



The Alberta  
Teachers' Association



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

Global 

# Compassionate classrooms

*Understanding  
student mental health*



Healthy  
minds.  
Bright  
futures.



# Compassionate classrooms

## *Understanding student mental health*

### Healthy minds. Bright futures.

Alberta's teachers are concerned about the well-being of children and youth, and understand that to educate children properly, their physical and mental health needs must be met. That's why the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Alberta Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) are partnering to promote the mental health of children and youth.

Launched in May 2009, the *Healthy Minds. Bright Futures.* program aims to increase awareness of the mental health needs of children and to decrease the stigmatization often associated with mental illness.

### Compassionate classrooms

The most important factor for success in dealing with a mental health issue is support. Teachers are part of their students' support system. The ATA and the CMHA hope that this booklet will help teachers promote the good mental health of their students.

This booklet was created to help teachers support students in need, but it should also help teachers help themselves and colleagues to maintain good mental health.

Special thanks go to TransCanada, RBC Financial Group, MaClaren McCann and CMHA Calgary and Alberta regions and Division, who partnered to put together the booklet "Mental Health Affects Us All," which provided much of the material for this booklet. Thanks also go to the CMHA National office whose materials also provided invaluable information.

# Project partners



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

The CMHA believes that a person cannot have good health without good mental health. Therefore, the CMHA works to not only support the needs of those living with mental illness but also to improve awareness of mental health.

CMHA is a national not-for-profit charitable organization with about 150 offices across Canada. In Alberta, CMHA has a provincial division office in Edmonton, a Centre for Suicide Prevention in Calgary, and eight regional offices (Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Edmonton, Camrose, Red Deer, Calgary, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge).

CMHA regional offices actively support the mental health needs of Albertans of all ages—in homes, schools, workplaces and in communities across Alberta. For more information on CMHA, please refer to its website [www.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.cmha.ab.ca).



## The Alberta Teachers' Association

The Alberta Teachers' Association, as the professional organization of teachers, promotes and advances public education, safeguards standards of professional practice and serves as the advocate for its members. It represents teaching professionals in Alberta's public, separate and francophone school divisions.

Alberta's teachers are committed to the well-being of the children and youth they serve. Teachers value the importance of public education in developing all children's potential and gifts and enabling them to function effectively in school, work and life.



Global Television is dedicated to developing partnerships for building stronger communities. Audiences rely on Global Edmonton and Global Calgary for their local, national and international news and entertainment programming, and for the support of important initiatives that improve the lives of all Albertans.

Global Television is proud to partner with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Canadian Mental Health Association to build awareness of "Healthy Minds, Bright Futures," the goal of which is to help parents, children, and the community understand and recognize the importance of student mental health.

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# Learn about mental illness

In the next few pages, we will discuss mental illness and mental health problems, and the difference between them.

When we say “mental illness,” we are referring to conditions that can be diagnosed, such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar condition, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa. These are examples of conditions that usually require medical treatment. It is estimated that one in five Canadians will experience diagnosable mental illness at some point in their lives.

“Mental health problems” describe the more common struggles and difficulties that people experience. When people are stressed, confused or upset, they often feel overwhelmed and incapable of coping. Most often such feelings pass and do not require medical treatment. Nevertheless, these feelings have a real impact on one’s good mental health and ability to thrive and enjoy life. Therefore, those experiencing mental health problems would benefit from help, support and understanding, even in the short-term.

It is important to pay attention to unusual behaviour, either your own or that of your colleagues and students. Changes in thoughts, moods, feelings, behaviour (eg, a loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities or a significant drop in performance at school) and perceptions are part of life. But, if persistent or severe, they may also be signs of trouble—and possibly of mental illness, which, if left alone, could be very harmful. (See Page 17, Youth mental health quiz.)



# Factors affecting mental health

Good mental health is more than just the absence of mental illness. It can be seen as a state of mental health that allows one to flourish and fully enjoy life.

Many factors can affect one's mental health. Everyone experiences down times in life. The ability to cope with negative experiences varies greatly from one person to another and, in large part, determines whether they enjoy their lives.

Some of the factors that affect the mental health of youth are as follows.

## *Self-esteem*

This is the value we place on ourselves, our positive self-image and sense of self-worth. People with high self-esteem generally have a positive outlook and are satisfied with themselves most of the time.

## *Feeling loved*

Children who feel loved, trusted and accepted by their parents and others are far more likely to have good self-esteem. They are also more likely to feel comfortable, safe and secure, are better able to communicate and develop positive relationships with others.

## *Confidence*

Youth should be encouraged to discover their own unique qualities and have the confidence to face challenges and take risks. Young people who are brought up to have confidence in themselves are more likely to have a positive attitude, and to lead happy and productive lives.

## *Family breakup or loss*

Separation or divorce or the loss of a parent or sibling are extremely painful events. Finding ways to cope and adjust to the changes wrought by these events is critical for everyone but particularly for youth. How grief is handled can affect young people negatively for years to come. If children are having difficulty coping, professional help is recommended.

## *Difficult behaviour*

When people are unhappy, they either internalize their unhappiness or act out. The latter usually appears as bad or difficult behaviour, such as using abusive language, being aggressive or violent, damaging property, stealing, lying, refusing to comply with requests or expectations at school or home, or displaying other inappropriate actions. If such behaviour is serious and persistent, the person and his or her family might require professional help.

## Physical ill health

Diseases, injuries and other physical problems often contribute to poor mental health and sometimes mental illness. Some physical causes (such as birth trauma, brain injury, drug abuse) can directly affect brain chemistry and contribute to mental illness. More commonly, poor physical health can affect self-esteem and people's ability to meet their goals, which leads to unhappiness or even depression. In such cases, receiving the best possible treatment for both the physical problem and the resulting psychological consequences is key to optimal recovery to good mental health.

## Abuse

The mental health of abused children is at great risk. Abused children are more likely to experience mental disorders or mental illness during childhood and into adulthood.

Abuse may be physical, sexual, psychological or verbal. It may not always be evident or easily recognized. Regardless of the form it takes, abuse cannot be tolerated. Children need to be protected from abuse and helped to overcome its negative effects. Abuse can cause feelings of low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, depression, isolation and anger—all feelings that impair a child's chance to lead a happy life. Teachers are legally obligated to report any suspected cases of abuse to the appropriate authorities.

Trust in others and feelings of being safe and cared for are key components to recovery from abuse. Few children are able to recover on their own. Support is critical, and professional counselling is sometimes required. If abuse is discovered early, the chances of a child returning to a healthy state of mind and avoiding serious mental disorders are greatly enhanced.

These are but a few of the factors that can affect children's mental health and contribute to mental illness. If you would like more information, you are encouraged to do more reading and research. As a starting place, a list of some reliable websites and resources is included later in this booklet. (See page 23)



# Symptoms and causes of mental illness

Changes in mood or behaviour that are troubling or last longer than two weeks should always prompt an evaluation by a doctor. A family doctor is a good place to start, as he or she can rule out any physical causes for changes in mood or behaviour and refer patients to a mental health professional.

Symptoms can vary with each type of mental illness and each person. The following are some common symptoms to watch for:

- Confused thoughts, delusions, and/or hallucinations
- Extreme fears or anxiety that seem out of proportion to circumstances or events
- Lack of motivation for a prolonged period of time (longer than two weeks)
- Persistent feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Extreme mood swings between depression and mania, sometimes with overly reckless behaviour
- Repeated, unusual actions such as handwashing or checking of lights
- Unexplained physical symptoms such as nausea, trembling, fatigue or headaches
- Difficulty concentrating and/or sudden irritability
- Disruption to usual sleep patterns
- Serious disturbance in eating pattern accompanied by a preoccupation with body image
- Talk or thoughts of suicide

Some of these symptoms may be uncomfortable or frightening to talk about, but the sooner help is sought, the better prepared people will be to manage a mental illness. If you recognize these symptoms in yourself, your colleagues or your students, reach out for assistance. Reaching out reminds us that we are not alone: there are professionals with expertise who can help.



## What causes mental illness?

There is no single cause of mental illness, and no one is to blame when someone develops a mental illness. A complex interplay of factors affect a person's mental health.

Our emotional health is dependent on a combination of attitudes, personality, support systems, and brain chemistry. Positive attitudes and healthy lifestyle choices can help you through many of life's difficulties. A good support system of family and friends is also valuable during challenging times.

Mental illnesses are thought to be triggered by the following:

- A chemical imbalance in the brain
- Psychological and social factors
- Genetics and heredity

### *Brain chemistry*

A chemical imbalance in the brain is caused by an imbalance of neurotransmitters, which can lead to symptoms such as depression, anxiety or stress reactions. We are all at risk for changes in our brain's chemistry. Recognizing these changes is an important part of treatment and the return to health.

The following biological factors can also affect the brain and the onset of a mental illness: prenatal damage, birth trauma, viral infection and faulty brain chemistry.

### *Psychological and social factors*

It is commonly thought that mental illness can be triggered by a traumatic life event or situation, and/or prolonged stress. Some examples of traumatic events are child abuse and neglect, family violence, severe or prolonged stress and unemployment.



### *Genetics*

Most mental illnesses are more common among close family members, which suggests that genetics plays a role. However, people don't inherit the illness itself; they inherit only the tendency to get it.

# Common mental illnesses

## Mood disorders

A mood disorder is an illness that involves the body, mood and thoughts. It affects the way a person feels about himself or herself, and even the way he or she eats, sleeps and thinks. Common mood disorders include clinical depression, seasonal affective disorder and bipolar disorder.

It's important to remember that people with mood disorders, as with other mental illnesses, cannot "pull themselves together" and get better using willpower alone.

### *Clinical depression*

People who suffer from clinical depression often feel sad, worthless and empty to the point of being unable to function. They lose interest in their usual activities, and experience a shift in appetite and energy levels.

A change in sleep patterns (ie, insomnia or excessive oversleeping) is also a symptom of clinical depression. In extreme cases, a depressed person has thoughts of death or suicide.

### *Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)*

Seasonal affective disorder, which is linked to reduced light in winter months, makes some people depressed. SAD is common and treatable through various forms of light therapy.

### *Bipolar disorder*

Bipolar disorder, also called manic depression, is an illness marked by periods of serious depression followed by episodes of markedly elevated or irritable moods or highs (in the absence of drugs or alcohol). These mood swings are not necessarily related to events in a person's life. Bipolar disorder affects approximately 1 per cent of the population, and affects men and women equally.

## Anxiety disorders

People with anxiety disorders experience excessive anxiety, fear or worry, which makes them avoid certain situations or develop compulsive rituals to ease their anxiety.

Anxiety disorders are the most common of all mental illnesses. Recognizing symptoms early and learning to manage the symptoms will help prevent secondary disorders, such as depression or substance abuse.

## *Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)*

Obsessive compulsive disorder is a very common anxiety disorder. People with OCD experience persistent and repetitive thoughts, ideas, impulses, and images that are perceived as intrusive and inappropriate and cause anxiety or distress. These thoughts lead to rituals (compulsions) that the person repeats, sometimes for hours a day.

## *Phobias*

A phobia is another type of anxiety disorder. Phobias are marked by a persistent fear of particular objects or situations, such as flying, heights or animals. When faced with that particular object or situation, people are overwhelmed by unreasonable fears that they cannot control.

## *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*

Post-traumatic stress disorder is marked by distressing recollections of a life-threatening event. A common symptom is experiencing flashbacks during which the person relives a terrifying experience.

## **Eating disorders**

Eating disorders are characterized by a serious disturbance in eating behaviour (either eating too much or too little). An eating disorder is a problematic coping strategy. Treatment involves initially stabilizing the person's diet to meet nutritional needs, followed by a variety of psychotherapies.

Eating disorders are disturbingly common among young women (15–25), up to 2 per cent of whom have anorexia and up to 5 per cent bulimia. This is a growing and serious problem because eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses—10 to 20 per cent of those afflicted eventually die from complications.

## *Anorexia nervosa*

Anorexia nervosa, one of the most common eating disorders, is a serious illness that involves drastic weight loss due to fasting; sometimes it is accompanied by excessive exercise.

People with an eating disorder often have an intense fear of gaining weight, so they establish unusual eating habits, such as weighing and portioning food. People with anorexia are often in denial of the seriousness of their loss of weight, and persist in seeing themselves as too heavy, no matter how thin they become.

## *Bulimia*

Bulimia is binge eating followed by recurrent inappropriate behaviour designed to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting; the use of laxatives, diuretics or enemas; and fasting or excessive exercise.

## *Binge eating disorder*

Binge eating disorder is overeating, often in secret, as a means of deriving comfort.

Binge-eating episodes are associated with at least three of the following symptoms: eating much more rapidly than normal; eating until feeling uncomfortably full; eating large amounts of food even when not hungry; eating alone due to embarrassment about how much one is eating; and feeling disgusted, depressed or guilty after overeating.

## **Personality disorders**

People with personality disorders may demonstrate a wide range of negative behaviours. They may be irritable, demanding, hostile, or manipulative. The behaviours can be mildly disruptive to the person's home or work life but can also be serious enough to cause great disruption to the person's family and sometimes to society.

These disorders can affect thought, emotion, interpersonal relationships and impulse control. An example of a diagnosable personality disorder is borderline personality disorder (BPD). Common symptoms of this disorder include unstable patterns of social relationships; bouts of anger, depression and anxiety; and a high sensitivity to rejection and abandonment.

Personality disorders can be the most difficult to treat because they are often unrecognized by the person experiencing them. Many people who have a personality disorder don't seek help because they are able to live normally in some ways. Individual and group psychotherapy combined with antidepressants and mood stabilizers have shown promise in treating personality disorders.

## **ADD and ADHD**

Attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) interfere with the learning process because they reduce students' ability to pay attention.

It is important to understand that ADD and ADHD are not disabilities in the learning process, although they may be present in addition to a learning disability.

ADD and ADHD are some of the most common mental disorders that develop in children. Symptoms of ADD and ADHD appear over the course of many months. Impulsiveness, hyperactivity and inattention are some of the most common symptoms; hyperactivity, however, is more common in ADHD than in ADD. Children with either of these disorders have trouble listening and following instructions. Fortunately, a wide variety of treatment options for ADD and ADHD are available.

## Substance abuse and dependency disorders

Approximately 600,000 Canadians have an alcohol dependency and another 200,000 have problems with illicit drug use. Dependency on tobacco and prescription medications is also a mental health concern.

People with a substance abuse problem usually have an increased tolerance for alcohol or another substance. They often experience withdrawal symptoms and are unable to decrease the amount of alcohol or drugs they consume. They continue to use the substance even though they know that it causes recurring physical or psychological problems.

Drug and alcohol dependency can lead to depression and other mental and physical health issues. Treatment options vary widely; the success of treatment programs varies according to the person and to the available support network.

## Schizophrenia

Contrary to what some people believe, schizophrenia is not a split personality; rather, it is a brain disease and one of the most serious mental illnesses.

Schizophrenia symptoms usually appear in the late teens or twenties. People with schizophrenia experience severe symptoms of mixed-up thoughts or delusions and bizarre behaviour (psychosis).

There are different types of schizophrenia, each with its particular symptoms. Generally, symptoms include hallucinations (something a person sees, hears, smells, or feels that no one else can) or delusions (false personal beliefs). These delusions are not part of the person's culture and do not change, even when other people demonstrate proof that the beliefs are not true or logical.



A person with schizophrenia may have disordered thinking and be clumsy and uncoordinated. He or she may also exhibit involuntary movements or display unusual mannerisms.

These impairments often interfere with a person's ability to lead a normal life and earn a living, and can cause great emotional distress.

The course of schizophrenia varies with the person; therefore, a wide variety of treatment options are available.

## Self-harm

Young people learn to cope with emotions in different ways. Some teens who are unable to cope with a build up of feelings or painful emotions try to release the bottleneck by striking out physically or verbally at others while others may seek relief through self-harm or self-injury, including cutting or burning themselves.

Self-injury usually starts during puberty and can last for ten years or more if left untreated. Episodes are often triggered by emotional pain. Some self-injurers want to feel emotions more intensely while others want to punish themselves. In most cases, this is a misdirected way for people to feel better by enduring physical pain rather than emotional pain.

Cutting is the most common form of self-injury; razor blades or glass are the most common tools. Other forms of self-injury include burning or hitting oneself, picking at scabs so that they can't heal, pulling out hair and inserting objects into one's body.

In a broader sense, self-harm can also include such behaviour as drug use, smoking, eating disorders, and entering into or staying in bad or abusive relationships.

It is important for children exhibiting this type of behaviour to talk to people they trust, who will not judge them but will help them get help from a mental health professional, who will assist the person in finding other ways of expressing their feelings and dealing with underlying issues.

## Suicide

Suicide is often difficult to talk about openly, yet it is more common than many people think. Those who have a physical or mental illness, use alcohol or drugs, or experience a major loss or life change are the most likely to attempt suicide.

The circumstances that can lead someone to take his or her own life vary, but all people who consider suicide feel extreme hopelessness, helplessness and desperation.

By learning about and paying attention to warning signs, even if it means asking uncomfortable questions, teachers can help prevent a suicide and get professional help for students who are feeling suicidal.

Warning signs of someone at risk of suicide include repeated expression of hopelessness or desperation, behaviour that is out of character, a sudden and unexplained cheerful attitude, making preparations for death (such as making a will or taking out insurance), or making remarks related to death and dying. An expressed intent to attempt suicide should always be taken very seriously.

The complex sense of loss after a suicide can be overwhelming. Specific programs designed to help survivors of suicide cope are available.

## *Preventing a suicide attempt*

If you suspect someone is suicidal, reach out to the person and ask him or her about their suicidal intentions. It is important to show respect and take the situation seriously. Offer your support by encouraging the person to talk and urging them to get help. If they won't seek help, get help for them. Never promise to keep their suicidal thoughts secret. Contact a suicide prevention resource in the school or school division, such as a guidance counsellor who knows how to work sensitively with these issues.

Inform the school principal if you have concerns about a student who might be suicidal and make sure that the parents are informed.

For more information about suicide or to learn more about suicide prevention training programs, contact the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research at 780-492-6019 or the Centre for Suicide Prevention at 403-245-3900.

If you are suicidal or concerned about someone who is, contact the Mental Health Help Line at 1-877-303-2642; the Kids Help phone at 1-800-668-6868; or call a local crisis centre or family doctor.



## Myths about mental illness

### **MYTH: Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness.**

**Reality:** A mental illness is not a character flaw. It is an illness that has nothing to do with being weak or lacking willpower. Although people with mental illnesses can play a big part in their own recovery, they did not choose to become ill, and they are not lazy because they cannot just “snap out of it.”

### **MYTH: If I seek help for a mental health issue, others might think I’m a wimp or even crazy.**

**Reality:** Seeking appropriate help is a sign of strength, not weakness. No one should delay getting treatment for a mental health problem that is not getting better, just as one would not wait to take care of a medical condition that needed treatment. The wisest, most courageous way to cope is to seek help, especially since early treatment can produce more positive results.

### **MYTH: Mental illness is a single, rare disorder.**

**Reality:** Mental illness is not a single disease but a broad classification that contains many disorders. Anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, personality disorders, eating disorders and attention deficit disorders are life altering for millions of Canadians.

### **MYTH: People with mental illness never get better.**

**Reality:** With the right kind of help, people with mental illnesses often recover and go on to lead healthy, productive lives. While the illness may not go away, the symptoms associated with it can be controlled.

### **MYTH: People with mental illness are poor and/or less intelligent.**

**Reality:** Many studies show that most people with a mental illness have average or above-average intelligence. Mental illness, like physical illness, can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, social class or income level.

# Assessing youth mental health



Assessing youth mental health is a complex process that should be done by a qualified health care professional. However, if you recognize symptoms or have concerns about the mental health of a colleague or student, initiating dialogue on the matter is an important first step.

The youth mental health quiz below can be completed by a student or in discussion with a concerned adult. The stress test is for information only and is not a diagnostic test.

## Youth mental health quiz

This quiz is designed to help you identify whether a youth might have a mental health issue that requires attention. Remember that everyone experiences some hard times or bad days, but if any of these symptoms affect a student's ability to function well and enjoy life over a period of time longer than two or three weeks, the student needs help. (See page 19)

Have you...

1. Had low self esteem—felt worthless, rejected, helpless or hopeless?
2. Had a major lack of energy or interest in daily activities?
3. Suddenly become very quiet or withdrawn?
4. Had significant decline in your school performance?
5. Had trouble concentrating/thinking clearly?
6. Had repeated sudden outbursts of anger or emotion over relatively small things?
7. Experienced serious eating or sleeping problems?
8. Had a noticeable decline in personal hygiene?
9. Felt that you are being watched or persecuted by others?
10. Had very negative thoughts, blamed yourself for things you cannot control, or considered suicide?
11. Been cutting, burning or doing other self-injury?
12. Been hearing voices or seeing things that others do not?

# Stress test

Stress can be difficult to understand. The emotional chaos it causes can make our daily lives miserable. It can also impair our physical health, sometimes drastically. Strangely, we are not always aware that we are under stress because the habits, attitudes and signs that can alert us to problems have become familiar, and sometimes unrecognizable.

Find your stress level right now by completing this test:

Do you frequently	Yes	No
Neglect your diet?		
Try to do everything yourself?		
Blow up easily?		
Seek unrealistic goals?		
Fail to see the humour in situations others find funny?		
Act rudely?		
Make a big deal of everything?		
Look to other people to make things happen?		
Have difficulty making decisions?		
Avoid people whose ideas are different from your own?		
Keep everything inside?		
Neglect exercise?		
Have few supportive relationships?		
Use sleeping pills without a doctor's approval?		
Get angry when you are kept waiting?		
Get too little rest?		
Ignore stress symptoms?		
Put things off until later?		
Think there is only one right way to do something?		
Fail to build relaxation time into your day?		

If you answered yes to six or more questions, it may be time to address your stress.

# Get help

## Types of help

The Canadian Mental Health Association advocates for all types of care that help people find optimal mental health. The treatments that a doctor prescribes could include one or more of the following:

- Medication
- Psychotherapy and/or counselling
- Alternative/complementary methods
- Community support services

Just as there are different causes and symptoms of mental illness, there are also many different ways to treat it.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact your local crisis line. This number can be found in the front of your phone book. If attempted suicide is a possibility, call 911—this situation is an emergency.

Alberta's 24-hour Mental Health Help Line is 1-877-303-2642

## Talk to your doctor

The first step to getting help begins by visiting your family doctor. Talking to a doctor as soon as possible about any mental health concern can clarify options for assistance and determine, or rule out, any physical causes for mental health issues.

Although it's sometimes uncomfortable or frightening to talk about, the sooner you seek help, the better prepared you will be to manage a mental illness. Reaching out also reminds us that we are not alone—there are professionals with expertise who can help.

If you don't have a regular family doctor, there are other options for accessing mental health professionals:

- Go to a walk-in clinic or local hospital emergency room.
- Call Alberta's 24-hour Mental Health Help Line at 1-877-303-2642 for confidential information and referrals.
- Call Health Link Alberta, a 24-hour advice and health information line staffed by registered nurses:
  - (403) 943-5465 in Calgary;
  - (780) 408-5465 in Edmonton; or
  - 1-866-408-5465, toll free from anywhere in Alberta.

Remember, mental illnesses are treatable, so asking for help is critical to regaining optimum mental health. Healthcare professionals can work with you to determine the problem and prescribe the best treatment options for you.

## Psychiatric care and counselling

Psychotherapy and counselling are valuable components of most mental health treatment programs.

**Psychiatrists** are mental health professionals who may diagnose, prescribe medication and provide psychotherapy for people with serious illnesses. A doctor's referral is required for psychiatric assessment and therapy.

**Psychologists** can provide support and psychotherapies, such as cognitive therapy, that help patients learn to effectively change their thinking, feelings and behaviour. Psychologists work on a broad range of issues and often specialize in a particular type of psychology.

**Counsellors** can also provide support, resources and assistance to students or others who need help making positive changes and/or informed choices in their lives. The counsellor will talk with the person to get a clear idea of the problem and will then be able to offer treatment options.

**Social workers** help people deal with personal and social problems, either directly or by planning or implementing programs that benefit groups or communities.

## Medication

Medication can be a crucial component of the treatment of certain mental illnesses. Physicians and psychiatrists are medical doctors who assess a person's condition, work with patients to determine a diagnosis, and prescribe medication and/or other treatments necessary for that person to get well.



Because everyone is different, no one treatment or medication works the same for every person. Sometimes, patients must try different medications until they find the right one that makes them feel better without disruptive side effects. Furthermore, psychiatric medication can take some time to stabilize a mental illness. While experimenting with medications can be frustrating, it is worthwhile following through to find the medication(s) that work.

## Additional methods

There is a wide range of alternative methods to improve mental health; however, these methods should not be a substitute for a physician's diagnosis or treatment. Some examples of alternative treatments are physical exercise, yoga and meditation, all of which help people relax and improve their mood.

Some employers offer assistance programs as a part of an employee benefit package. Many of these programs offer counselling for all family members.

Exploring spiritual options at one's place of worship can provide people with additional support and add purpose to their lives.

Self-help groups give people in similar situations a chance to advise and support one other.

Nutritional counsellors can provide education on making healthy food choices for a balanced diet to improve overall health. Naturopathic counselling emphasizes the body's potential to heal itself, and focuses on prevention and balance.

## CMHA programs and services

When facing a mental illness in yourself, a colleague or a student, it's important to know that you are not alone. And while our world has gotten bigger and seemingly more impersonal, it's helpful to know that there are many people who work to help others cope with mental illness.

CMHA programs and services are available through regional offices in communities throughout Alberta. Many regions offer programs for children and youth.

### CMHA provincial offices

#### *CMHA Alberta Division*

Phone: (780) 482-6576

[www.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.cmha.ab.ca)

320 Capital Place, 9707 110 St. NW, Edmonton, AB T5K 2L9

#### *The Centre for Suicide Prevention*

Phone: (403) 245-3900

[www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca)

Suite 320, 1202 Centre Street SE, Calgary, AB T2G 5A5

The centre provides information, training, and research support to mental health professionals and the general public interested in understanding suicide.

## **CMHA regional offices**

### ***Wood Buffalo Region (Fort McMurray, AB)***

Phone: (780) 743-1053

[www.woodbuffalo.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.woodbuffalo.cmha.ab.ca)

10011 Franklin Avenue, Suite 302 Fort McMurray, AB T9H 2K7

### ***Northwest Region (Grande Prairie, AB)***

Phone: (780) 539-4681

[www.grandeprairie.cmha.ca](http://www.grandeprairie.cmha.ca)

9713 100 Avenue, Grande Prairie, AB T8V 0T5

### ***Edmonton Region (Edmonton, AB)***

Phone: (780) 414-6300

[www.cmha-edmonton.ab.ca](http://www.cmha-edmonton.ab.ca)

800 Harley Court 10045 111 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5K 2M5

### ***East Central Region (Camrose, AB)***

Phone: (780) 672-2570

[www.camrose.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.camrose.cmha.ab.ca)

4870 51 Street, Camrose, AB T4V 1S4

### ***Central Alberta Region (Red Deer, AB)***

Phone: (403) 342-2266

[www.reddeer.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.reddeer.cmha.ab.ca)

5017 50 Avenue, Red Deer, AB T4N 4B2

### ***Calgary Region (Calgary, AB)***

Phone: (403) 297-1700

[www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca](http://www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca)

Suite 400, 1202 Centre Street SE, Calgary, AB T2G 5A5

### ***Lethbridge Region (Lethbridge, AB)***

Phone: (403) 329-4775

[www.lethbridge.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.lethbridge.cmha.ab.ca)

426 6 Street S, Lethbridge, AB T1J 2C9

### ***South East Region (Medicine Hat, AB)***

Phone: (403) 504-1811

[www.ser.cmha.ab.ca](http://www.ser.cmha.ab.ca)

Suite 204, 1865 Dunmore Road SE, Medicine Hat, AB, T1A 1Z8

## Useful links and resources

### Mental health and high school

[www.cmha.ca/highschool](http://www.cmha.ca/highschool)

This website provides information for students, teachers and parents on the mental health needs of high school students.

### Mind your mind

[www.mindyourmind.ca](http://www.mindyourmind.ca)

This website provides the necessary info, resources and skills to enable youth to reach out, to get help for themselves and to give help to their friends who may be struggling with stress, mental health issues, self-harming behaviours or suicidal thoughts. This site eliminates the stigma associated with mental illness by reframing perceptions, disregarding stereotypes and equipping youth with the knowledge and information they need to effect change.

### Children's mental health

[http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content\\_page.asp?cid=2-29&lang=1](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=2-29&lang=1)

This site offers helpful information on how to help and support children who are exhibiting difficult behaviour or going through a family breakup. Also addressed is the importance of self-esteem and ways in which parents can nurture it in their children. It also offer tips and techniques to help children overcome irrational fears and teach them how to protect themselves.



### Alberta Health Services – Mental health and addiction

[www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca)

Alberta Health Services is responsible for the delivery of mental health medical treatment in Alberta. Facilities and contact information can be found on their website.

# Take action to make a difference

## Find balance

In today's fast-paced world, most people know that maintaining a balanced life can be difficult but that balance is important for sustaining good health.

Perceptions about health are changing. The World Health Organization now defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being," not merely "the absence of disease or infirmity." Within this context, fostering our mental health every day—not just when we are feeling pressured or unwell—is an important factor in our overall well-being and that of our students.

Characteristics of good mental health include:

### *The ability to enjoy life*

Enjoying life can come from simple things such as focusing on the positive aspects of life and accepting that some things can't be changed.

### *Resilience*

Life can be full of tough times. One simple way to build resilience is to encourage yourself, your colleagues and your students to learn from difficult times.

### *Balance*

A balanced life usually comes from a realization that there are many facets to life that are important and deserve attention.

### *Self-actualization*

Make a plan to use your best abilities to enhance your life. Above all, value yourself and believe you're worth caring for, and model this behaviour to your students.

### *Flexibility*

Flexibility comes from a sense that change is a fact of life. Accepting other points of view helps one adapt and make the most of life.

# Ways to help those with a mental illness

## Volunteer and advocate

Volunteering is an excellent way to broaden your social support network and keep your mind active by learning new things. It is an easy way to build connections with your local community; it also gives you an opportunity to share your knowledge and experiences, make a positive difference, and feel good about yourself.

Most non-profit organizations rely on the dedication of volunteers. Mental health charities are no different. The Canadian Mental Health Association relies on volunteers to help provide programs to the thousands of people who depend on its services.

You can be an advocate for people with mental illness by fulfilling a volunteer role, or simply when interacting with friends, students, family or other members of your community. There is an ongoing need to publicly dispel myths and support mental health initiatives through letters to the media and MLAs.

Volunteering and advocacy benefit you and help strengthen Alberta's mental health sector.

## Host a mental health event

Talking about mental health is a crucial step to reducing the silence and stigma associated with mental illness. Share the knowledge you've gained, or, if you're comfortable doing so, share your personal experiences with others whenever the opportunity is right.

Hosting a fun event to raise awareness and support for mental illness is a novel way to get people talking. Rally friends or coworkers together for activities you enjoy and have a great time while giving back to the community. You might get value from hosting a mental health or pamper party to treat friends and family to some relaxation. A corporate challenge event to gather pledges can support mental health initiatives while improving the public image of teachers and schools. Use your imagination and creativity to come up with an event idea.

Contact your local office of the Canadian Mental Health Association or Jonathan Tegtmeyer (1-800-232-7208) at the Alberta Teachers' Association to share your vision and discuss how we can help you with planning and implementing your idea.

## Donate

The Canadian Mental Health Association wants to empower people to live with better mental health and break the stigma of mental illness.

Its plan is to change the face of mental illness. To do this, it needs support in the form of donations. The economic cost of mental illness in Canada is more than \$14 billion annually—second only to cancer. Donations make a significant difference in sustaining core programs, enhancing specialized supports and developing mental health innovations at CMHA.

Alberta's teachers recognize the importance of this work, and through the ATA and its locals, they are contributing to the important work of the CMHA in Alberta.

Because one in five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, chances are you or someone you know or teach will be affected by it. Share the responsibility.





# Healthy minds. Bright futures.



**The Alberta  
Teachers' Association**



**CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION**  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

