



## Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Students in High School: A Review of the Literature

### Key Concepts

- ◇ Schools are at the front line for identifying adolescents with mental health needs.
- ◇ Mental health issues have been identified as both the greatest health needs of students and the least serviced.
- ◇ One in five students experience significant mental health issues, most of these are undiagnosed and untreated.
- ◇ Academic, emotional, behavioural and social needs are interconnected and interventions must address all of these.
- ◇ Anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour disorders are the most common mental health problems in adolescents.
- ◇ Depression and anxiety in adolescents often manifests itself in acting out behaviours not seen in adults.
- ◇ Increased school connectedness and engagement lead to improved mental health and academic achievement.



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Mental health needs are the most common health problem facing schools today. One in five students have mental health issues; however the majority never seek services and go undiagnosed. Anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour disorders are the most prevalent mental illnesses in youth and have a significant impact on the psychological, physical, social and academic functioning. The complex development of mental health needs results from interactions among genetic, personal and environmental factors all of which are out of personal control. Many develop early and lead to ingrained patterns of behaviour, thinking and coping that are not conducive to academic success. Others arise after situations of excess stress such as a traumatic event that overwhelms the individual's ability to cope effectively. Difficulties in the areas of attention, decision-making, and emotional and behavioural self-regulation are frequent indicators while more subtle signs include declining academic performance, avoidance of situations or people, changes in peer groups, and increases in at-risk behaviour. Early intervention and ongoing support for identified mental health needs can greatly diminish negative psychological, educational and social outcomes. Academic, emotional, behavioural and social needs are intertwined and interventions to support one must also support the others. Schools are positioned to play a prominent role in recognizing and responding to the mental health needs of students and can have significant impact on their overall health and wellbeing.

Small group and individual interventions are necessary aspects of support and treatment for students with mental health needs. Recent findings indicate that a sense of school connectedness has a significant positive impact which contributes to greater academic and social success. School connectedness refers to the creation of a school and classroom environment that engages students through relationships and a sense of belonging. It is dependent on high, manageable expectations of academic success, perceived support by teachers, and safe school environments. Teacher-student relationships are at the heart of school connectedness, small actions by teachers such as noticing absences, telling students they were missed or attentive listening lead to increased engagement even in students who appeared resistant or rejecting of teacher efforts to reach out though they may be unable to reciprocate. Due to the stigma towards mental health needs, student help seeking behaviour is low. Increasing understanding can ensure that struggling students are identified and receive the necessary supports and services. Creating a positive climate in the school that enhances relationships and promotes positive outcomes can lead to student engagement and academic and social suc-



Understanding why students act the way they do is an essential part of the shift away from correcting and responding to unwanted behaviour to teaching students the desired, adaptive behaviour. The effectiveness of teacher support in all areas rests on getting to know the students and developing caring relationships. Providing accommodations such as flexible timelines, prearranged breaks, and exit plans support student learning. Students with mental health needs are not predictable or consistent learners and require attunement to their needs and adaptive responsiveness. Effective and engaging instruction lead to significant improvements in behaviour. Students with externalized behaviour receive less instruction time than their peers and interaction frequently focuses on behaviour rather than curriculum. An increased focus on academic instruction and a decreased focus on disruptive behaviour leads to significant academic and behavioural improvement. Advocating for students or supporting them in advocating for themselves is a further way in which teachers can support students who many not have the skills, motivation or perceived competence to speak up for themselves. Teachers are often the only professionals involved in a youth's life and through early identification of needs and referral for services, can ensure that students receive necessary interventions.

Teachers and schools play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of their students. Mental health needs are prevalent in the classroom and are as important to address as physical and academic needs to ensure student success. Universal programs should focus on reducing stigma and improving knowledge, understanding, and help-seeking behaviour. Programs targeted at small groups and individuals must address both academic and health outcomes. The creation of positive and supportive environments with caring relationships, effective instruction and consistent expectations have the most positive impact on student health, wellbeing, and outcomes. Teachers and schools do make a difference.

*“...students with emotional and behaviour disorders identified that they appreciated and valued caring behaviour from teachers even when they did not acknowledge it or seemed to go as far as to reject it...long standing histories of chaotic or non-caring relationships make it difficult for students with mental health needs to internalize or accept the caring of teachers or to reciprocate in a healthy manner despite their desire to do so.”*



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