

Understanding Mental Wellness

Curriculum Guide

COURSE MISSION

To raise awareness that mental health is just as important as physical health, and empower students to take care of their mental health.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Physical health has been a part of schools' curricula for over 150 years which has led to a positive framing of physical health as it relates to a person's life. Educational institutions are just beginning to address mental health in the same way. Mental wellness is an important part of overall health, but mental health is often misunderstood or mistaken for mental illness. This course fills a need as schools seek to incorporate more ways to address the mental health needs of students.

The *Understanding Mental Wellness* course blends evidence-informed content with engaging digital activities. By defining what mental wellness is and modeling positive behaviors this online program teaches students the importance of paying attention to their mental health. This course explores the difference between mental wellness and mental illness, and provides strategies for coping during stress or mental health challenges. The course shows the impact of thought patterns, trauma, stigma, and times of uncertainty. Suicide prevention and when to seek help for yourself or others is also covered.

Six lessons scaffold students' knowledge to build a comprehensive understanding of what mental wellness is and how to maintain or achieve it. Interactive scenarios and digital stories allow students to face stressful situations and manage their mental health effectively while learning how to identify warning signs and how to get help for themselves and for others.

The first five lessons contain a pre- and post-assessment to measure knowledge gain throughout. The sixth lesson is application-based. Additionally, students complete a survey at the start and end of the course, to evaluate attitudinal and behavioral change.

COURSE OVERVIEW

TOPIC	DESCRIPTION
Mental Health Resources	Students are provided a list of free resources for help if they or someone they know needs assistance.
Lessons	The course consists of 6 online modules, each lasting approximately 10-15 minutes. Students must complete each lesson in sequential order.

Assessments	Each lesson contains a 5-question pre- and post-assessment to measure knowledge gains.
Reflection Questions	Each lesson contains pre- and post- reflection questions to give students a chance to consider how information impacts their lives.
External Resources	You can extend the digital program with additional lessons and discussion guides.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Pre-survey	Introduction to Mental Health	Understanding Mental Health Challenges	Mental Health Coping Strategies	Staying Healthy in Times of Uncertainty	Seeking and Offering Help	Creating a Supportive Mental Health Plan	Post-survey
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The online lessons are accompanied by offline lesson plans to extend the concepts, discussions, skills, and strategies learned in the online course.

DETAILED COURSE OUTLINE

Lesson: Introduction to Mental Health

Students are introduced to the course, take Survey 1, and learn what mental wellness is, how to strengthen it and protect it from the everyday threats from stress.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Define mental health.
- List behaviors and factors that maintain and contribute to positive mental health.
- Define stress and explain how it interacts with mental health.
- List behaviors and factors that threaten mental health.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Mental Health Resources	A list of hotlines and support available for young people dealing with mental health challenges. These resources can be accessed at any time throughout the course.
What is Mental Health?	Mental health is defined and linked to overall health and wellbeing.
Reflection	Students reflect on their experiences with good, or healthy, stress.
Your Mental Health	The ways that choices and experiences impact mental health is introduced.
How Your Brain Works	Students explore the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus and how each part contributes to their mental health.
Brain Functions	Students review how brain functions work together to connect thoughts, behaviors, and emotions.
Understanding Stress	Stress is defined and both healthy and unhealthy stress is explored.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
What is Stress?	Students learn about good and bad stress and their effects on physical and mental health.
The Stress Spectrum	Stress is shown as a spectrum between healthy and unhealthy.
The Impact of Stress	Examples of stress experiences as they relate to the stress spectrum.
Key Areas of Mental Health	Students are introduced to 4 key areas of mental health: mindset, habits, relationships, and emotions.
Mental Health Needs	Examples from the impact of stress are revisited and the key areas of mental health are applied.
Reflection	Students reflect on ways they are already using to maintain mental health.
Staying Healthy	Summary of the information presented in the lesson and an introduction to the next lesson's topics.

Lesson: Understanding Mental Health Challenges

Students learn the difference between mental wellness and mental illness and explore how the brain is impaired in some common disorders that affect their age group.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Identify warning signs of a mental health condition.
- Explain how the functions of the brain affect the emotional, intellectual, and behavioral actions of a person.
- Identify when mental health is at risk.
- Identify the symptoms and possible treatments of 5 common mental illnesses affecting adolescents.
- Explain how trauma impacts mental and physical health.
- Explain the ways that your environment and sudden life changes are connected to mental health.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Where Do Mental Health Challenges Come From?	Mental illness is explained. Students learn that some mental health challenges are within their control and others are not, just like physical health. Students also understand the role of experiences in mental health.
Reflection	Students reflect on a time they weren't feeling well physically and how they knew something was wrong.
Brain Messages	Building off the brain information in lesson one, students discover how messages and information travels throughout the brain.
Types of Mental Illness	Students learn about the symptoms and treatments of five common mental health conditions: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress (PTSD), and substance use abuse.
Diagnosis and Treatment	Information related to reaching out for help, noticing symptoms and discussing treatment with a doctor.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Your Environment and Experiences	Students will learn about the ways their environment is connected to mental health.
Traumatic Experiences	Trauma is explained in three categories, abuse, neglect and household challenges.
Stressors	Students explore six common stressors; loneliness, financial stress, overwhelmed by media, social media, discrimination, and social and political climate.
Extreme Thoughts, Behaviors, and Emotions	Students learn about how to recognize when thoughts, behaviors, or emotions have become extreme.
What Does Mental Health Mean To You?	Optional Activity: Students can watch videos in which a peer shares their mental health experience. There are four topics: Maintaining positive mental health, coping with stress, getting support for mental health, challenging experiences and mental illness.
Reflection	Students reflect on ways they could tell a friend is struggling with mental health.
You Can Adapt	Summary of the information presented in the lesson and an introduction to the next lesson's topics.

Lesson: Mental Health Coping Strategies

Students learn what coping strategies are and how they can be used to deal with life's challenges and support mental health. Students also have the option to practice five coping strategies.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Identify emotional, intellectual, physical and social factors that can support or impact mental health.
- Explain how coping strategies can impact mental health.
- Identify appropriate coping strategies to use to best support mental health.
- Identify how self-talk can impact mental health.
- Increase awareness of effective coping strategies and ability to apply them effectively.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
What Are Coping Strategies?	Coping strategies are defined.
Reflection	Students reflect on the last time they were upset, sad or angry and what they did to feel better?
Thoughts, Behaviors, and Emotions	Students learn about the connection between thoughts, behaviors, and emotions.
Self-Talk	Students learn how positive and negative self-talk can impact mental health.
All or Nothing Thinking	Students explore a series of examples of types of negative self- talk and how to adapt it into positive self-talk.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Negative Thoughts	Students learn five types of negative thought patterns that can affect mental wellness: “all-or-nothing” thinking, fortune telling, catastrophizing, personalization and mental filtering.
Interrupting the Cycle	Students learn that interrupting negative cycles of thoughts, behaviors and emotions is not only possible but necessary for maintaining positive mental health.
Exploring Coping Strategies	Students explore coping strategies and choose which ones they would like to try. Coping strategies include: reframing thoughts, breathing mindfully, muscle relaxation techniques, journaling prompts and naming emotions.
Practice Coping Strategies	Optional activity: Provides an opportunity for students to try each of the coping strategies.
Reflection	Students reflect on the coping strategies to consider which they’ve tried before or would like to try in the future.
Building Your Coping Skills	Summary of the information presented in the lesson and an introduction to the next lesson’s topics.

Lesson: Staying Healthy in Times of Uncertainty

Students learn the ways that changes outside of our control impact mental health. Students will understand basic human needs, the importance of resiliency, and coping strategies specific to times of change and uncertainty.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Understand the ways that uncertainty and change impact mental health.
- Explain the ways that your environment and sudden life changes are connected to mental health.
- Examine the ways that basic needs are connected to mental health needs and overall health.
- Compare and contrast effective coping strategies for supporting positive mental health during times of uncertainty with everyday coping strategies.
- Review the changes to thoughts, behaviors, and emotions that are common during times of uncertainty.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Why Is Uncertainty Challenging?	Students will learn the impact of uncertainty to mental health.
Reflecting on Change	Students reflect on the feeling they’ve experienced during a big change in their life.
Unexpected Life Events	Examples of unexpected life events that have an impact on mental health are reviewed.
COVID-19 Pandemic	The COVID-19 pandemic is provided as an example that all students, world-wide can relate to as a major time of unexpected changes.
Human Needs	Students are introduced to the concept of basic human needs and how they impact overall wellbeing.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Needs Pyramid	Students explore the needs pyramid to understand how they build and contribute to overall wellbeing and impact mental health.
Developing Resilience	Resiliency is defined and explained. Students learn how they can practice and develop their resiliency.
Coping During Uncertainty	Students explore the following coping strategies: Develop a routine, learn new skills, Boost your digital wellness, maintain social connections, and give and help others. Students can select from lists of items they may incorporate into their lives for each strategy.
Communication and Empathy	The importance of communication and empathy are explained in the context of uncertain events. Students can explore ways to interact with others during uncertain times.
Common Thoughts, Behaviors, and Emotions	Students review the ways their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions can be impacted by times of uncertainty.
Reflection	Students reflect on how they responded to an uncertain time in their life.
You Are Not Alone	Summary of the information presented in the lesson and an introduction to the next lesson's topics.

Lesson: Seeking and Offering Support

This lesson teaches students how to recognize when help is needed and how to access it for oneself and to encourage others to seek help when needed. Stigma is addressed and how it can hinder help-seeking behaviors. Students are also provided with an approach they can use to support others.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Identify observable and non-observable warning signs of mental health challenges.
- Identify how stigma prevents people from seeking support for mental health issues.
- List ways to combat the stigma of mental health issues.
- Understand consequences of not seeking help for mental health issues.
- List three steps to use in supporting a peer who may be struggling with a mental health condition.
- Identify treatment options for people with mental health conditions.
- Identify the warning signs of self harm and suicide and steps to support others when present.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
When Is Help Needed?	Students learn how seeking help can positively affect someone by watching a testimonial video.
Reflection	Students reflect on their own ability to identify how to help a friend in need of support.
Observable Signs	Students learn signs that may mean that they or someone they care about is struggling with their mental health.
Noticing the Signs	Students prepare to review scenarios that include signs that someone may need help. This may be sensitive content for students that have experienced similar situations.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Noticing the Signs—A Close Friend	Students identify warning signs that a friend may need help.
Noticing the Signs—A Family Member	Students identify warning signs that a family member may need help.
Non-Observable Signs	Students learn that some mental health challenges do not always have observable warning signs.
Picture Perfect	An example of a social media post versus a person's full thoughts show students that what they see online is only part of someone's overall situation.
When to Seek Help	Students identify when they may want to take steps to seek help for themselves or others.
Understanding Stigma	Students learn about stigma, types of stigma and where it comes from.
Identifying Stigma	Students identify thoughts that stem from stigma and other ways to reframe those thoughts.
Practice Time	Students prepare to practice reacting to stigma in positive ways in scenario exercises.
Reducing Stigma	Students practice replying to a statement that stems from stigma.
Normalizing Challenges	Students practice replying to a statement that stems from stigma.
Showing Support	Students practice replying to a statement that stems from stigma.
Suicide and Prevention	Students learn the warning signs, risks and way to prevent suicide.
V-A-R® Method	Students learn to apply the V-A-R® Method. V-A-R®, Validate-Appreciate-Refer, is Active Minds' everyday tool for everyday conversations. More information on this can be found by visiting, activeminds.org .
Response Options	Students apply the V-A-R® Method by sorting statements into Validate, Appreciate, and Refer categories.
Treatment Options	Students review options for everyday stress, feeling overwhelmed, when they're struggling and helping others.
Reflection	Students reflect on ways they can support or help a friend.
Help Is Out There	Summary of the information presented in the lesson and an introduction to the next lesson's topics.

Lesson: Creating a Supportive Mental Health Plan

In this application-based lesson students are given the opportunity to practice what they've learned throughout lessons 1-5, while also developing their own personal mental wellness strategy. Students will consider what they can do during times of mental health challenges that will help them the most. Students will also practice supporting others through scenarios of mental health distress.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Identify stigmas / myths.

- Understand signs of mental health distress.
- Identify warning signs of suicide.
- Understand how to minimize risk for mental health crises.
- Understand how to manage healthy boundaries for yourself.
- Understand available resources for support.
- Understand how to respect healthy boundaries for others.
- Apply reframing to negative self-talk.
- Apply coping strategies.
- Evaluate ways to respond to others experiencing a mental health challenge.
- Create a mental health wellness plan.

ACTIVITY TOPIC	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Mental Health Distress	Students learn the importance of having a strategy during times of mental health distress.
Mental Health: Fact or Fiction	Students identify facts related to suicide prevention.
Reframe Your Self-Talk	Students review examples of negative self-talk and practice reframing thoughts in a more positive way.
Your Mental Health Wellness Plan	Students are introduced to the concept of a mental health wellness plan.
Your Warning Signs	Students review common warning signs and consider which warning signs apply to them when their mental health is at risk.
Your Coping Strategies	Students review common coping strategies and consider which coping strategies are most beneficial to them when they're faced with a mental health challenge.
Your Distractions	Students review examples of distractions and consider which distractions could be helpful to them when they're faced with a mental health challenge.
Your Network	Students identify the characteristics of supportive and unsupportive people when selecting who they could contact for support during a mental health challenge.
Supporting Others	Students learn that supporting others through a mental health challenge requires knowledge and practice, but can make a big difference in someone else's life.
Observing Mental Health Warning Signs	Students review examples of mental health red flags and common assumptions one can make when mental health warning signs with someone else are not obvious or immediately clear.
Responding to Warning Signs	Students learn that it's always best to check in and ask if others are okay when there's any concern, rather than make assumptions.
Stressed Out	Students practice supportive communication strategies with a family member that is dealing with extreme stress.
Mental Health Distress	Students practice supportive communication strategies with a friend that is experiencing mental health distress.

ACTIVITY TOPIC**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION**

Caring for Yourself and Others

Students learn that each strategy for dealing with mental health challenges is unique and should be tailored to that person's needs. Students also learn that small consistent changes can make a big difference in their lives and the lives of others.
