

- Remind students that mental illness is very common, but not something that a lot of people talk about.
- Remind students that we should also respect the privacy of people who have mental illnesses.
- Students can express themselves in many different ways. Be aware of your responsibilities around disclosure in relation to student self-harm. If you have concerns about a student, speak to your school counsellor.

Topic: Stigma

Considerations

- Stigma around mental health can prevent people from seeking help, so this should be your starting point *before* discussing specific issues.
- Many students don't know what the word "stigma" means, so it needs to be explicitly defined.
 - Stigma is when someone views another person in a negative way based on their circumstances, characteristics, or traits.
 - Stigma is a negative stereotype.
- The lives of people with mental health issues are often plagued by stigma (both social stigma and self-stigma), discrimination, and shame.
- Mental illness is the same as physical illness. If someone breaks their leg, they don't hesitate to see a doctor. However, someone with a mental illness might avoid seeing a doctor because they worry that they'll be judged.
 - There is a mistaken belief that you should be able to control your mental health. An example of this is when people say "Just stop worrying so much" to someone who has an anxiety disorder or is experiencing stress.
- Media portrayals of mental illnesses are often highly inaccurate.
 - People with mental health conditions are often depicted as dangerous, violent, and unpredictable.
 - Depression can be portrayed as a choice or a sign of weakness.
- Stigma-Free Society is a B.C. organization that can provide guest speakers who will visit your class in person or remotely to discuss mental health topics.

Instructional strategies

Strategies to support you in exploring this topic with your students could include the following:

- Many famous celebrities have overcome mental health challenges and talk publicly to help break down stigmas and inspire others to get help or overcome similar challenges.

Have students research a celebrity of their choice who has struggled with mental health.

- What are their stories? How did they overcome their challenges?
- Have students develop a public awareness campaign, creating public service announcements (PSAs; – e.g., video, websites, or posters to put up around the school) that address some sort of stigma or negative stereotype related to mental health.
- Have students discuss examples of health-related stigmas from the past that have changed, such as stigmas around HIV/AIDS or PTSD.
 - Why has public understanding of these issues changed, while other stigmas have remained?
- Have students research a variety of mental health myths and present their findings to the class. For example:
 - Mental illness is “in your head” and you should be able to fix it on your own.
 - People with mental illnesses are violent or delusional (e.g., hear voices).
 - People with mental illnesses need to take powerful medications.

Topic: Coping Strategies

Considerations

- As they go through puberty, students undergo a number of major physical, emotional, and social changes. Difficult situations in their lives can leave students feeling overwhelmed and cause them to experience high levels of stress.
- Each student will respond to stress in different ways. Some students may become quiet and withdrawn, and others may display disruptive behaviours such as arguing or having angry outbursts.
 - While some of these behaviours may be difficult to deal with, responding as calmly and positively as possible will make it easier to help students deal with their stress more productively.
 - If you notice new or unusual behaviours in a student, it is important not to overreact. Most of the stressors that students experience are temporary and do not lead to chronically high levels of stress.
- Focus on strengths.
 - Since adolescents are striving for independence, a focus on strengths resonates with them because it inspires empowerment and agency in relation to health.
 - There is plenty of research that points to the importance of focusing on mental health, as opposed to mental illness, to enhance psychosocial strengths, competencies, and ability to access resources. A narrow focus on mental illness isn't enough.