

MODULE 4.1

HOW SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS

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How schools help students

Objectives

- School staff have a shared understanding of their role (including boundaries), in supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties.
- School has policies and processes for recognising and supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties, including strategies to help students remain engaged in their schooling.

Outcomes

School leadership, student wellbeing and MindMatters Action team – these outcomes enable staff to explore expectations of staff, policies and procedures:

- Review current school policy, procedures and boundaries for staff supporting students with mental health difficulties.
- Ensure that staff across the school understand policies.
- Understand how to create school policies and procedures as well as strategies to help students remain engaged in their schooling.

All staff:

- Understand that school staff, through their everyday interactions, can make significant contributions to the lives of individual students experiencing mental health difficulties.
- Enhance their understanding of their role and boundaries for supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties.
- General awareness of the type of mental health difficulties schools typically deal with.
- Staff benefit from clearly understanding their role, including boundaries, when supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties.

Key messages

- Schools are faced with a wide range of emotional, behavioural and social difficulties related to young people's mental health that are of concern. Mental health issues are relatively common in young people and these impact on individuals and the broader school communities.
- It's important to know that schools and individual staff can make substantial differences to the lives of individual students at risk of or experiencing mental health difficulties. For staff, this may be through their 'everyday' role as a teacher such as demonstrating an interest in the student's wellbeing, being approachable, being empathetic, developing good listening skills, being non-judgemental when a student tells you of difficulties, knowing where the student can get help and helping them (where possible) to access it, and where possible making allowances for individual students.
- The school's policies and procedures will assist school staff in supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties most effectively.
- Staff benefit from clearly understanding their role, including boundaries, when supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties.

Student mental health affects school core business



Students with good mental health and wellbeing are better equipped to cope with the everyday demands of school life such as attending class, forming and maintaining supportive peer relationships, completing assignments and achieving academic success.

Many programs have demonstrated that enhancing young people's social and emotional competencies also helps them to learn and achieve academically. On the other hand, students who experience ongoing mental health difficulties tend to have poorer records of school attendance, behaviour and academic performance and are more likely to drop out of school early.

For this reason student mental health can be considered to be part of a school's core business, and directly related to its success.

Note that the relationship between mental health and academic achievement can also run the other way: taking part in school activities and achieving educational success can be a protective factor for young people by increasing their sense of competence.

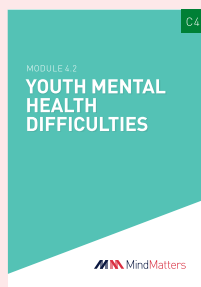
The extent of the mental health challenge

Schools today are grappling with a host of complex mental health and social issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying and violence. This is consistent with the findings from epidemiological studies, which indicate cause for concern regarding the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians. In a 2007 survey of 10,000 Australian school students, 40 per cent were identified as having low levels of social and emotional wellbeing, with 18 per cent indicating they were lonely and 31 per cent stressed. 48 per cent reported they had difficulty calming down (Bernard et al., 2007).



In the recent 2013 Mission Australia Youth Survey (Perrens et al., 2013) involving over 14,000 young people aged 15–19 years, approximately one-fifth were found to be experiencing high levels of psychological distress. When survey participants were also asked to identify the issues they were most concerned about, the following four were identified in order:

- coping with stress
- school or study problems
- body image, and
- depression.



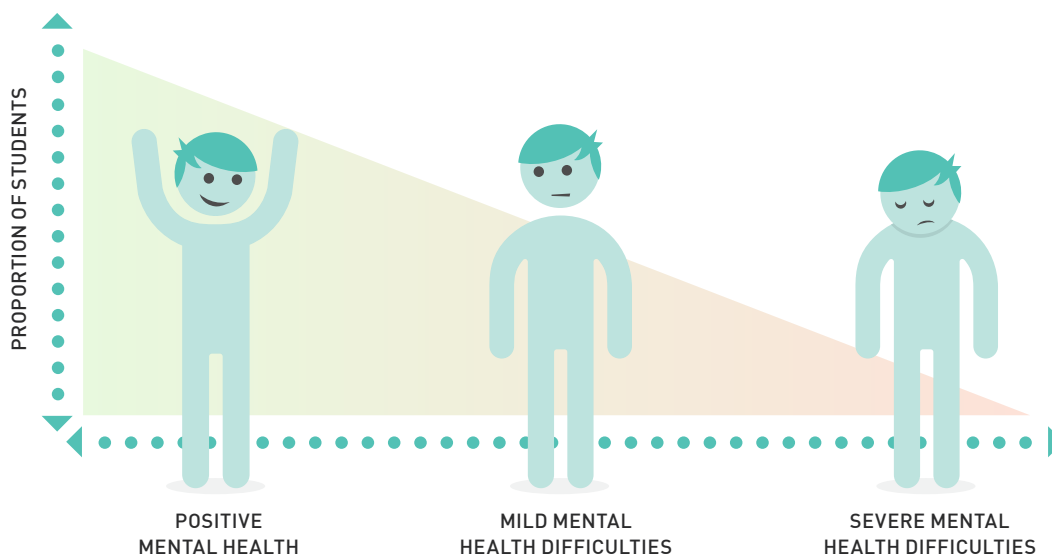
Module 4.2 Youth mental health difficulties

This module will help staff understand the mental health continuum and differentiate between common difficulties and more serious disorders.

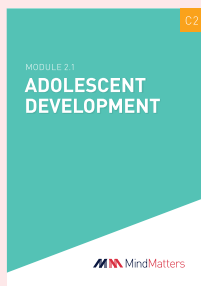
Which young people are likely to have mental health issues?

Experts define mental health difficulties as a broad range of cognitive, emotional and behavioural difficulties that cause concern or distress. In other words, mental health difficulties affect how a young person thinks, feels and behaves.

There are young people in all schools right now who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Staff members may guess at which ones are struggling; however, the reality is that mental health difficulties can be experienced by anyone, **at different times, and for different lengths of time**, and be influenced by a wide range of circumstances.



It is also important to remember that an individual's mental health is not fixed or static and can change over time. Depending upon a whole range of circumstances, an individual can move back and forth along the continuum at different times in their lives. This is particularly the case with young people who are more prone to 'ups' and 'downs' in their mood and outlook as they deal with biological and psychological and social changes that come with adolescence.



Module 2.1 Adolescent development

By explaining the cognitive, emotional and social changes that adolescents typically experience, this module helps staff recognise and anticipate normal adolescent behaviour.

Is mental health the concern of school staff?

While academic research has found strong links between student mental health and student behaviour, attendance and academic performance, these links are becoming more evident to school staff.

Awareness of youth mental health issues in the community has increased over the past decade, and schools and staff are increasingly recognising that individual student behaviour and academic performance is often influenced by their mental health (their capacity to manage stress and deal with life challenges). Not surprisingly, school staff are also now more likely to see a link between student mental health and their own mental wellbeing.

Although staff are understandably concerned about youth mental health they often report being unsure of what they can do when a student is experiencing difficulties. Research with staff (and students) indicates that they are often looking for practical education and 'upskilling' in everyday situations such as how to support a student who is distressed (Graham et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2009).



Wellbeing priorities in schools around the world

The findings from the 2008 Intercamhs survey (Biewener et al., 2009) of 1,200 principals across 27 countries also indicates that school leaders appreciate the significance of student wellbeing with over 80 per cent of the principals surveyed identifying student emotional/mental health as being 'very important' for academic achievement.

When asked to rank the main student mental health and wellbeing issues confronting schools, principals identified the following three in order of priority: (1) bullying and harassment, (2) impulse control, and (3) anger management.

With respect to training, education materials and resourcing supports the following four were given highest priority: (1) student and family supports for those with serious problems; (2) programs and strategies to teach students social and emotional competencies; (3) knowledge of effective promotion and prevention strategies and implementation; and (4) how to identify mental health problems early.

The critical role of school staff

Because of their ongoing contact with students, school staff are well placed to notice behavioural, emotional, cognitive and even physical changes that may be of concern. This may be noticing a marked drop off in school performance, attendance or behavior; observing a student becoming increasingly teary, angry or aggressive; observing a student becoming increasingly disengaged with school and peers; or observing a student who is flat or depressed and showing no interest in things they would normally enjoy doing.



At times, school staff will be aware of some background factors that may be triggering some of these concerning behaviours; for example, knowing that the student is experiencing some family upheaval or has been recently rejected romantically. Such behaviours may or may not reflect a strong reaction to common life experiences or stressors, or the normal ups and downs of adolescence.



We know that young people who are experiencing difficulties are often reluctant to talk about their problems or to take steps to get help for a range of reasons (including embarrassment and concerns about what others will think, as well as being unsure where to get help). Sometimes they may think they are the only person that is experiencing such problems or thoughts. This is the point where school staff are in a powerful position to make a significant contribution to an individual student's mental health and wellbeing.

Staff are able to make significant contributions through their 'everyday' role as a teacher such as:

- demonstrating an interest in the student's wellbeing
- being approachable
- being empathetic
- developing good listening skills
- being non-judgemental when a student tells you of difficulties
- knowing where the student can get help and helping them (where possible) access it
- where possible making allowances for individual students.

MindMatters emphasises school support for students experiencing mental health difficulties because of its impact on student performance, attendance and behaviour (as well as staff morale).



The critical role of school staff is in recognising behaviours, emotions or thinking patterns of concern and supporting young people experiencing such difficulties to get help when needed and to remain engaged in their schooling. Essentially, staff can be part of the early warning system that enables the young person to get timely support before the difficulties become too entrenched or take too much of a toll on the student, family and school.

For school staff this may be a new and challenging concept.

Understanding boundaries and roles

It's also important to keep in mind that there are boundaries that need to be placed around the role of staff members. When a general staff member recognises behaviours of concern they should discuss them with more experienced or specialist staff, who can then work with the student and family to clarify areas of concern and make decisions about possible referral options. All schools will have their own procedure and policies for how staff should handle concerns.



The school staff member's role in early recognition of behaviours of concern is highly valued by families and mental health professionals as it provides significant information about the student within the school environment. Schools can best support students by having strong partnerships with families and external community agencies who will be able to provide mental health expertise and support the school in continuing to engage the student.

Module 4.8 Building support pathways

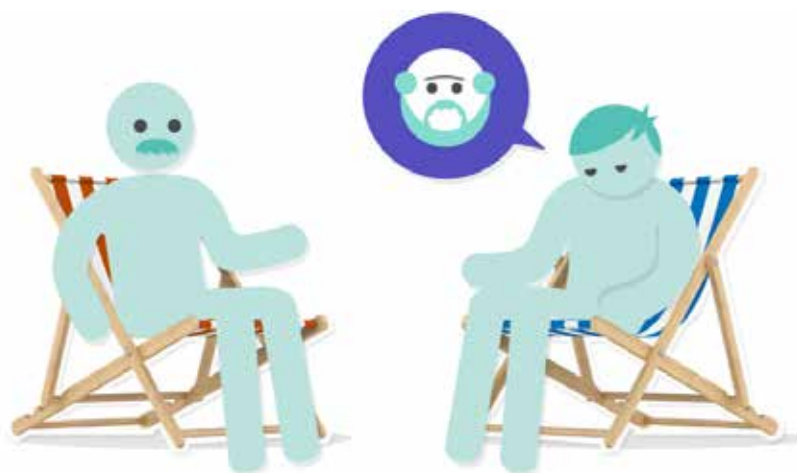
This module provides advice on how you can strengthen relationships with mental health service providers in order to maximise the benefit for students.

The main role for school staff is to observe and support young people. General school staff do not need to be mental health experts or counsellors. Staff shouldn't seek to diagnose or solve mental health issues, but rather approach their work in a way that supports positive student mental health and understand their role within the bigger picture of the family, school and the health professionals who can provide support to students when needed. Importantly, the various education policies will guide schools and staff around their roles and identify appropriate supports.

Providing support through day-to-day interactions

There are many things school staff can do in their day-to-day interactions with students that will make significant contributions to the lives of individuals experiencing mental health difficulties:

- Be viewed by students as approachable – this means listening, not judging and taking a general interest in each student as an individual.
- Show empathy when students express concerns or experience difficulties.



- Notice early when something is not right for the student and check this out with them. This relies upon knowledge of the individual student as well as an understanding of adolescent development and awareness of how the student is compared to his or her peers.
- Know where students can be referred for further support if required. Be aware of the types of supports available – within the school and in the community – and encourage students to seek support from mental health professionals or school staff members with a wellbeing role.
- Where possible, be flexible in your expectations when students are experiencing difficulties. Consider making allowances for students when they are struggling with school tasks, for example, giving an extension for homework, allowing them to work in a quiet space rather than the classroom or providing alternative tasks.
- Let students know that they are able to talk about non-curriculum topics.
- Place boundaries around what you are able to do and when you might need to suggest other supports.
- Manage the student's expectations about what the staff member can and cannot do, particularly in relation to limits of confidentiality.
- Be aware of your school's response to when you have concerns about a student.

Many of these tips are explored more fully in other MindMatters modules.

Relationships and belonging

1.4

This module explains why relationships and belonging are so fundamental to mental health, and encourages schools to develop more inclusive environments.

When should I be concerned?

4.3

This module provides a simple framework that staff can use when observing students and deciding if given behaviours should be a cause for concern when they arise.

Helping individual students

4.4

This module contains advice on how staff can approach a conversation with a student when they become concerned about the student's mental health, including managing confidentiality.

Who can help?

4.7

This module provides an overview of the types of mental health services that schools can access in order to expand their mental health capabilities.

Creating effective policies and procedures

While a successful whole school approach relies on the actions of individuals throughout the school, impact is maximised when that action is coordinated through a clear, simple and usable set of policies and procedures.

Policy considerations

It's important for school staff to consider:

- existing expectations and guidelines
- review of data
- clarity of staff roles and responsibilities
- staff mental health training
- the wider school community
 - parents
 - students
 - mental health professionals.



Existing expectations and guidelines

When developing a whole school approach to mental health, a good start is to review the policies, processes and supports currently in place. This may require the formation of a group of key stakeholders including staff, student wellbeing staff, parents and carers — as well as community members such as agency staff and members of cultural groups. Staff should also consider how students can further inform the group, as students are the key stakeholders and may have valuable perspectives about ways the school can provide support.



Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- How does our policy link into national, state or territory and sector expectations and guidelines around supporting students with mental health difficulties?
- How do we ensure that policies are communicated and understood across the whole school community?



For more information on data see [Module 1.2 Using data for planning and success](#).

Reviewing data

Schools should review their mental health strategy regularly. Ideally this review is informed by data that demonstrates trends or impacts to date.

Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- What are some of the current issues the school is facing in supporting students? What patterns exist? Are some issues new or emerging? How does the school's experience fit with other local schools and schools in other regions?
- What data do you already have in relation to student mental health difficulties, for example visits to counsellor?
- Where is data held? Who has access?
- What is the data saying? What are the gaps?
- What are the implications for action?

Staff roles and responsibilities

It's important to have clear processes and referral pathways, and to ensure that staff have confidence in them. Explore staff beliefs about their role in supporting students with mental health difficulties, and define clearly the responsibilities and boundaries of different staff.

School duty of care responsibilities for staff and students will need to be balanced with the needs of students experiencing mental health difficulties.

Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- What are the varying responsibilities school staff will have, for example, student support staff, teachers, coordinators, wellbeing staff, leadership team, canteen manager, volunteers?
- How do staff members feel about their role of supporting students with mental health difficulties? Are some roles clearer than others?
- How to balance the staff's role in supporting students with their other roles? How do schools ensure appropriate boundaries between roles?



Staff mental health training

All school staff benefit from mental health training.

For instance, knowing when to act can be difficult for staff. Is it when the parent or student raises concerns? Is it when the staff member notices something? Or is it when something significant happens? Messages around early intervention would suggest it's best to act early to prevent issues becoming bigger, however staff may tend to wait and see what happens unless they have had specific training on the benefits of acting early.

Additionally, viewing behaviour through a mental health lens will help the school to develop the most useful and appropriate response when issues arise (for example, a student turning up to school substance affected). However, teasing out what requires a mental health response versus (or in conjunction with) another type of response can be challenging for schools and may lead to some disagreement between staff unless they have had training in the fundamentals of mental health.

Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- How do we help staff share their concerns? How well do we do this now?
- What is the ideal process when a staff member has a concern about the student? Where is this documented?
- How can we help staff learn about mental health in general, and school processes specifically?

The wider school community

Parents, families and carers

The role of parents in supporting young people with mental health difficulties can't be ignored when schools are developing strategies and plans to support students. This can be challenging for school staff to manage at times and priorities may tend to go to supporting the student.



Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- What are families' expectations about the school supporting their young people? Do families seek this help from the school already?
- What capacity do we have to respond to these expectations?
- How does the school break down stigma about mental health issues so that students and staff and families can seek help?

Students

Including the student in any planning and strategy development is necessary to ensure their ongoing engagement with the school. At times of crisis or concern it can be easy for adults to take over and determine what the student needs. This can be disempowering and unhelpful despite the adults' best intentions. Finding ways to act early, listen to the student and engage the student actively in decision making where appropriate will be more successful. Staff may need support and training in order to do this well.

Confidentiality around mental health difficulties can be problematic. On the one hand all staff involved with the student need to have some knowledge of the student's difficulties in order to provide appropriate support. On the other hand the student has a right to privacy. Negotiations between the student, parent, school and any mental health professional can help find the most appropriate ways to protect the student's confidentiality while also ensuring that school staff are equipped to support the student and family. (Note that the practicalities of this can lead to tension and conflict at the school, particularly if staff are not well trained and fully conversant with risks and issues around confidentiality.)



Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- How are students encouraged to share concerns about themselves or others?
- How does the school involve students in reviewing policies and processes related to students with mental health difficulties?
- How are in and out of school supports promoted to students? How are students involved in reviewing, creating and publicising these agencies or supports (including online supports)?

Mental health professionals



The role of mental health professionals in supporting the school and engaging in planning and development of strategies cannot be underestimated; however the availability of mental health professionals may vary between communities.

Consider the following questions when developing policy:

- What kinds of support can be provided by in-school student support services (for example school psychologists and social workers) and how are they currently engaging with the school? What constraints do they currently have?
- What connections do we already have with local health and community agencies? How do we decide what agency is most appropriate? How do we engage the student and family member in these decisions?
- How are online resources and apps promoted?

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

References and key readings

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