Canadian Mental Health Association
Mental health for all

Association canadienne pour la santé mentale
La santé mentale pour tous

Mental Illness in the Classroom

What do I need to know?

1. 20% of Canadians will experience a mental illness.
2. 70% of all mental illnesses begin to show signs before age 25.
3. Mental illnesses can occur on the spectrum of mild to severe.
4. Recovery from a mental illness benefits from early diagnosis and treatment.

Is it 'normal' distress or is it a mental illness?

Distress is a common experience caused by a problem or event that is often not very severe and which response is relatively short lasting. Professional help may be helpful by not usually necessary.
A **mental illness** is a less common experience (only 1 in 5 Canadians) and often occurs without warning, however it may be triggered by an event or problem. The symptoms are often severe and long lasting and professional help is usually needed.

How do I know if my student has a mental illness?

Only qualified health providers (doctor, psychologist, etc.) can diagnose a mental illness. That being said, there are some common signs that an individual may be experiencing a mental illness or other problems that need further attention and assistance. Please see below for more information.

What are the signs that suggest someone may be experiencing a mental illness?

Many of the following signs and symptoms are common for teens. In the case of mental illness, their severity and longevity are important as well as if they are exhibiting only a few or many of these signs and symptoms. Please note, this list is not exclusive.

- Missing class or refusal to attend school completely.
- Persistent and unnecessary worry and anxiety or avoidance of stressful situations.
- Persistent physical health complaints (headache, stomach troubles, etc.).
- Extreme need for reassurance or extreme perfectionism.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Repetitive or ritual behaviour.
- Persistent and significant negative mood including sadness, irritability, agitation or aggression.
- Excessive fatigue.
- Loss of interest in activities.
- Decrease in grades or loss in confidence.
- Significant changes in appetite, eating habits, or weight.

- Extreme fear of weight gain even if underweight.
- Social withdrawal or isolation.
- Beginning to use or increasing the use of drugs, alcohol or other substances.
- Persistent and significantly elevated, expansive or irritable mood.
- Feelings of euphoria, inflated self-esteem or grandiose ideas.
- Racing or disorganized speech.
- Hallucinations or delusions (disclosed or observed).
- Hyperactivity or excessive restlessness or fidgeting.
- Impulsivity or poor decision making.
- Showing little to no emotion.
- Decreasing attention to personal hygiene and grooming.
- Lack of insight into the emotions and behaviours of others.

What do I do if I suspect my student has a mental illness?

1. Talk to the student in a caring and respectful manner. Keep in mind that the stigma surrounding mental illness is the biggest reason why people do not seek the help that they need.
2. Communicate the things you have noticed and that you are concerned. Talk about behaviour rather than the student as an individual; rather than saying “you are acting strange” talk about the specifics you have noticed without placing judgment.
3. If you remain concerned, talk to the most appropriate person in your school. This may be a counsellor, social worker, nurse, psychologist, or supervisor/principal.
4. Alert the parent(s) or guardian(s) that the student may be in need of additional help and/or resources.
5. A referral to an outside mental health professional can assist with obtaining any necessary treatment for the student. The student, teacher, parent(s)/guardian(s), along with the mental health professional(s) should work as a team to develop strategies to support the student in the school.

What else can I do?

1. Be understanding and accepting. Feeling that they are not judged but rather unconditionally accepted, is very helpful for the recovery of those living with a mental illness.
2. Ask them how they want you to help.
3. Pay attention for any suicidal behaviours, thoughts or feelings they may be exhibiting or disclose to you. Disordered thinking and negative mood often associated with mental illnesses are related to suicide. If you are concerned about the risk of suicide, inform the appropriate person in your school and implement any school protocol in place. The student should receive immediate care.

What resources are available?

211edmonton.com is rich with up-to-date resources for Edmonton and area and are listed. You can search their resource lists to find the appropriate resources.
Albertahealthservices.ca/mentalhealth.asp is another helpful resources for services across Alberta.