

module 1
**What is
mental health?**

adapt



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Montréal Branch



educational activities booklet

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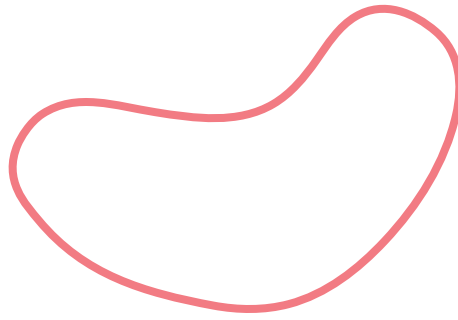
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Foreword

Adap•t is a pedagogical tool specifically designed to equip teenagers aged 12 to 18 years to better understand how important their mental health is in order to better manage and maintain a good personal balance. Intended for teachers and psychosocial service providers, this module proposes educational activities that encourage development of personal and social skills such as **self-esteem**, **stress management** and **problem solving**. The activities also enable students to better understand the notion of mental health and to adopt healthy lifestyle habits.

Moreover, this educational material fosters harmonious interpersonal relationships and encourages students to address problems, break down their isolation pattern and ask for help.

a unique tool!

This document uses a **flexible modular approach that is easy to implement**; activities range in duration and can be carried out in class, during lunchtime or on special theme days.

The document's various components can be **coupled with a broader intervention program** or one that is already implemented in your school.

Introduction to mental health



Mental health involves a balance in all aspects of life, which enhances the ability to enjoy life and deal with challenges that arise. This includes learning better in school, working more productively, forming and maintaining positive relationships with other people, contributing to the community and performing practical routine tasks related to personal care, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, recreation and spiritual needs.

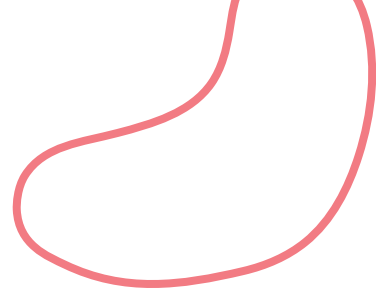
Talking about mental health with young people helps them make connections between daily choices and overall well-being. Teaching teenagers to recognize components of good mental health helps them develop healthy lifestyles and therefore, become equipped to deal with the challenges they will face throughout their lives.

Having good mental health means also being able to think clearly and realistically about yourself and others, and asking for help when needed. Therefore, it can be defined as how a person thinks, acts and feels when faced with life situations.¹

adolescence: a period of transformation and metamorphosis

The process of identity construction is not simple; it involves a large amount of information with which teenagers must learn to cope. In this regard, the influence of family as well as social, educational, cultural and environmental influences exercise a certain amount of pressure on young people, who will tend to question them. Some adults may be bothered by the behaviour of teenagers, who are often only experiencing emotions specific to their state of transition. It is important to understand that when faced with difficulties, young people are not just being lazy or acting out of ill will, as some adults are quick to assume. They may just be finding it difficult to make the transition between adolescence and the adult world. This is why it is important to show empathy and understanding, and to avoid giving in to the temptation of blaming them for their apparent lack of realism, energy or motivation.

1 Adosanté.org. *Santé mentale*, [http://www.adosante.org/Sante_mentale/03.shtml], [page accessed on January 23, 2012].



when to sound the alarm

Everyone experiences feelings of isolation, solitude or emotional distress at one time or another. These reactions are usually normal and last only a short while. The same applies to teenagers. Most of them go through adolescence without encountering major upheavals and start their adult lives feeling calm and satisfied. However, for some youth, the duration and intensity of feelings of insecurity or distress can seriously impair their academic, social, emotional or cognitive functioning, as well as their capacity to enjoy life. Their distress can take many forms: dropping out of school, using drugs and running away, as well as depression, eating disorders and suicidal behaviours are a few examples.

Overall, we should be concerned in the following circumstances: when a teenager no longer wants to

see his or her friends, especially the ones the teen is usually with all the time; finds everyone stupid, starting with himself or herself; loses interest in things that were once a passion; or has poorer grades in school.

Physical health can also be an important indicator. Too much or not enough sleep, constant fatigue or an eating disorder are telling signs of distress. Sudden hyperactivity and exaggerated or forced euphoria can also camouflage an underlying state of anxiety. Such symptoms should not necessarily be diagnosed as a mental illness, but rather seen as concrete signs of distress. However, when any of these symptoms significantly changes a teenager's behaviour, mood, emotions, thought patterns and perceptions, it may be justified to think of these as early signs of mental health problems or symptoms of mental illness.

protective and vulnerability factors

Protective and vulnerability factors enable detection of positive influences that can enhance mental health or, conversely, contribute to poor mental health.

protective factors

- Self-confidence, self-esteem, social skills
- Psychosocial skills (problem solving, critical thinking, communication, empathy, dealing with emotions)
- Stress management
- Harmonious relationships with family and friends, good parental skills
- Positive interpersonal relationships (being part of a positive peer group), solid social and support networks
- Development of personal potential, self-actualization
- Positive school environment
- Appropriate child development, good personal resources
- Physical activity
- Early intervention, mental health education

vulnerability factors

- Use of psychoactive substances (drugs and/or alcohol)
- Stress, illness
- Violence, abuse, conflict
- Major life events (e.g., loss of a loved one, breakup, separation/divorce of parents, repeated failures, assault, multiple foster placements or moves, etc.)
- Racism, sexism, homophobia
- Early independence
- Family breakup, family problems
- Family history of mental illness
- Absence of intergenerational communication
- Absence of significant figures
- Social isolation
- Poverty, income insecurity, unemployed parent

Leading a workshop

planning ahead

- 1 • **Understand the specific concepts** raised in the workshop; prepare for students' reactions and potential questions.
- 2 • **Identify obstacles** related to workshop facilitation (e.g., student passivity, lack of motivation) and **adapt workshop content** to the various cultural, regional and ethnic characteristics of the students. For instance, you can change the first names of the characters in the activities so students can relate to them.
- 3 • **Plan learning activities** to complement the ones proposed in this module to help students grasp the content in a playful way.
- 4 • **Be aware of your own perceptions of mental health:** By being mindful of what touches you, of your fears and insecurities related to the theme of mental health, you will be better able to understand students' reactions and, consequently, to support them as they learn the basic concepts and coping strategies proposed in the modules.

during the workshop

- 1 • **Don't hesitate to rephrase** or explain a concept several ways, and to use expressions more familiar to students.
- 2 • **Use neutral objects, people or activities:** Using a neutral object, person or activity makes it possible to introduce a theme without the facilitator or students feeling directly involved, while still initiating an open discussion on the topic. For instance, consider a film (the behaviours or thoughts of one of the characters can be discussed), an art-related activity (students can be asked to draw an emotion or make a poster that promotes mental health) or a fictitious individual (students can be asked for their opinion on the behaviours or attitudes of this person).
- 3 • **Share:** Students might appreciate the facilitator sharing personal stories with them; this can help normalize the thoughts, emotions, perceptions and behaviours they have in situations they experience. For example, the facilitator could talk about how she or he felt when beginning high school.
- 4 • **Validate students' understanding:** Encourage students to talk about the concepts using their own words. By expressing their own perceptions, they can then more easily make connections between the activities and their own experiences, and thus benefit even more from the methods and strategies proposed.

suggestions for complementary activities

Puzzles, crosswords, criss-crosses, riddles, charades, word association games

Composing rap or slam

Quizzes, contests

Writing or filling in a comic strip (where the dialogue has been removed)

Writing an article or making an illustration for the school paper

Improvising on a given theme

Designing and developing a theme week with students, related to what they have learned

Producing posters for different themes: students can use their own drawings and text, or choose from an image bank

Using the approach, "What would you say to your best friend in this situation?"

Asking drama, art or English teachers, for example, to help with certain themes

Producing a guide with students about the subject of this module

Using students' work for workshops with other students (e.g., students produce a booklet on stress management that is then given out to students in grade 6)

Leading a guided relaxation, making mandalas, producing a stress management kit

Watching short films: "How would you have reacted if you were such-and-such character? What advice would you give?"



module 1

What is mental health?

The goal of the **What is mental health?** module is to bring awareness to students about the concept of mental health. The activities suggested here will encourage students to ask themselves questions and to identify things they can do to take care of their mental health.



By the end of the module, students will have:

- 1 • thought about the importance of having a good social network
- 2 • identified key people and resources in their environment
- 3 • considered the importance of confiding in someone, should the need arise



Students will also know how to:

- 1 • explain what mental health is in their own words
- 2 • list at least three factors that affect mental health positively and three that affect it negatively
- 3 • name at least one thing they can do to help themselves overcome personal difficulties

activity 1

What is mental health?

time required
20 to 30 minutes

objective

bring awareness to students about the concept of mental health.

suggested approach

- 1 • Ask students to respond to the question, “How would you define good mental health?” Write some of their answers on the board.
Some answers to expect:
Feeling good about yourself, balanced, happy; doing what you like to do; not having any worries; having good relationships with other people.
- 2 • Ask students to form groups of two or three; tell them to come up with a definition of good mental health and to show how it ties into the activity theme.
- 3 • Ask each sub-group (either together or one after the other) to name one person who will go to the board and write down their group’s definition.
- 4 • In a large group, read out the definitions, highlight the key elements of each proposed definition and listen to students’ comments.

remember

Each of us has a more or less accurate idea of the meaning of “mental health,” “feeling good about yourself” or “being happy.” Generally speaking, we can say that good mental health is feeling good about yourself and others.

This involves balancing all aspects of life: physical, mental, emotional, social, family and school.

Opening up to other people and turning to people we trust or to a professional to talk about our concerns are ways to find and keep our personal balance and to feel good about ourselves. It’s such a relief not to feel alone with our questions and concerns.

There is still a lot of stigma surrounding mental illness. This can convey many prejudices and false beliefs. It causes people to feel ashamed to talk about their concerns and thus avoid talking to an adult they trust or to a professional. Yet, seeking help is healthy and positive. It helps us see things more clearly.

discussion points

Good mental health contributes to overall well-being. Mental health is just as important as physical health; in fact, they are interrelated.

Inevitably, there are times when things just don’t go the way we’d like them to. Life is full of changes, challenges and difficulties.

When we’re upset, we can feel sad, anxious, undecided or angry. It’s normal. It happens to everyone. What’s important at that time is to identify what is bothering us so we can understand

why we feel bad and try to find solutions.

There are concrete ways to develop or maintain good mental health. The following activities will help us discover a few. Maybe you’ve already used some of them yourself.

activity 3

The behaviour ladder

time required
30 to 40 minutes

objective

identify behaviours that help or harm mental health.

suggested approach

- 1 • In a large group, ask students the following questions and write some of their answers on the board, dividing them into two columns: harmful factors and helpful factors.
- 2 • What behaviours, habits or attitudes contribute to maintaining or developing good mental health?
- 3 • What behaviours, habits or attitudes can harm it?
Some answers to expect:
Helpful: having good friends; knowing your strengths and weaknesses; expressing your needs and opinions.
Harmful: criticizing everything; staying alone; not talking; experiencing failures; not having friends; fighting with others.
- 4 • Tell students that you'll be going over the list later and ask them to respond individually to the questionnaire **What best describes me?** (p. 19) so they can identify their own attitudes and habits.
- 5 • In a large group, start a discussion about the answers students have given by asking if they liked answering the questionnaire and what it can tell them.
- 6 • Using students' answers, complete the list already written on the board.

remember

Some factors harm mental health and personal balance; others enhance balance and help us feel good about ourselves and others. Here are a few examples:

protective factors

factors that help personal balance

- 1 • self-esteem²
- 2 • self-confidence
- 3 • accurate self-perception³
- 4 • effective stress management
- 5 • personal fulfilment
- 6 • healthy lifestyle habits
- 7 • sports, recreational and creative activities
- 8 • good friends

vulnerability factors

factors that harm personal balance

- 1 • high stress level
- 2 • isolation
- 3 • poor self-perception (that is, seeing yourself as someone with many negative traits)
- 4 • difficult situations (e.g., breakup of a relationship, having a big fight with friends, separation of parents, failure at school)
- 5 • taking psychoactive substances (alcohol and/or other drugs)
- 6 • prolonged illnesses

discussion points

Though we may have behaviours, habits or thoughts that are generally described as “negative,” this does not necessarily mean that our mental health is fragile or in danger.

If you’re not sure, it’s good to talk to someone you trust about what’s bothering you.

Assessing if there are any harmful factors in your life and being able to identify them helps preserve good mental health.

Being aware of factors that contribute to personal balance and that could be integrated into daily life is also a good way of staying in shape mentally. These factors can help offset the more

difficult elements in life and help us deal with them better.

Although we sometimes feel overwhelmed by what’s going on or by the depth of our emotions, this doesn’t mean that we are weak.

We can learn tips to help deal with factors that are harmful to mental health.

² Self-esteem is the assessment and awareness of self-worth.

³ Self-image is the way we perceive ourselves in all facets of life. For more information, see Module 3: Self-esteem.



activity 3



What describes me the best?

Each time you answer TRUE to a question, colour in a circle on the left, starting from the bottom of the ladder.

		<i>true</i>	<i>false</i>
<i>protective factors</i>	<input type="radio"/> I can be proud of myself and of my accomplishments.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> When I make a commitment, I carry it out.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I rarely feel overwhelmed by my workload.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> In general, I'm someone who is calm.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I like doing activities, alone or in a group.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I feel good with my friends.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I have good lifestyle habits* (e.g. sleep, physical activities, eating habits).	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> My friends think I'm sensitive, empathetic*.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I can take things lightly; it's always good to laugh!	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> When I have a disagreement with someone, I deal with it as soon as I can.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> When something bothers me, I'm able to say it.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I can learn from my mistakes and from difficulties I experience.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I adapt well to major changes.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> Overall, I get along with my family.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
<input type="radio"/> I like being around people that I like and with whom I get along well.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F	
<i>vulnerability factors</i>	<input type="radio"/> I tend to compare myself to other people, and it's always to my disadvantage.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> My friends often tell me they think I'm stressed out.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I don't really have good lifestyle habits*.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I often fight with my friends.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> Nobody knows about my problems.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I never know where my school stuff is and that works against me at school.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I worry a lot about the future.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I have the impression that no one understands me.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> I don't have any pastimes or passions; I'm not interested in anything.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes I feel overwhelmed with all my responsibilities.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F
	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes I find it hard to know how I feel.	<input type="radio"/> T	<input type="radio"/> F

* Lifestyle habits are habits related to sleep, eating, physical activity and consumption of caffeine, energy drinks, drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.
 † Able to put myself in the other person's shoes, to perceive what he or she feels.

activity 4

My life, with whom do I talk about it?

time required
30 to 40 minutes

objective

identify resources or people you trust and whom you can contact or confide in, if need be.

suggested approach

- 1 • In a large group, ask students what they do when they feel bad or alone, or when they're dealing with a problem to which they can't find a solution. Write their answers on the board.
Some answers to expect:
I cry; I withdraw; I try not to think about my problem anymore; I'm unhappy; I talk to someone about what's bothering me.
- 2 • Remind them that one of the ways to maintain or develop good mental health is to talk about what's happening to them. Therefore, it's important to keep in mind a list of resource people to whom they can turn, should the need arise.
- 3 • Still in a group, ask students to name the **community resources** they know (e.g., Tel-jeunes) and can turn to if they're having a hard time. Write the names of the resources on the board, as well as the type of difficulty each can help with. When you feel that most known resources have been named, complete the list and go to the next step, **after erasing** the board.
- 4 • Then ask them who are the **resource people they can talk to in their school**. (**Make sure you have the contact information of the school's main resource people.**) Ask them to give the names and titles of these resource people, as well as an example of a problem for which students can go see them. Write their answers on the board. When you feel that most resources have been named, complete the list, add the telephone numbers and go on to the next step, but do not erase the board.
- 5 • Ask students to think about and **individually** make lists of **people around them** whom they trust enough to confide in or to ask for help (e.g., parents, friends, uncle).
- 6 • Hand out the sheet **My support network**, which lists the contact information of community resources. Ask students to fill out the section "My school support network" using the information written on the board, as well as the "My personal support network" section.

discussion points

Being alone during moments of distress or when we don't know what to think anymore can be difficult and cause us to be blind to solutions.

Talking about our problems, identifying what is wrong and finding ways to feel better about ourselves and others are ideal ways to find our personal balance and feel good.

When dealing with personal difficulties, it's a good idea to talk with someone we trust or to a resource person at school or

in the community. Some people think this is a sign of weakness. In fact, it's the opposite! Confiding in others about our problems actually indicates a will to make things better. It helps us get to know ourselves better and find ways of feeling better. It's such a relief not to feel alone with our questions and concerns.

For a more complete list of resources, talk to the facilitator. **Don't worry, it's confidential!**



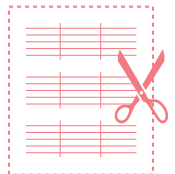
activity 4

My support network



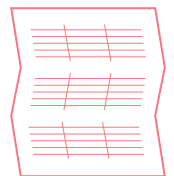
my support network in the community

Resource	Phone	Website
Tel-jeunes	1 800 263-2266 514 600-1002 (text messages)	teljeunes.ca
Kids Help Phone	1 800 668-6868	jeunessejecoute.ca
Suicide Action Montréal	1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)	suicideactionmontreal.org
Drugs: help and referral	514 527-2626	drogue-aidereference.qc.ca
Écoute entraide	514 278-2130	deprimesanonymes.org
Interligne	514 866-0103	interligne.co



my support network at school

Title	Name	Telephone/ Office no.
Teacher		
Educator		
Psychoeducator		
Nurse		
Psychologist		
Social worker		
Student life facilitator		
Other		



my personal support network

Name	Relationship	Telephone/Email

