

# Understanding Students' Mental Health

## A Guide For Teachers



**Mental health** is more than the absence of mental illness.

As defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO)<sup>1</sup>, it is a state of emotional and social well-being in which every individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Mental health encompasses having the necessary life competencies as well as having a balance in various aspects of life. By encouraging emotional competency and developing social skills in children and youth, we can help build their resilience, contribute to their overall development and enhance their learning potential.

1. Adolescent Health and Development. A WHO Regional Framework 2001-2004. Regional Office for the Western Pacific, WHO

Some characteristics of positive mental health include:

- A sense of wellness in life
- A positive outlook in life
- A realistic set of expectations and approaches to life
- A positive regard for self
- Effective coping skills to deal with challenges in life
- Effective management of emotions
- Ability to relate and function well with others

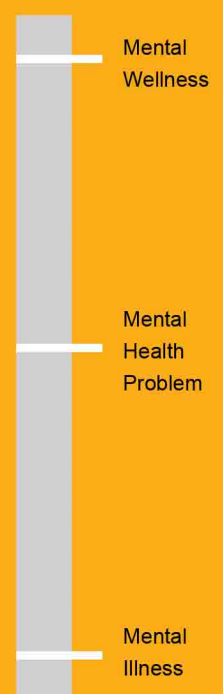
Mental health is a continuum which ranges from a state of optimal mental health to mental illness. An individual's state of mental health can be on any point along the continuum depending on life circumstances.

**Mental wellness** or **mental health promotion** is about increasing emotional and social well-being, competence and resilience and creating supportive environments for all. It aims to develop social and emotional competencies and lifeskills, and build in children and youth protective factors against mental illness.

**Mental health problems** occur when someone is in a vulnerable state of entering into the mental illness spectrum. They do not have sufficient resources and capacity to cope with the challenges at hand and require greater support from others to help them through the difficult times. Some people with unresolved mental health problems might go on to develop a mental illness.

**Mental illness** is a more serious or long-lasting medical problem, which requires diagnosis, medical treatment and support.

### Mental Health Continuum



**Protective factors** contribute to an individual's resilience and capacity to cope with life's problems and challenges, thereby reducing the risk of mental illness. This is especially important to children and youth as they are constantly faced with physical, psychological and emotional changes and transition. Furthermore, adolescence is a complex and challenging phase in the development of an individual and can be a peak period for onset of mental illness.

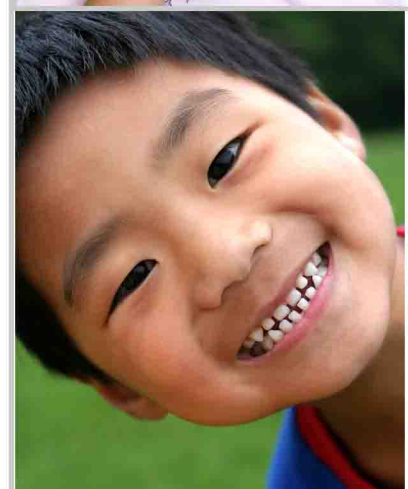
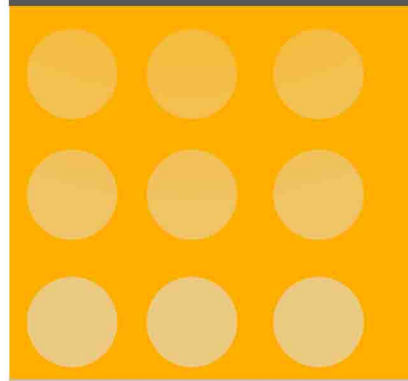
Risk factors increase the likelihood of an individual developing mental illness.

Risk is greatly increased when adverse environmental circumstances, adverse family relationships and personal characteristics reinforce each other.

As risk factors accumulate, more protective factors are needed to compensate for this.

Specific protective and risk factors vary according to the developmental stage of child or youth. Family is an important factor in the earlier years while peers are a more salient factor in adolescence.

Types of Factors	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
<b>Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good level of physical activity</li> <li>• Good physical health</li> <li>• Good intellectual capacity</li> <li>• Good lifeskills:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good problem solving skills</li> <li>- Good social skills</li> <li>- Good communication skills</li> <li>- Willing to seek help</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Good social emotional development</li> <li>• Easy-going temperament</li> <li>• Good sense of independence</li> <li>• Good sense of self-efficacy / internal locus of control</li> <li>• Good self-esteem / self-worth / self-confidence</li> <li>• Good sense of personal competence</li> <li>• Resilience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genetic (e.g. family history of mental illness)</li> <li>• Personality and temperament (e.g. anxious disposition)</li> <li>• Adverse early childhood experiences or chronic trauma (e.g. physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence and bullying)</li> <li>• Loss of a parent, family member or close friend</li> </ul>
<b>Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive family</li> <li>• Good family support for school success</li> <li>• Good relationship with parents</li> <li>• Parents with good emotional stability</li> <li>• Stable financial situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divorce</li> <li>• Inconsistent care-giving</li> <li>• Poor family discipline</li> <li>• Death of a family member</li> </ul>
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive teachers</li> <li>• Positive relationships with peers / fitting well in school</li> <li>• Positive school experience</li> <li>• Involvement in school-based activities</li> <li>• Feeling cared for and respected by peers and teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure from exams and school placement</li> <li>• Low academic performance</li> <li>• Problems with classmates and school mates (e.g. bullying, isolation)</li> <li>• Inadequate / inappropriate provision of education</li> </ul>
<b>Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good social support</li> <li>• Good social inclusion</li> <li>• Economic stability of neighbourhood</li> <li>• Good access to health care and recreation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substance abuse</li> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Lack of a sense of "place"</li> </ul>



Some children and youth find it difficult to ask for help when they are in distress.

Warning signs are often an appeal for help.

There are several warning signs that may indicate the need for additional support or professional advice.



## School Behaviour

- Being frequently late for school
- Unexplained and repeated absence or truancy
- Inattentiveness or unusually disruptive behaviour
- Sudden loss of interest in studies and/or previously pleasurable activities
- Unexpected deterioration in academic performance or underachievement
- Ideas and themes of death, suicide or self-harm (e.g. statements that life is not worth living)

## Interpersonal Behaviour

- Becoming withdrawn, avoiding or having a lack of social contact
- Mood swings and occasional emotional outbursts (e.g. crying)
- Unaccountable rage, anger or aggression, and/or overly irritable or hostile

## Intrapersonal Behaviour

- Having frequent negative or worrying thoughts
- Frequently feeling anxious, afraid, guilty, ashamed and/or embarrassed
- Unexpected change in mood, behaviour and/or personality (e.g. loss of sense of humour)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions, feeling listless
- Having illogical thoughts and ideas (e.g. hearing voices, hallucinating)
- Being very lethargic or overly energetic than usual
- Complaints of unexplained pains
- Exhibiting regressive behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, sucking thumb)
- Sudden changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns or habits
- Neglecting responsibilities or personal appearance (e.g. unkempt appearance, poor hygiene) and/or responsibilities
- Excessive smoking and/or drinking, or drug abuse
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness and/or perceived loss of control
- Talking and/or writing about things that do not make sense (including online behaviour)

Any one of these signs does not necessarily indicate that the student is suffering from a mental illness or who may have thoughts of suicide. If these signs are present **in combination**, or in **more extreme** or **long-lasting forms**, it might be an indication that the student is experiencing significant social or emotional distress with potential for long term consequences. If in doubt, seek help and advice from your school counsellor.

Early intervention at this point may be effective in reducing the risk of outcomes such as reckless or delinquent behaviour, academic failure, isolation from friends or family, and/or substance abuse, and in some cases, suicidal behaviour. Creating a supportive environment is critical, no matter what the student is experiencing.

## School / Classroom Environment

- Create a safe and supportive environment that promotes learning
- Foster a climate of care and respect
- Ensure that school rules and policies are fair and enforce them consistently
- Help the child or youth to establish supportive social network and connectedness through building positive relationships with peers and significant adults (e.g. parents)
- Show an interest in the achievements and hobbies of the child or youth beyond the curriculum
- Focus on changing behaviour rather than blaming or labelling the child or youth
- Provide opportunities for the child or youth to clarify his or her thoughts, feelings and modes of expression, and respond by validating and acknowledging the feelings
- Provide additional support for the child or youth who might need additional time and practice to learn and demonstrate certain skills

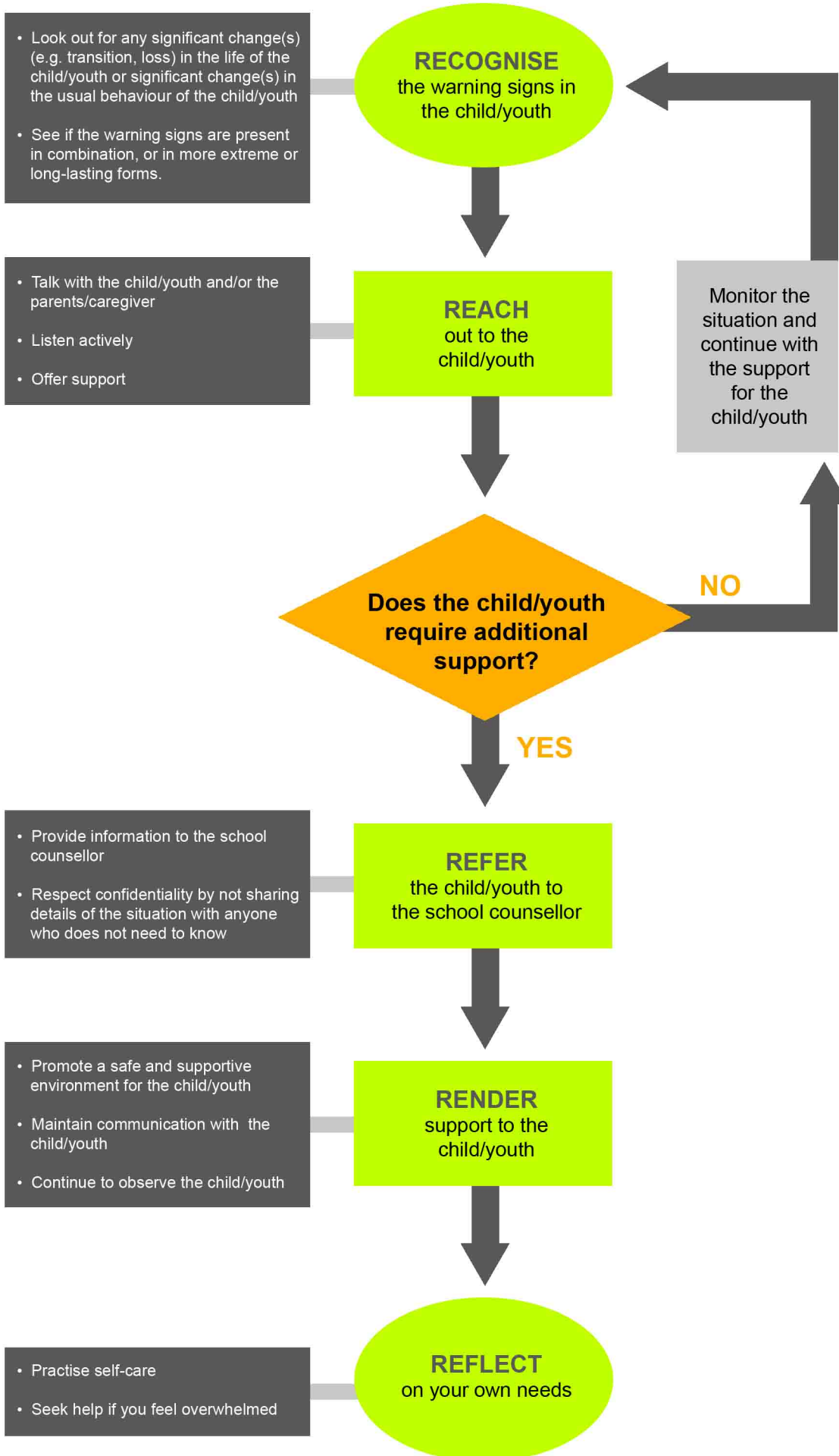
## Social and Emotional Learning

- Promote empathy through reflections and asking how characters in stories, books, articles or films might be feeling
- Teach negotiation, mediation skills and coping strategies to manage stress or difficult emotions
- Build social and communication skills using cooperative learning structures
- Identify the inherent strengths and abilities of the child or youth and assign tasks that enhance his/her strengths and abilities
- Use questions to help the child or youth understand the perspective of others
- Encourage and affirm the efforts, progress and achievements of the child or youth
- Provide specific feedback on the work of the child or youth rather than global praise
- Help the child or youth to identify, articulate and work towards achievable individual and group goals

## School-Home-Community Collaborations

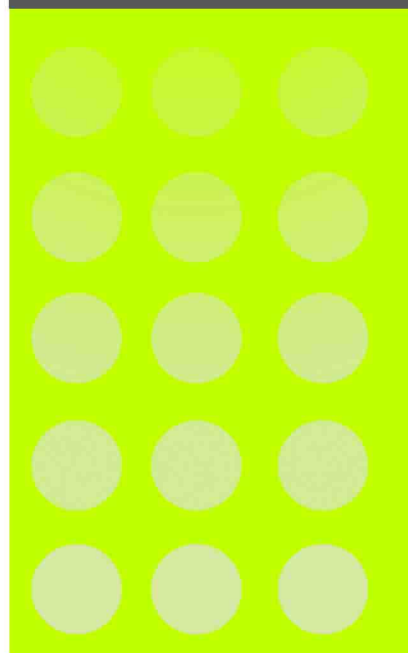
- Advocate for the needs of children or youth and families in community forums
- Contribute to and support policies relevant to mental health
- Collaborate with community stakeholders on prevention programmes that involve parents
- Provide information and professional advice to parents and community about learning and mental health
- Engage parents and community in discussions on mental health in educational settings
- Promote strategies to parents on how they can promote mental health at home
- Share positive reports of the behaviour and achievements of the child or youth with his/her parents
- Provide opportunities for the children or youth to contribute positively to the community





The RESPONSE flowchart serves as a guide when you become concerned that a child or youth may possibly be experiencing distress.

The 5Rs, **Recognise**, **Reach**, **Refer**, **Render** and **Reflect**, highlight the possible actions that you can take.



## Self-care

Like other helping professionals, teachers and school counsellors take on important responsibilities of caring for those placed under their charge.

Promoting mental health in the school not only means caring for one's students and colleagues, but also looking after oneself.

It is important to realise that you can be affected by the problems and emotions of those whom you are trying to help.

You may experience compassion fatigue, which is the cumulative stress of caring for others. You may also experience your own personal frustrations and worries.

You will be much better able to help others if you remember to look after your own mental health.

Here are some tips to help you maintain your own wellbeing:

- Look after yourself physically: have a healthy, balanced diet, regular exercise and enough sleep.
- Monitor and manage your stress in positive ways.
- Make time for some positive activities for your own relaxation.
- Maintain a work-life balance. Leave work issues at work.
- Recognise your limitations, especially when the person you are helping has complex issues that are beyond your scope of expertise.
- Evaluate yourself regularly to recognise and acknowledge your thoughts, feelings and attitudes.
- Talk to friends, family, colleagues, your GP or another health professional if your thoughts or feelings are worrying you, or you are going through a difficult time in your personal life.
- Counter negative thoughts and maintain a positive outlook.
- If you have a spiritual belief, make time for regular spiritual practice or relationships with others who share the same belief.

Agency	Brief Programme Description	Hotline/Contact
Agape Counselling & Training Centre	Counselling for individuals or families on emotional, interpersonal, sexual and parent-child relationship	6842 2922
Child Guidance Clinic	Any child or youth (up to age 19 years) with significant or severe emotional and behavioural problems	6389 2000 6389 2222 (24 hrs)
Counselling and Care Centre	Anyone with psychological and behavioural issues	6536 6366
Institute of Mental Health	Any child or youth with serious emotional and behavioural problems e.g. suicidal or psychotic problems	6389 2000 6389 2222 (24 hrs)
Mount Elizabeth Behavioural Health Services	Anyone with psychological, psychiatric and behavioural issues	1800 738 9595 (24 hrs)
Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)	Anyone in crisis or suicidal	1800 221 4444 (24 hrs)
Singapore Association for Mental Health Helpline	Anyone with psychological, psychiatric, emotional or social issues	1800 283 7019 Mon-Fri: 9.00am – 6.00pm
WINGS Counselling Centre	Any child or youth with psychological, behavioural, medical and psychiatric issues.	6383 5745 Mon-Thurs: 8.30am-5.30pm
Tinkle Friend (Singapore Children's Society)	For children aged 7-12 who need someone to chat with	1800 274 4788 Mon-Fri: 9.30am-11.30am and 2.30pm-5.00pm
Touchline (TOUCH Youth Services)	For youth aged 12-19 who need someone to talk to	1800 377 2252 Mon-Sat: 10.00am-10.00pm
Audible Hearts (Supported by HPB)	An anonymous online peer support network by youth for youth	<a href="http://audiblehearts.yah.sg">http://audiblehearts.yah.sg</a>

## Helplines



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