

Mental Health Discussion Guide

CONSIDERATIONS.

Before facilitating a discussion on mental health with your students, reflect on the following questions. If you answer “no” to one or multiple question(s), please discuss with your colleagues and/or Jack.org staff before progressing.

- Is this an appropriate time to have a mental health promotional discussion?
 - If there has been a recent loss or traumatic experience in the school population, group-setting mental health discussions are not appropriate. Instead, connect with mental health professionals and refer to our Resources section
- Are mental health supports available in the school should students need/want professional help during or after the discussion?
- Have I accounted for cultural, religious, and social backgrounds within my school?

Safety

At Jack.org, safety is a top priority. Just like physical health, safety in mental health means that we are reducing the potential for risk of danger and harm. We want to ensure that the space and the topics discussed within it will not exacerbate pre-existing issues or create new ones.

Setting Boundaries and Expectations

When discussing mental health, 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 / 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 counseling: although we want to reduce stigma, we do not want people disclosing in detail about their own mental health issues, challenges and struggles
- To revisit or retell personal, vivid or graphic details of a mental health struggle or challenge (we want to avoid oversharing and triggering statements)
- For forced sharing: saying a space is safe does not mean it is, and people 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 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 a mental health experience or crisis?

A mental health disclosure is when someone confides or shares personal information regarding their mental health experiences. Responding to a disclosure doesn't have to be an alarming experience. Refer to our module [Responding to Disclosures](#) to learn more and be prepared.

FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION.

Mental health advocacy can be as simple as taking care of your own mental health and educating peers, or as large as addressing the systems and structures in our communities that impact mental health. Acknowledge this spectrum and where your students might fall on it.

To determine which types of mental health conversations will be most appropriate and relevant to your students, reflect on the following questions:

- **Demographics:** Consider location, age, race, culture, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, migrant status, gender, sexuality, languages, (dis)ability (including mental illness)
- **Attitudes/awareness:** Have you talked about mental health with this group of students before? How have they learned about mental health in the past? 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 (eg. age, culture), you may discuss mental health, stigma, and self-care more broadly
- 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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.

Below we have listed questions you might ask your students to facilitate a discussion around mental health. Keep the demographics, attitudes/awareness, and assets/strengths of your classroom in mind when selecting questions and using examples to spark discussion.

Understanding Mental Health in Our Community

- The speakers shared statistics about mental health in Canada: 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness in any given year. Only 1 in 4 will get the help they need. Suicide is the #1 health-related cause of death for young people in Canada.
 - Do any of these statistics stand out to you?
 - Did any of these statistics surprise you? Why or why not?
- The speakers taught us the difference between mental health and mental illness. Mental health is a state of well-being that affects our thoughts, feelings & behaviours. A mental illness is a cluster or pattern of symptoms.
 - Why is it important to distinguish between mental health and mental illness?
 - Why is mental health important to you?
 - How does mental health impact our community/school?
- The speakers mentioned that a lack of knowledge and understanding of mental health can be a barrier to us reaching out for help.
 - What are potential gaps in knowledge about mental health in our communities?
 - How can we learn more about mental health?
- The speakers also mentioned that negative attitudes around mental health can be a barrier to seeking help.

- How do we talk about or treat people experiencing a mental health struggle or crisis?
 - Examples if needed: language like “crazy” or “suffering from”; labelling behaviours as “attention-seeking”
- What can stigma look or sound like?
- What can we do to change these attitudes/stigma?

- The speakers discussed a number of factors that can contribute to mental health stress.
 - What are some factors that affect mental health in our community?
 - Examples of structural factors: racism, transphobia, colonialism, food and housing insecurity, criminalization, substance use, underfunding of healthcare, lack of resources, lack of culturally competent resources
 - How do they affect our mental health?

Being There for Ourselves & Others

- The speakers recommended seeking community supports if we experience a mental health struggle.
 - What are some community supports available to us?
 - Are these community supports easy for everyone to access? Why or why not?
 - Examples if needed: cultural competence, financial cost, wait time, fear of judgment or discrimination, physical distance, accessibility features
 - How would you improve community supports?
 - What might hold someone back from reaching out to friends/family?
 - What can we do to change that for the better?

- The speakers encouraged self reflection on how we can be there for ourselves.
 - What do you consider to be self care?
 - Examples of low-barrier self-care: basic hygiene, adequate rest/sleep, nutritious meals, cleaning/organizing, breaks from social media/news
 - What self care do you already do?
 - How could you improve your current self care practices?

- The speakers introduced 5 Golden Rules of being there for others (see Resource List)
 - Which Golden Rule(s) is the most challenging for you?
 - How might you overcome that challenge?

Turning the Conversation into Change

- What is one thing we can do today/this week to be better advocates for our own mental health?
 - What about for the broader community?

- How can we keep the mental health conversation going beyond today’s presentation?

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, and 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 everyone for participating and encourage students to keep the conversation going. Validate that there are many ways to take action on mental health in their lives.

RESOURCES.

Mental Health Supports

- [Alberta Health Services](#): A comprehensive list of Alberta-specific resources for social services
- [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

Learn More about Mental Health

- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) (CMHA): Learn more about specific mental illnesses and suicide prevention
 - CMHA [Stigma and Discrimination](#): A resource to understanding mental health stigma, discrimination, and language
- [Jack.org Resources](#): Youth-friendly guides to specific mental illnesses, common misconceptions about mental health, and when to seek professional help
 - [Be There](#): A five minute crash course on supporting others
 - [5 Golden Rules](#): A pdf poster of our Be There resource

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 your Jack.org Program Coordinator.

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Be There