

Mental Health LITERACY MODULES
FOR **GRADES 7 AND 8**



Educator Guide

Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grade 7 and 8 Students





WELCOME!

Welcome to the Ontario Ministry of Education's Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grades 7 and 8 Students. **These modules support delivery of the mental health literacy topics found within Strand D of the Health and Physical Education curriculum.** There are three, 40-minute modules in grade 7 and three, 40-minute modules in grade 8:

These modules are designed to be easy to use without much preparation. They follow a familiar lesson plan format and have guiding prompts and language for teachers to draw on. Videos, handouts, and activities created by educators and school mental health professionals are designed to assist with module delivery. This Educator Guide has been prepared with input from practicing educators and school mental health professionals. It is designed to provide supports and helpful information to enhance the delivery of these modules to students.

Table of Content

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1. | Introduction | 02 |
| 2. | Mental health literacy for educators | 03 |
| 3. | Preparing to teach about mental health | 04 |
| 4. | Curriculum alignment | 06 |
| 5. | Module structure | 07 |
| 6. | Supports for students | 09 |
| 7. | A note about educator well-being | 12 |
| 8. | Appendix A – Frequently asked questions | 13 |

INTRODUCTION

When we start early in life and reinforce skills and habits that promote mental health within caring classroom settings, we can set students up for success and may help to prevent or minimize the burden of future mental health problems.

By embedding opportunities to learn about mental health in the classroom, both through explicit teaching and through the inclusion of everyday practices, Ontario educators can contribute to the development of positive mental health for all students. When young people learn to understand, respect and care for their mental health routinely, just as they care for their physical health, they are more likely to reach out for help early if needed. Early identification and early intervention for mental health problems lead to better overall outcomes for young people.

The Mental Health Literacy Modules for Grades 7 and 8 Students are designed to be delivered by an educator, most typically the individual who provides Health and Physical Education instruction. **The modules are not intended to be student self-directed.** Ontario students have, in fact, indicated that they would like to learn about mental health from their teachers at school (HearNowON report, 2021). Students also highlighted the importance of educators, and parents/guardians, having essential knowledge about mental health so they can help young people to nurture their well-being and assist with finding additional support when help is needed.

“There are so many different initiatives competing for teacher time, but this is of central importance. I think this is number one.”

Ontario educator, Educator Focus Group

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY FOR EDUCATORS

While students are expanding their mental health literacy, educators can expand theirs, too. There are many resources available for educator learning about mental health. If you are interested in learning more, consider accessing the self-paced, online [MH LIT: Mental Health in Action](#) mental health literacy course for educators. It's free, available on the ministry Virtual Learning Environment, and designed to provide educators with foundational knowledge and information related to mental health, strategies to enhance student mental health, and everyday practices for use in a variety of learning environments.

Did you know? All Ontario boards have a mental health leader and superintendent with responsibility for mental health who lead the board mental health strategy and action plan. They provide resources, professional learning, and support to schools as they work on ways to promote mental health. You can learn more about your board mental health strategy and related supports and services on the board website or through your school administrator.

PREPARING TO TEACH ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

“Educators know their students well, so they can tailor mental health learning in ways that build on the strengths, identities, and learning needs within the class. They also have the advantage of time with students for the better part of each day, so they can model healthy habits, validate students’ experiences, and reinforce growing skills every day. This has such huge benefits for the mental health of young people.”

Community mental health professional, 2023

Mentally healthy learning environments

The mental health literacy modules are best introduced within the context of a mentally healthy learning environment. As a caring educator, you help create learning environments through which a sense of belonging is fostered, proactive steps are taken to promote positive mental health and support is provided when mental health problems arise. A crucial aspect of mentally healthy learning environments is prioritizing a culturally responsive approach within the school culture. This includes acknowledging and respecting students as complex individuals with diverse needs and experiences. Note that these settings make mental health part of the everyday experience through wellness activities, posters and other visual reminders, and frequent sharing of resources and local supports and services. While you will use your professional judgement to determine the right time in the school year to introduce the mental health literacy modules, an important consideration is the time needed to establish this sort of learning environment.

Self-reflection

Part of your preparation might also include reflection on your own lived experiences, culture, and implicit biases as it relates to mental health. By acknowledging these biases and actively working to overcome them, you can create a more supportive learning environment and help to approach this content with empathy, openness and curiosity. Starting with reflection about yourself, the learning environment, and individual student circumstances offers a strong entry point to the mental health learning modules.

Know every student

Approaches to all instruction, including mental health learning, are most impactful when they are mediated through supportive and trusting relationships. Taking time to listen for understanding as you come to know the students — as complex individuals with diverse needs — will help you to tailor the learning to the needs and strengths of the students in your class. This can also help in identifying students who may need extra support with this content because of their personal circumstances. Establishing supportive home-school connections and being prepared with knowledge of board and community services can help when a student needs extra care.

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

These modules are based on curriculum expectations from Strand D (Healthy Living) from the [Health and Physical Education curriculum](#). It is recommended that the modules are delivered in the order they are presented. The learning has been scaffolded and is designed to build as you progress through the modules.

| MODULES | | CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS |
|---------|---|--|
| Grade 7 | 7.1 Mental Health, Mental Illness, and the Relationship Between Them | <p>Substance Use, Addictions, and Related Behaviours [D1.2] demonstrate an understanding of linkages between mental health problems and problematic substance use, as well as between brain development and cannabis use, and identify school and community resources (e.g., trusted adults at school, guidance counsellors, public health services, helplines) that can provide support for mental health concerns relating to substance use, addictions, and related behaviours</p> <p>Mental Health Literacy [D1.6] demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between mental health and mental illness and identify possible signs of mental health problems</p> |
| | 7.2 Understanding Signs of a Mental Health Problem and How to Seek Support | |
| | 7.3 Mental Health, Substance Use, and the Relationship Between Them | |
| Grade 8 | 8.1 Mental Health and Stigma | <p>Mental Health Literacy [D2.4] demonstrate an understanding of how incorporating healthy habits and coping strategies into daily routines can help maintain mental health and resilience in times of stress</p> <p>Mental Health Literacy [D3.4] explain how word choices and societal views about mental health and mental illness can affect people and perpetuate stigma, and identify actions that can counteract that stigma</p> |
| | 8.2 Supporting Our Mental Health – Managing Stress | |
| | 8.3 How to Help a Friend – Seeking Support for Others While Caring for Ourselves | |

There are opportunities to connect to further curriculum expectations within the extension activities.

In addition, mentally healthy habits and skills can be integrated and reinforced as part of the regular school day, during transitions, during class discussions, and in conversation with individual students who are working to practice their skills.

MODULE STRUCTURE

Each module is 40 minutes in length and follows a familiar format:

- **Supportive Transition/Mindful Practice:** a brief practice/activity to help students be present and ready for learning
- **Minds On:** an activity for student reflection and activating previous learning or prior knowledge
- **Action Task(s):** engagement with the core content of the module
- **Consolidation:** questions for students to reflect on the learning, as well as a short student-friendly summary of the key learnings
- **Supportive Transition:** a brief practice/activity to end in a positive way and help students transition to the rest of their day

Note: Learning about mental health may feel new for some students, and for you. It can be helpful to create a transition into the modules with a mindful practice. Several ideas for activities that can help students to be present and ready for learning are listed in the Supportive Transitions resource (e.g., brief deep breathing exercise, visualization, stretching). Likewise, these practices can be used to draw the mental health learning to a close before moving forward with other learning or activities.

Assessment

No formal assessment tools (with the purpose of assigning a mark), are provided. However, the modules do offer components to help students gauge their learning, such as reflection questions and a list of key learnings. These tools will also support your ongoing assessment strategies as part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Accessibility

The modules include specific tools to provide improved accessibility. Videos have closed captioning. You can choose to have captions by clicking the small 'CC' button at the bottom right of the video screen. Videos also include ASL and LSQ interpretations (coming in Winter 2023-24). The content is AODA-compliant and compatible with screen-reading tools.

Digital Platform

A video at the start of the modules will orient you to the platform, as well as the structure of the modules and the functions of the platform. It is designed to offer flexibility and choice and materials are also easily printable if that is your preference or need. For example, there are **three** different ways to view the learning materials:

- **Reading:** this view will show you all the components of the modules – instructions, tips, complimentary learning, supportive guides, etc.
- **Teacher Notes:** when you're ready to teach, this view will provide you with what you need to guide and share the learning
- **Presenting:** this view gives you just the materials that you need to show to students (e.g., slide decks, videos, etc.)

Supportive transitions

Essential to each module is a **supportive transition** to both open and close the learning. Before starting a module, it can be helpful to create a transition into the learning with a mindful practice. Likewise, these practices can be used to draw mental health learning to a close before moving forward with other classwork or activities. At the end of each module, educators are also encouraged to share resources with students, including a list of helplines and local mental health services. **Although these modules focus on literacy and ways to build wellness, there are students in classrooms every day who could benefit from a caring connection.**



SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS

"I know that my grade 8 students will benefit from learning about mental health at school. It can help them with coping with stress, getting ready for high school, and knowing where to turn if they are struggling emotionally. But I'm not a mental health professional and I'm worried I will say or do the wrong thing. I need a little help to get ready."

Ontario educator, 2023

Maintain a focus on wellness

These modules are intentionally designed to focus on mental health as a positive concept and to support students as they engage in the learning. Research tells us that when mental health literacy is taught in a sensitive and appropriate manner, discussing mental health can have beneficial impacts on students' well-being.

Consider ways to transition out from previous learning to ensure your class is ready for this learning and see mental health as a topic for all. Some ideas to try include playing music, change in lighting, a brief stretch break, or a snack.

Consider timing

It can be helpful to deliver the content within these modules and other mental health topics during a time that allows for student follow-up (ideally not at the end of the day; consider avoiding Fridays). Be aware if there have been any recent events in your school community that would make mental health a particularly sensitive topic and may impact when and how you might teach these lessons.

Focus on the facts

Given that the focus of the modules is on sharing facts and reliable information rather than personal stories, **it is helpful to remind students at the beginning of modules that this is not a forum for disclosures related to mental health. You can suggest that if there is a personal situation a student would like to speak about, they can see you after class.**

Encourage help-seeking

Students experience a range of emotions and having peers, parents/guardians and other caring adults to connect with can be helpful. Sometimes, more help is needed. There can be stigma regarding seeking mental health support and caring adults play an important role in encouraging students to reach out for professional support when they need it.

For further information about how to support students in the classroom while teaching the mental health modules, explore Appendix B: Frequently Asked Questions. Remember, your school leader is there to help you as you support students with their mental health learning.

"Everyone getting the help they need [is] not everyone getting the same amount of help because everyone has different situations and experiences."

HearNowON, 2021, Student forum participant

List of Helplines and Supports

You know the students best and the resources available in your local community. The following provides an overview of provincial resources to help guide you. Included are specific differentiated resources to support students with a range of needs.

| LIST OF HELPLINES AND SUPPORTS | |
|--|---|
| <u>Black Youth Helpline</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call: 416-285-9944 or toll-free 1-833-294-8650 • Multicultural youth helpline serving all youth • Services available in English |
| <u>Kids Help Phone</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call: 1-800-668-6868 • Text: CONNECT to 686868 (<u>Resources Around Me - Kids Help Phone</u>) • Available to young people across Canada • Services available in English and French (additional languages also offered) • Support in Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut varies from week to week, so you may need to call to request services in those languages |
| <u>One Stop Talk</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call: 1-855-416 8255 • Chat: <u>onestoptalk.ca</u> • Available to children and youth under age 18 • Services available in English and French • One hour of professional therapy at no cost, and referral for more support when needed • Monday to Friday from 12PM to 8PM, and Saturday from 12PM to 4PM EST. |
| <p>* Service availability varies. Encourage students to check the websites for availability in their time zone.</p> | |

Students and families can also access community mental health organizations in their community. In addition, a growing number of communities have youth wellness hubs that provide a range of services in a youth-friendly environment. Also, a new service has launched recently in Ontario called [One Stop Talk](#), where students and families can receive immediate service from a trained mental health professional by contacting this service.

EDUCATOR WELL-BEING MATTERS

Educator mental health matters! We recognize that the mental health and well-being of students, staff, and family members are inextricably linked. Personal wellness looks different for everyone. There are many ways to maintain balance and stay mentally healthy in the face of the many challenges and demands we all sometimes encounter.

Consider the opportunity to support your own mental health through these modules. As you move through them, consider taking time to reflect on your own mental health and practice strategies alongside students. Look for 'try it!' tips for teachers highlighted throughout the modules for opportunities. Taking time to engage in well-being practices is so very important and sets an excellent example for students.

If you feel you could benefit from support for your own mental health and well-being, connect with:

- Your family physician
- Your board Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Your local union/federation bargaining unit office
- [ConnexOntario](#) | Mental Health & Addiction Treatment Services, Also available at 1-866-531-2600
- [Telehealth Ontario](#) Also available at 1-866-797-0007

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis:

- [Crisis Text Line | Text HOME To 741741](#) - Crisis Text Line, powered by Kids Help Phone, provides free, 24/7, nationwide service to people of all ages in Canada
- Go to the emergency room of your local hospital or call 911 (if you feel safe to do so) right away. If you choose to call 911, you may request that a mental health professional who understands your culture be part of the response team.

APPENDIX A

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1

Why is it important for grade 7 and 8 students to learn about mental health?

"Students' health and well-being contribute to their ability to learn in all disciplines, and that learning in turn contributes to their overall well-being" ([Ontario Ministry of Education](#)). Mental health education supports learning in all areas. Connections between mental health and well-being and student achievement underpin all student learning.

In addition, in recent surveys, Ontario secondary students highlighted that they want to learn about mental health at school, from knowledgeable educators. They noted that they want this learning to be frequent, early, and varied, making grades 7 and 8 important opportunities (HearNowON report, 2021).

Most importantly, as educators and caring adults in the lives of young people, we want students to be well, and these modules can help to support that by equipping students with knowledge and strategies for maintaining mental health.

2

What if a student asks a question about mental health and I don't know the answer?

It's okay not to have all the answers. By guiding students on where to access reliable information, you are promoting critical thinking and the value of seeking information from reliable sources.

- Be honest and transparent: Students appreciate honesty, and it sets a positive example of lifelong learning. You can say something like, ***"That's a great question, and I want to give you the most accurate information. However, I don't have the answer right now. Let's explore this together."***
- Validate the question: Assure the student that their question is important and valid. This can help them feel heard and encourages them to continue seeking knowledge. You can say, ***"I'm glad you asked that question. It shows curiosity and a desire to learn about mental health, which is really important."***
- Consult with a mental health professional: If the question is particularly complex or requires specialized knowledge, consider reaching out to a board mental health professional who can provide accurate information. They can help you address the student's question in an appropriate and knowledgeable manner.

3

What if a student becomes upset while I am teaching one of the modules?

If a student becomes upset during a lesson, it's important to respond in a supportive and compassionate manner, just as you would if a student became upset during any other subject matter. Here are some things to consider:

- **Lean on your experience:** Maintain a calm demeanour to help create a safe and non-judgmental environment. Pay close attention to the student's emotions and reactions.
- **Validate their feelings:** Let the student know that it's okay to feel upset or overwhelmed. Acknowledge their emotions and reassure them that their feelings are valid. Avoid dismissing or minimizing their experience.
- **Offer support:** Show empathy and ask the student if they would like to talk about what is bothering them. If they feel comfortable sharing, be an active listener and offer a non-judgmental ear. Avoid pressuring them to speak if they are not ready.
- **Engage in supportive strategies:** Take a moment to engage the students in a breathing strategy or other calming practice.
- **Seek help if needed:** If the student's distress persists or intensifies, it may be appropriate to involve the principal, a school mental health professional if your school has one available, or the student's parents/guardians.

Remember, each student's emotional response is unique, and it's essential to approach the situation with empathy and flexibility. The goal is to create a supportive and understanding environment where the student feels comfortable expressing their emotions and seeking help when needed.

4

What if a student asks me a personal question about my mental health experiences?

When a student asks you about your personal mental health experiences during a lesson about mental health, it's important to approach the situation with sensitivity and professional boundaries. Here are some ideas to consider in considering the best way to respond:

- Acknowledge their question: Acknowledging the student's question with a positive and understanding tone. You can say something like, ***"That's a thoughtful question, and I appreciate your curiosity about mental health."***
- Offer general insights and redirect the discussion: Instead of sharing personal experiences, use the opportunity to highlight strategies that you have found helpful to manage everyday stressors or share resources students can explore.

Remember, it's important to prioritize the well-being of the students while maintaining professional boundaries. If you feel that a student needs more support than you can provide, consider involving school support staff or mental health professionals who are trained to address these concerns.

5

What should I do if a student is concerned about their mental health and requires more specialized support?

Early identification of concerns can help prevent future mental health problems. While it's not an educator's job to diagnose or provide treatment, you're a critical and supportive link between students who may be experiencing mental health problems and the resources they need to flourish. You're also part of their ongoing circle of support.

Ensure you are aware of your school and board supports and service pathways, should a student need support. Always follow your school board's protocol for accessing support for the student. If you're not sure what your protocol is, ask your principal or a member of your school's mental health leadership team. Use the following steps as a guide:

- If your concern is urgent (e.g., suicide risk or risk to others/imminent danger), act immediately to activate school protocols. **Never leave the student alone.**
- If appropriate, have a conversation about your observations with the student and/or their parent/guardian.
- You can have a conversation with your principal, vice-principal or someone else on your school's mental health leadership team, either for guidance or to help connect the student to appropriate supports.
- Once other staff are involved, additional district-level supports may be accessed, and the student may be referred to professional mental health support within the school board or community.

6

How can I talk with parents/guardians who are concerned about their child's mental health?

Reaching out to parents/guardians when you are concerned about a student's mental health is important. These guidelines and ideas may be helpful:

- Offer private conversations with the parent/guardian.
- Ahead of time, think about what information you would like to share with the parent/guardian and how you would like to share it. Consider language and cultural differences as you reflect on how you will share your observations.
- Avoid labels or mental health terms (e.g., depressed, anxious) to describe what concerns you and instead focus on describing what you are seeing in the classroom.
- Use neutral and non-judgmental language to describe your observations. Be open.
- Avoid using acronyms or shorthand for describing what you are observing.
- Invite parents/guardians to authentically partner with you for a solution and help you understand strategies that help the student in other situations.
- Reassure parents/guardians that there are supports available and let them know you or another school staff member will be following up with them as you work through the supports you discussed.
- Share appropriate board and community supports that they can access.

Wondering what to say? Here are some sample prompts to help you start a conversation with parents or guardians:

- ***“I’ve noticed that Tanya is having a hard time settling into class. She is easily distracted and often has difficulty focusing. I’m wondering if you’ve noticed this at home.”*** If not, then an appropriate follow-up comment might be: ***“I notice this often in class, and it’s affecting Tanya’s learning. Do you have any suggestions about what we can do to help Tanya manage this?”***
- ***“Arvin seems very quiet in class and finds it difficult to answer questions when I call on him, even though he knows the answer. Have other teachers mentioned this?”***

7

How can I help to ensure that the material is presented in ways that are culturally relevant and respect diverse student needs?

Students have a diverse range of strengths and needs that are shaped by their unique personal, social, and cultural lived experiences.

As part of a mentally healthy learning environment, it is important to consider using language that recognizes and respects a diversity of perspectives and the range of learning needs of students in the class. For example, students who are new to Canada or those with specific learning needs may require further differentiation to best make connections to this learning.

A set of shared agreements/classroom expectations can help create a culturally responsive space. There is stigma related to the topic of mental health, making these agreements even more critical. Some of the topics in the mental health literacy modules invite students to share about themselves. It is also important that the environment promotes a culture of asking questions and welcomes diverse points of view and ensures that each student is able to express their thoughts without judgement.

Prior to starting this learning, review the agreements that your class has created and discuss whether anything needs to be added or updated. Do the agreements support conversations about mental health? This discussion is a great opportunity for students to be leaders in the learning, conversation, and improvement of the agreements.

If you don't have shared agreements in place, provide some time to collaboratively consider, discuss, and co-create some before starting this learning. Before you do so, you may wish to offer students a few examples to help elevate the different needs, goals, and perspectives of all students. Some options include:

- There is room for everyone to contribute, but you don't have to speak if you don't want to.
- Be open to each other's experiences and appreciate differences. Value everyone's voice.
- Use thoughtful, respectful, non-judgmental language about mental health that makes everyone feel included. Be kind.

In addition, to building a mentally healthy learning environment, you can share supportive and culturally responsive mental health resources with students and their parents/guardians often (e.g., post local school and community resources in your classroom and provide regular reminders regarding seeking help, especially before weekends or school closures). Note that creating a supportive and culturally responsive space for students extends to the way we talk about opportunities for students, how we frame assessment, and what experiences we hold up as examples of success.

8

Is there anything I need to be aware of when teaching mental health literacy to students who identify as Indigenous?

Indigenous is a broad and inclusive term that encompasses First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and it is important to recognize and celebrate the incredible diversity and rich tapestry of cultures, languages, traditions and histories within and among each group. First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples each have distinct identities, worldviews, and experiences that contribute to the multifaceted nature of Indigenous heritage. It is important to approach teaching with a deep appreciation for the diversity and uniqueness of Indigenous cultures, while also acknowledging the common struggles and challenges faced. By embracing this diversity, educators can foster a more culturally responsive approach to mental health literacy for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Research has consistently shown that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada experience higher rates of mental illness compared to non-Indigenous peoples. Histories of inequities and marginalization have been identified as a significant factor in the mental health problems experienced by First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. The impact has been felt across generations, and affects the mental health of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities. Other factors that contribute to mental health problems in Indigenous communities include poverty, marginalization, and limited access to mental health services.

In teaching mental health literacy to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, it is important to be aware of this historical inequality, as schools and educators have the potential to impact First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples' mental health in present day. By understanding this and following the guidance of this educator guide, you are equipped to create supportive and empathetic learning environments that recognize and respect the lived experiences of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students.

Despite higher incidents of mental illness among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples, research suggests that culturally appropriate mental health literacy can be effective in improving mental health outcomes for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit youth. These modules have been carefully created in sensitive and culturally appropriate ways, alongside Indigenous colleagues and with consultation with Indigenous community partners. However, even without teaching mental health literacy, there is always a possibility of a student being triggered at school. Refer to the support section if you are concerned about a student's mental health.