives on student mental health – Findings from a national survey: <http://bit.ly/187rBRv> (requires Adobe Reader)

² Teachers unprepared to deal with mental health issues among students: <http://bit.ly/1a7DMRj> (requires Adobe Reader)

³ Depression literacy in Alberta – Findings from a general population sample: <http://1.usa.gov/17d9ZDE>

⁴ Teen Mental Health – Educators training programs: <http://bit.ly/1b9gJF3>

⁵ Teen Mental Health – For educators: <http://bit.ly/1cRRg4i>

⁶ Cross-cultural mental health and substance use: <http://bit.ly/1ekCqXU>

⁷ Talking about mental illness – Teacher's resource: <http://bit.ly/1eEop18>

⁸ Mental health kit (junior high school): <http://bit.ly/187sIR7> (requires Adobe Reader)

⁹ When something's wrong – Strategies for teachers: <http://bit.ly/1hj7MA1> (requires Adobe Reader)

¹⁰ Mental health for all children and youth: <http://bit.ly/1aF2qLQ> (scroll down to "The Parents" section)

For easier access to these resources, view the article online: <http://bit.ly/HyOBDO>

About the Author



Sakina Rizvi is a PhD Candidate at the University of Toronto in the Departments of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Neuroscience, and a Clinical Research Coordinator in the Department of Psychiatry, University Health Network. She has worked as a researcher in mental health for over a decade and has published numerous articles on psychiatric illness.

References

1. Teen Mental Health & TakingITGlobal. (2011). TIGed mental health thematic classroom: A guide for educators. Retrieved from http://www.teenmentalhealth.org/images/resources/teachers_guide_final_pdf_july_2011.pdf.
2. Wells, J., Barlow, J., & Stewart-Brown, S. (1999). A systematic review of universal approaches to mental health promotion in schools. *Health Education, 103*, 197-220.
3. Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation. (2007). When something's wrong: Strategies for teachers. Retrieved from <https://www.ctf-fce.ca/Documents/Priorities/EN/mental%20health/CPRF%20Teachers%202007.pdf>.

INGLE[®]
INTERNATIONAL

For more articles and insurance information, please visit
www.studyinsured.com