



# A **mental health** GUIDE

FOR EDUCATORS  
IN INSTITUTES OF  
HIGHER LEARNING

# THE truth

## ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Having good mental wellbeing isn't just the absence of a mental illness, such as depression or schizophrenia. Instead, mental health ranges from optimal wellbeing to mental illness. A youth's state of mental health can vary along this continuum, depending on life circumstances.

**Mental wellbeing** is a critical and integral part of health. A youth with good mental wellbeing is able to flourish, realise his own abilities, cope with the normal stresses in life, work productively and contribute to the community. While stressful, challenges and life events will not feel unmanageable to the youth.

**Mental health problems** occur when a youth's thoughts or feelings are troubling him to the extent of affecting his normal activities. There is a lack of capacity to cope with challenges faced, and greater support from others is needed. While almost every person will experience some degree of mental health problems, this can evolve into a mental illness if left unresolved.

**Mental illness** is a serious or long-lasting medical condition. This stage is characterised by marked distress, with the individual experiencing moderate to disabling impairment in his functioning. Diagnosis, treatment (through medicine, psychological therapy and/or counselling) and support is essential for youths in this stage.





# UNDERSTANDING A youth's MENTAL WELLBEING

Protective factors are predictors of positive outcomes. They reduce the negative impact of risk factors, and decrease the likelihood of mental illness developing.

On the other hand, risk factors are predictors of negative outcomes. As risk factors accumulate, more protective factors are necessary to compensate.

	RISK FACTORS	PROTECTIVE FACTORS
INDIVIDUAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Genetic vulnerability (e.g. family history of mental illness)</li> <li>Personality and temperament (e.g. anxious disposition)</li> <li>Adverse early childhood experiences or chronic trauma (e.g. physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, and bullying)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive Functioning Skills</li> <li>Social Intelligence</li> <li>Emotional Intelligence</li> <li>Healthy Self-esteem</li> </ul>
FAMILY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inconsistent care-giving</li> <li>Poor family discipline</li> <li>Sudden change in the family (e.g. divorce, death of a family member)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive family</li> <li>Good relationship with parents</li> <li>Parents with emotional and financial stability</li> </ul>
SCHOOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure from assignments and exams</li> <li>Poor academic performance</li> <li>Problems with schoolmates (e.g. bullying)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive educators</li> <li>Positive relationships with peers</li> <li>Positive school experience</li> <li>Meaningful involvement in school activities</li> </ul>

Table 1: List of risk and protective factors

Four key domains of skills contribute to the mental wellbeing of youths in Singapore. They serve as important protective factors, and should be cultivated. Doing so will enable our youths to better cope with challenges and achieve positive outcomes in life.

AREAS OF MENTAL WELLBEING	ESSENTIAL SKILLS TO IMBUE IN YOUTHS
<b>Positive Functioning</b> "I can solve problems"	The ability to learn well, make good decisions, and adapt to different situations in school and at home.
<b>Social Intelligence</b> "I get along with people"	The ability to form and maintain strong relationships. This includes cooperating with others when working together, and knowing how to seek advice when making major decisions.
<b>Emotional Intelligence</b> "I know my feelings"	The ability to manage emotions in difficult times and maintain a positive attitude. This includes being adept in expressing, sharing and discussing emotions with others.
<b>Self-esteem</b> "I value myself"	The ability to be comfortable about oneself and accept our strengths and weaknesses. This also includes seeing oneself as being useful and capable of contributing to the community.

Table 2: Essential skills that contribute to a youth's mental wellbeing



A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE:

# FROM **problems** TO **strengths**

We commonly look out for problems and weaknesses in youths. However, it is important to realise that **all youths have their unique strengths!** Empower our youths by building upon the four domains of skills that contribute to better mental wellbeing.

All youths have their unique set of strengths that are important to protecting their mental wellbeing. Identifying and building upon these strengths help youths to **be more resilient and cope better with the challenges in life.**

Better mental wellbeing has been associated with various important positive outcomes. A youth with better mental wellbeing generally exhibits **more positive school outcomes.** This includes better class engagement and participation, as well as better academic achievement.

**These strengths also translate into a set of important life skills.**

In school, youths must work in project groups and get along with their classmates. Upon entering the workforce, they will need to work well with colleagues and meet tight deadlines, all while juggling multiple responsibilities. To do so, these skills – such as the ability to communicate effectively or manage negative emotions, are critical.

**Youths can play an active role in building their mental wellbeing.**

To cultivate better mental wellbeing in your students, encourage them to complete the Singapore Mental Wellbeing Scale for Youths at [www.findyourinnerawesome.sg](http://www.findyourinnerawesome.sg). This will allow students to identify their areas of strengths and pick up skills to boost them.

## SIMPLE STEPS TO BUILDING MENTAL WELLBEING IN YOUTHS

Educators can use the following tips either with the entire class or on a one-on-one basis. As you know your students best, educators are encouraged to modify the tips to suit their needs.

### TIPS

#### Create a classroom environment where students feel a sense of connection and belonging

- There are many positive moments in class. Dedicate attention to them instead of negative ones.
- Encourage all students to participate in class discussions, or to contribute otherwise.
- Remind students to be respectful to the answers shared by their classmates, even if they may be different or wrong.

#### Understand and promote the unique strengths that students possess

- Provide students with opportunities to leverage on their strengths (e.g. mentoring classmates in their studies, facilitating school events, being a peer supporter).
- Provide students with immediate and specific compliments for both their efforts and achievements (e.g. "I appreciate your help in mentoring Brian" instead of "good job").
- Encourage students to develop various interests beyond their studies (e.g. sports, photography, fashion).

#### Help students deal with setbacks, failures and disappointments

- Remind students that it is common to face setbacks. Explain that it is okay to feel disappointment and that these failures are not representative of them as a person.
- Encourage students to view the situation as a useful learning experience. Ask them what they have learnt and how they can improve in future.
- Success stories or positive movies may also serve as useful tools of encouragement.

#### Treat all incidents as learning opportunities

- Leverage opportunistically on various classroom events to make learning points.
- Besides scolding, it is beneficial if students are given constructive feedback.

#### PROBLEM

#### USEFUL SKILLS TO IMBUE

##### HEAVY WORKLOAD

- Categorising tasks based on their importance and urgency

##### IMPENDING EXAMS

- Creating a study plan with daily targets
- Coping with stress (e.g. talking to a friend, taking a short break)

##### GROUP CONFLICT/ BULLYING

- Seeking help (e.g. telling a trusted adult)
- Being polite but assertive (e.g. refusing unreasonable demands)
- Understanding and respecting the differences amongst peers



# IDENTIFYING THE **early signs** OF DISTRESS

A survey conducted in 2010 found that approximately one in ten Singaporean adults will suffer from a mental illness in their lifetime. In particular, the onset of many major mental health problems occurs during youth. However, many youths do not seek timely help.

Early intervention is essential to minimise any distress and disruption to the youth's functioning. Pay close attention to students who exhibit sudden changes from their usual self as such changes can be warning signs. The following are some signs that educators can look out for.

WARNING SIGNS	
<b>EMOTIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mood swings and occasional emotional outbursts</li><li>• Unrealistic and/or excessive fear and worry</li><li>• Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness and/or perceived loss of control</li><li>• Unaccountable anger, aggression, irritability or hostility</li></ul>
<b>THOUGHTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expressed ideas of death, suicide or self-harm (e.g. statements that life is not worth living)</li><li>• Having frequent negative or worrying thoughts</li><li>• Having illogical thoughts and ideas</li></ul>

<b>BEHAVIOUR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sudden unexplained and repeated absence from school</li> <li>• Sudden loss of interest in studies and/or usual activities</li> <li>• Sudden deterioration in academic performance</li> <li>• Social withdrawal and/or avoidance</li> <li>• Talking and/or writing about things that do not make sense</li> <li>• Neglect of responsibilities and/or personal appearance (e.g. appearing unkempt, poor hygiene)</li> </ul>
<b>PHYSICAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complaints of unexplained pains</li> <li>• Sudden changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns</li> </ul>

### WHAT IF MY STUDENTS ARE DISPLAYING SOME OF THESE SIGNS?

Having any one of the above signs does not necessarily indicate that the student has a mental illness or is suicidal. However, should these signs be

- (a) present in combination,
- (b) persist for more than two weeks, and
- (c) the student is unable to function as he usually does, it may imply the presence of significant distress.



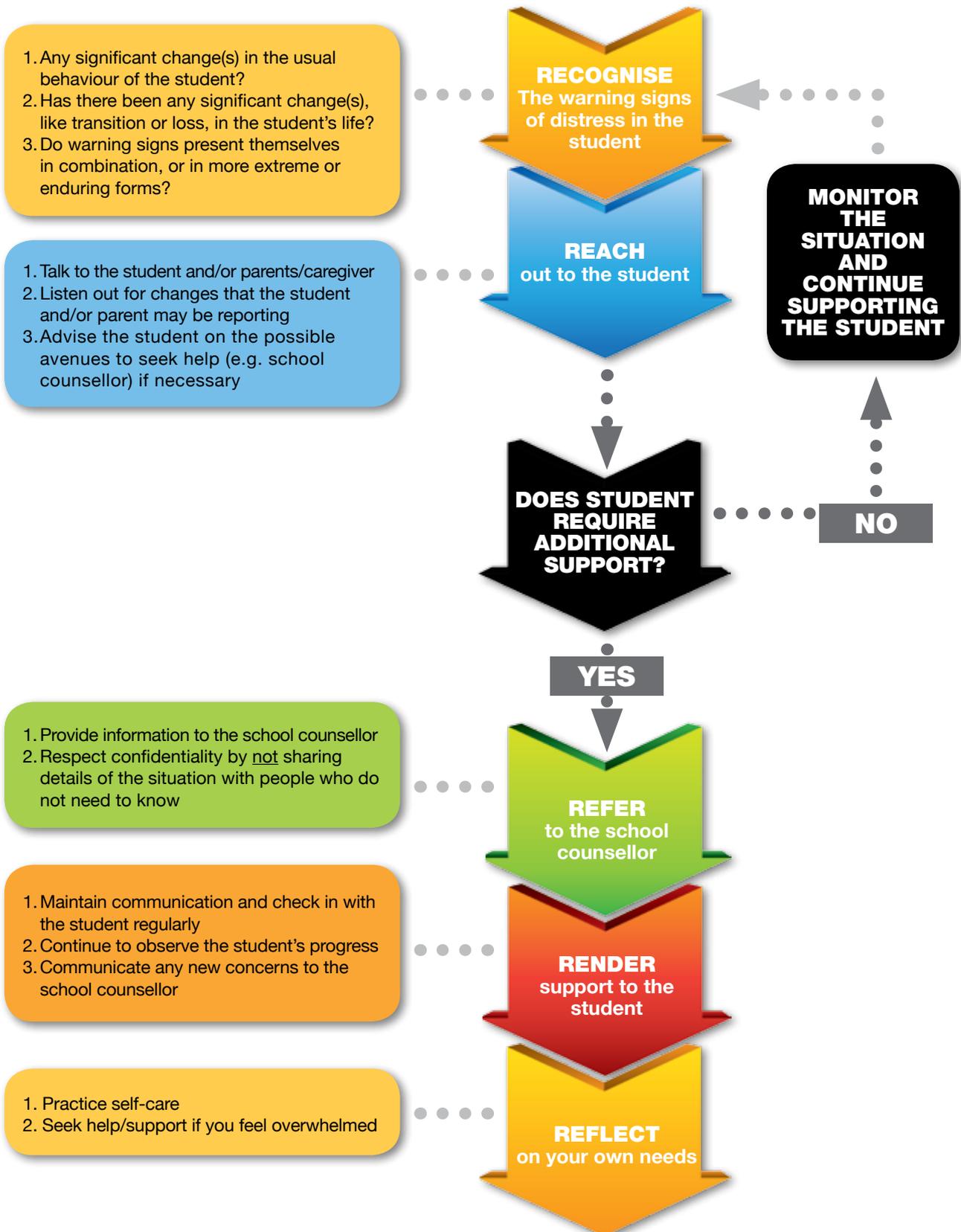
### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How different is the student from his usual self?
- How long have these signs been present?
- How severely affected is the student's functioning at home, school or with friends?

Record the signs displayed by the student and inform your school counsellor. Do note that diagnosis and counselling should only be carried out by a trained mental health professional.

# RESPONDING TO distress

Educators can use the flowchart below to help students who may be experiencing distress.





# REACHING OUT TO STUDENTS WITH **distress** IN THE CLASSROOM

As an educator, you often get the first glimpse of distress exhibited by students and may be the first person whom they turn to for help. Responding to students, however, can be confusing and overwhelming. The following section will provide you with some tips on reaching out to them.

## DO NOT

### **Use judgemental statements.**

Statements such as, “Why are you skipping school”, “your grades are falling and you need to pay more attention” prevents students from wanting to share their problem.

### **Trivialise the problem.**

Even though the problem may seem trivial, it does not necessarily imply that the student can manage it. Avoid criticizing and minimizing the student’s thoughts and feelings.

### **Provide solutions.**

Educators play a critical role in building the mental wellbeing of students, and encouraging them to seek help early.

However, counselling and therapy should only be conducted by a trained professional, such as the school counsellor.

## DO

### **Express your concern in a non-judgemental manner.**

Use phrases such as “I’ve noticed that you haven’t been concentrating well in class and I’m concerned about you” to relay your concern and the reason for the conversation.

### **Be empathetic.**

Validate and acknowledge the student’s emotions first. Use phrases such as “it must be difficult for you” and “you must have been disappointed”.

### **Be patient and understanding.**

It will take time to build rapport before the student feels safe enough to confide in you.

If necessary, assist the student in scheduling an initial appointment with the school counsellor. Use phrases such as “I hope that you can consider visiting the school counsellor, as she/he can help you better.”

## DILEMMA

## USEFUL TIPS

**My student just refuses to share the problem with me. How can I proceed?**

### Be aware of the student's refusal

The student might not be willing to do so because:

- He might feel the problem is not severe enough.
- He thinks that he is capable of coping by himself.
- He is worried about stigmatization and confidentiality.

### Provide the student with alternative options

It may be counter-productive to get the student to talk if he is unwilling. Instead:

- Back off but extend an open invitation.
- Enquire if the student would like to consult the school counselor instead, as talking to another party may be easier.
- Assure the student that his information will not be unnecessarily disclosed, unless his safety is at risk.
- Notify the school counselor immediately if you think that the situation is urgent.

**I promised the student that I won't tell anyone else. What should I do?**

Educators often have to thread a fine balance between respecting the autonomy of students confiding in them, and alerting the relevant school administration.

### Keep the student informed

- Inform the student that you would like to refer him to the school counsellor/ relevant personnel for help.
- Assure the student that you are doing this out of concern for his wellbeing.
- Advise the student that the school counsellor has worked with many other students before, and is professionally trained to handle such matters.
- It is better to inform the relevant personnel and err on the side of caution instead of maintaining absolute confidentiality.

**My student is constantly contacting me. How can I draw a boundary without rejecting him?**

Establishing clear boundaries does not equate to rejection. While we care for our students, it is important that boundaries be respected for the benefit of both student and educator.

### Understand your personal boundaries

- Are you comfortable with having an open door policy for students to pop by anytime?
- Are you comfortable with students contacting you after office hours? While some teachers are willing to share their mobile number, others may prefer to provide their email/office number only.

### Establish clear boundaries

- Inform the student about your contactable hours. For example, you will be available only on Fridays between 11am to 2pm; any calls after 5pm will not be answered.
- Check if your school has a 24-hour counselling service/hotline that you can refer the student to.

### Practise self-care

- Having to provide extra attention to a student, on top of your existing workload, can be overwhelming. It is thereby critical for educators to ensure their own wellbeing. Refer to Page 11 for methods to do so.

**How can I support a student with distress in class?**

To better support students facing distress, here are some general classroom tips educators may adopt:

### Be flexible with rules

- Make accommodations for assignments and exams if possible.
- Check in with the student regularly to ensure that he can keep up. Knowing that someone cares can help them feel better about themselves.

### Build the positive mental wellbeing

- Positive mental wellbeing should be cultivated not only in students with mental health problems, but in all students. For simple strategies that can be easily applied in the classroom setting, refer to Page 4: Simple Steps To Building Mental Wellbeing in Youths.



# MENTAL WELLBEING STARTS WITH YOU: **self-care**

Educators take on important responsibilities of educating and caring for the students under their charge. It is important to realize that you can be affected by the problems and emotions of those whom you are trying to help. By taking good care of yourself, you can then better care for others.

### **Understand your own mental wellbeing**

The mental wellbeing of adult Singaporeans is related to five areas: self-esteem, resilience, cognitive efficacy, social intelligence and emotional intelligence. Educators can visit [www.hpb.gov.sg/mentalwellbeing/scale](http://www.hpb.gov.sg/mentalwellbeing/scale) to find out more about building their own mental wellbeing.

### **Set aside time everyday to do something you enjoy**

Have a conversation with a good friend, participate in group activities, or read your favourite book. The possibilities are endless!

### **Work as a team**

Approach experienced colleagues, supervisors or the school counsellor for help. It is also important for educators to be open and understanding to their colleagues handling such situations.

### **Manage your stress**

Do some deep-breathing exercises when you feel stressed. Take deep breaths for a minute, focusing on your diaphragm. Feel your belly rise when you inhale and fall when you exhale.

### **Recognize your limitations**

Recognise your limitations, especially when the student you are helping has complex issues beyond your scope of expertise. Counter negative thoughts and maintain a positive outlook.

### **Knowing when to seek help for oneself**

Approach the school counsellor or seek help through other avenues if overwhelmed by the situation. This will ensure that educators are emotionally healthy to continue handling the situation.

## RESOURCES AND

# helplines

Educators can call the following hotlines to make an appointment with the school counsellor, or just to find out more information.

NAME OF INSTITUTION	HOTLINE	OPERATING HOURS

Educators can also call the following hotlines should they feel the need for external professional help.

AGENCY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	HOTLINE
<b>Agape Counselling &amp; Training Centre</b>	Counselling for individuals or families on emotional, interpersonal, sexual and parent-child relationships.	6842 2922
<b>Counselling and Care Centre</b>	Anyone with psychological and behavioural issues.	6536 6366
<b>CHAT- Community Health Assessment Team</b>	Provides resources and free mental health assessments for young people aged 16 to 30.	6493 6500 / 6493 6501 (Tues-Sun: 12pm-9pm)
<b>Institute of Mental Health</b>	A 24-hour helpline for anyone facing a mental health crisis.	6389 2222 (24 hrs)
<b>Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)</b>	Anyone in crisis or suicidal.	1800 221 4444 (24 hrs)
<b>Singapore Association for Mental Health Helpline</b>	Anyone with psychological, behavioural, medical and psychiatric issues.	1800 283 7019 (Mon-Fri: 9am-6pm)

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