

MODULE 6

Preparation

The importance of positive mental health

Overview:

What constitutes a mentally healthy person? Does everyone have mental health? In this module, students will explore these questions and will look at the impact of mental health on overall well-being. Through several group activities, students will also learn about the impact of stress, and will identify appropriate and effective coping strategies to deal with stress.

Learning objectives:

- To describe the characteristics of an emotionally healthy person
- To demonstrate skills that enhance personal mental health, including stress management techniques

Major concepts addressed:

- Everyone has mental health that can be supported and promoted, regardless of whether or not they also have a mental illness
- Positive coping strategies can help everyone maintain and enhance their mental health

Materials required

- Handouts: Activity 1 Taking care of your mental health, Activity 3 Coping cards
- Flip chart paper and pens

In advance:

- Photocopy handouts for Activity 1 Taking care of your mental health (one copy for each student) and Activity 3 Coping cards (only one copy)
- Cut out coping cards

Teacher preparation:

Read through all activities before class

MODULE 6



Websites such as the Canadian Mental Health Association's (www.cmha.ca) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) www.camh.net offer reliable and accessible information on many topics related to mental health and illness. Other websites specifically geared to youth are listed in the Resources section of this guide.

Activity 1:

(5 mins.)

What do you think about mental health?

Purpose:

- To explore students' growing understanding of mental health, and its importance to each individual.
- To brainstorm about the kinds of things that contribute to positive mental health.

How to:

- 1) Ask students to brainstorm ideas of the kinds of things that keep people mentally healthy. Potential ideas are listed below:
 - think positive
 - organize your time
 - value yourself
 - eat right and exercise
 - try new things
 - get enough sleep
 - make plans
 - set realistic goals and work towards them
 - reward yourself
 - share concerns and worries with friends and family
- 2) Hand out photocopies of 'Taking care of your mental health' for students to keep.

Taking care of your mental health:

Achieving mental health is about striking a balance in the social, physical, spiritual, economic and mental aspects of our lives. Reaching a balance is a learning process and it is ongoing. At times, we may tip the balance too much in one direction and have to find our footing again. Our personal balance is highly individual, and our challenge is to stay mentally healthy by finding and keeping that balance.

Mental health and mental illness each run along a continuum. When our personal balance is off, either repeatedly or for long periods, we may eventually find ourselves moving closer along the continuum towards mental illness. While some people experience a sudden onset of symptoms of a mental illness, many mental health

problems develop gradually. For example, you may hardly notice your anxiety turn to distress until, one day, you feel overwhelmed. To find out more about building healthy self-esteem, creating positive relationships, coping with change, and learning to manage stress, read the 10 tips below taken from the CMHA fact sheet Mental Health For Life, at www.ontario.cmha.ca/fact_sheets.asp?CID=3219

From nurturing relationships with family and friends, to identifying and dealing with situations that upset you – including stressful circumstances, such as the pressure of exams, a conflict at work, or a misunderstanding with a friend – you can take steps to improve and maintain your mental health throughout your life.

The Canadian Mental Health Association has 10 tips for mental health:

1. Build a healthy self-esteem
2. Receive as well as give
3. Create positive parenting and family relationships
4. Make friends who count
5. Figure out your priorities
6. Get involved
7. Learn to manage stress effectively
8. Cope with changes that affect you
9. Deal with your emotions
10. Have a spirituality to call your own



Taking care of your mental health

Consider these key characteristics when assessing your own mental health:

Ability to enjoy life – Can you live in the moment and appreciate the “now”? Are you able to learn from the past and plan for the future without dwelling on things you can’t change or predict?

Resilience – Are you able to bounce back from hard times? Can you manage the stress of a serious life event without losing your optimism and sense of perspective?

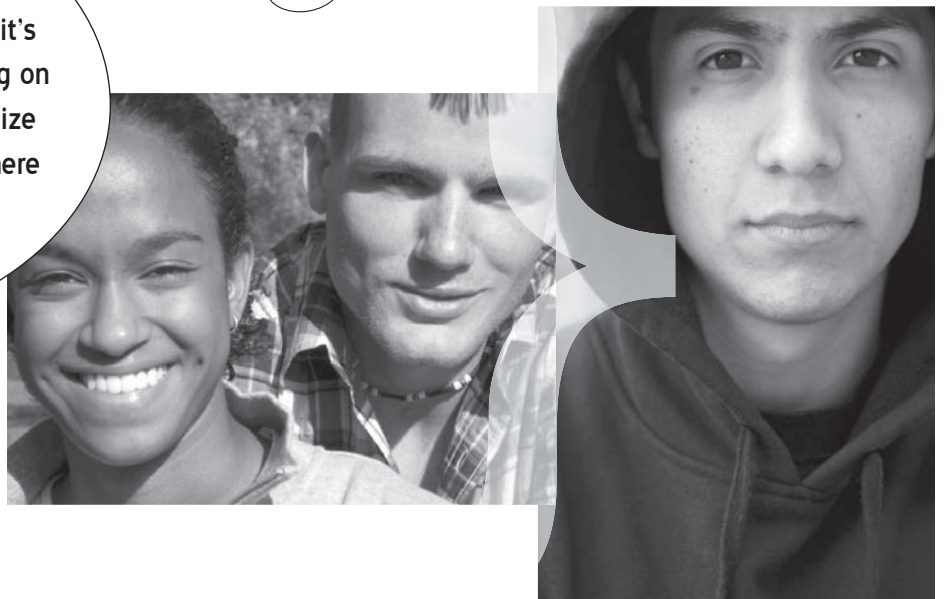
Balance – Are you able to juggle the many aspects of your life? Can you recognize when you might be devoting too much time to one aspect, at the expense of others? Are you able to make changes to restore balance when necessary?

Self-actualization – Do you recognize and develop your strengths so that you can reach your full potential?

Flexibility – Do you feel, and express, a range of emotions? When problems arise, can you change your expectations – of life, others, yourself – to solve the problem and feel better?

You can gauge your mental health by thinking about how you coped with a recent difficulty. Did you feel there was no way out of the problem and that life would never be normal again? Were you unable to carry on with work or school? With time, were you able to enjoy your life, family and friendships? Were you able to regain your balance and look forward to the future?

Taking the pulse of mental health brings different results for everyone; it’s unique to each individual. By reflecting on these characteristics, you can recognize your strengths, and identify areas where your level of mental fitness could be improved.



MODULE 6

Activity 2:

(15 mins.)

What do we mean by “Stress?”*

Purpose:

- To identify different kinds of stress and the impact that stress can have on overall well-being
- To give examples of stressors commonly experienced by young people, and explore different coping strategies and positive ways of dealing with stress

How to:

- 1) Ask students to imagine that they are about to explain to an alien what human beings mean by stress. Ask them to form pairs and talk with their partner and develop a definition, e.g. “stress is when...” and write their ideas down in point form.
- 2) Ask each pair to share their definitions, and write them on the board as they read them aloud.
- 3) Ask students what they notice about what stress means to different people.
- 4) Ask students to brainstorm about the different kinds of stressors. Use the list below as a guide to make sure all areas are mentioned. Write their responses on the board

Different kinds of stressors:

- Physical stressors (e.g. injury, illness, fatigue, hunger, lack of shelter)
- Social stressors (e.g. arguments, rejection, embarrassment)
- Intellectual stressors (e.g. mental fatigue, lack of understanding)
- Emotional stressors (e.g. death of a close friend or family member)
- Spiritual Stressors (e.g. guilt, moral conflicts, lack of sense of purpose)

cont.>

*adapted from *MindMatters, Coping*, pg. 23

MODULE 6



Introduce the idea that stress can be seen either as a challenge or an opportunity, or as a nightmare or trap. Tell students that people who can imagine or visualize themselves handling their challenges or stresses in a positive way, with an image of themselves having some power or control, are able to bounce back more easily after difficult times. Provide the example of professional athletes, who often use mental pictures to visualize themselves conquering a challenge. Explain to students that this technique can also work for the rest of us - that we can all work at inventing or imagining pictures of ourselves succeeding, and this can help us to do our best in a situation where we fear failure, embarrassment or hard work. Explain that research has shown that people who can learn to visualize themselves succeeding are more likely to actually succeed.

Activity 2:

How to (cont.)

- 5) Divide students into groups of four or five. Ask each group to brainstorm around the following question: "What are some of the stresses and challenges people around your age face?"

Circulate around the room as the students are brainstorming in their groups, and use the probes below if they need help or direction

- What sorts of stresses in the physical environment can directly affect how you feel either physically or emotionally?
 - What sorts of stresses or challenges can happen to relationships or between people?
 - What kinds of happenings or events can cause stress (e.g. family breakup, transitions like leaving school or moving, illness, end of a close relationship, etc.)
 - What are some of the fears, anxieties or thoughts that can get people feeling stressed?
- 6) As the groups report back, ask several students to record the brainstorm results on flip chart paper. Explain that this list will be used later, in the next activity.

MODULE 6

Activity 3 :

(15 mins.)

How do you cope?*

Purpose:

- To describe a range of coping strategies to deal with stressful and challenging situations
- To identify some of students' own preferred coping strategies, and examine the effectiveness of different strategies

How to:

- 1) Remind students that in the previous activity they identified the kinds of things people can feel stressed-out about, and some of the thoughts and feelings they can have when faced with challenging and stressful situations.
- 2) Ask students to get into pairs or groups of three, and ask them to share examples of things they like to do when they feel stressed or overworked. Ask a student in each group to write down at least one of the coping strategies discussed. To prepare for the next part of the activity, while students are busy in their groups, stick up one piece of paper in each corner of the room, with the words "Helpful", "Not much use", "Useless" and "Harmful" written on them.
- 3) Explain to the class that in this activity you'll be examining coping strategies, or things that people do in response to stress or challenge. Point out that there is a huge range of possible coping strategies, that it's different for each individual, varies in terms of a person's culture, religious background, gender, etc. and that there is no one right way of coping. Explain that people who cope effectively often have a whole range of different strategies that they use, and that people often learn about coping by watching what their friends and family do.
- 4) Have students come back together and arrange themselves in a circle. Ask those who recorded their group's coping strategies to put the paper on the floor in the middle of the circle, and spread Coping Cards into the pile, face down. Ask each student to choose two cards or strategies offered by the students.
- 5) Ask students to choose one of the cards and hold it up at chest height so that it can be read by others.

cont.>

* Adapted from *MindMatters: Coping*, pg 34.

MODULE 6

Activity 3: How do you cope?*

How to (cont.)

- 6) Explain to the class that you will describe a situation of potential stress or challenge. Students will then be asked to move to a defined area of the room according to whether they think their coping strategy would be helpful, not much use, useless or harmful.
- 7) Describe the scenario, choosing either from the brainstormed list that the students came up with, or from the suggestions below:
 - faced with a big exam
 - dealing with separation of parents
 - dealing with death of someone close
- 8) When the students have grouped, have them compare and comment on their choices. Ask them to put their other coping card on top and regroup if they think this card belongs to a different category.
- 9) Play a few rounds of the game to emphasize the point that different situations may call for different coping strategies. Remind students that there are no right or wrong answers, and that sometimes the most important coping strategy can involve getting help or support for yourself or someone else.

* Adapted from *MindMatters: Coping*, pg 34.

MODULE 6

Activity 3

HANDOUT

Coping Cards

Withdraw - not mix with other people	Think positive about how it will turn out
Play computer games	Worry
Visit a favourite person	See a counsellor
Eat more	Eat junk food
Quit (the job, the team...)	Sleep more
Avoid or put off something you have to do	Go for a run
Prioritize (put the most important things first)	Party/socialize
Fantasize - daydream an escape	Run away
Plan - figure out how to do it	Get sick
Start a fight	Blame someone else

MODULE 6

Activity 3

HANDOUT

Coping Cards

Blame yourself	Smoke cigarettes
Ask for help	Go out
Talk it over	Complain
Eat less	Change direction
Have a shower	Go to bed early
Drink alcohol	Exercise
Work harder	Stay out late
Meditate	Listen to music
Pretend it's OK	Call friends
Watch television	Write about it

MODULE 6

Activity 3

HANDOUT

Coping Cards

Cook something	Sleep less
Walk the dog	Go shopping
Pray	Draw or paint
Take a day off	Tidy up
Take risks	Make something
Problem-solve	Find new friends
Cry	Joke or laugh
Set goals	Go for a swim
Play sports	



About Laing House

Laing House is a community support centre for young adults, ages 17-24, who are living with serious mental illnesses such as psychosis or mood disorders. Launched in January 2001, it is located in a refurbished Victorian house in downtown Halifax. Laing House starts with a belief that young people have an array of talents and strengths which, when supported, point them towards recovery. Youth are invited to participate - as members of Laing House - in a welcoming, respectful and collaborative environment. Involvement is voluntary and referrals can come from the young person, a family member, community agency, or mental health professional. Laing House is unique in Canada.

Laing House's mission is "to prepare youth living with mental illness for healthy futures".

Laing House seeks to reduce isolation, to address needs in relation to returning to school, seeking employment, re-establishing a peer group, and finding a place to live. The programs focus on these core areas, while allowing youth to gain the confidence they need to be healthy and productive. Already, more than 200 young people have found their way to Laing House, where a team of peers and professional staff provide supports.

Youth and staff build relationships and work together to create personal development, community education and advocacy programs. These experiences and opportunities provide youth with support and resources to resume educational and vocational paths, find safe housing, and become contributing members of their natural communities.

<http://www.lainghouse.org>

Laing House

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