

How Schools can Help Students with Mental Health Problems

Students with mental health problems need treatment by medical professionals such as psychiatrists, clinical psychologists or follow up by medical social workers. Schools play a complementary role in supporting these students at school. Important points to note are highlighted below for schools' reference when planning and implementing support measures. Please also see the section on "Schools should take proper care of students with mental health problems" in Chapter 3 of the **School Administration Guide**: <http://www.edb.gov.hk/en/sch-admin/regulations/sch-admin-guide/index.html>. For more information on various mental illnesses, please visit the following website of the Hospital Authority: <http://kch.ha.org.hk/EN/subpage?pid=16>.

A. Early identify students with mental health problems and in need of support

- (i) Schools should establish channels for reporting diagnosed cases (e.g. issue a circular letter annually to parents to solicit their co-operation in reporting the medical history of their children, including their states of mind, etc.). In addition, schools should observe the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance. The reporting of students' medical history by parents should be entirely on a voluntary basis. Schools should ensure that information is not disclosed to other parties without the consent of the parents.

- (ii) Teachers should be alert to the following signs indicating possible mental health problems, for example:
 - declining grades which are not commensurate with the students' usual performance
 - frequent or long term absenteeism
 - inability to focus on school work and routine tasks
 - emotional and/or behavioral problems over a sustained period of time
 - fatigue and tiredness over a period of time
 - irritability, emotional ups and downs
 - withdrawal from relationships
 - social isolation.

B. Reach out to students with mental health problems

Schools should designate a member of staff with relevant knowledge and skills, such as the school social worker, to communicate with the students concerned and their parents to understand their needs. Based on the student's school adjustment needs, the designated school personnel then gives teachers expert advice, coordinates follow up actions and when necessary, liaises with and makes referrals to agencies/professionals.

C. Establish mechanism to review support and health issues

- (i) Schools should set up coordination/review meetings and/or case conferences to review and adjust support strategies to meet students' needs at different phases of development (the length of each phase varies from person to person), namely:
 - initial stage of treatment when several medication adjustments may be needed to find dosage of best fit
 - high suicide risk period (e.g. time of resuming school, relapse, change of support personnel)
 - recovery/stabilization, residual phase.
- (ii) Schools should identify protective factors and risk factors through meetings and/or case conferences. Conditions that promote resilience and reduce the potential for risky behaviors, such as suicidal attempt, are referred to as protective factors and those that may increase a person's potential for risky behaviors are referred to as 'risk factors'. Protective factors including personal strength, positive thinking, supportive family members, peers and teachers, etc., should be enhanced. Risk factors including deficits in coping skills, unsupportive family and poor peer relationship are to be minimized.

D. Establish mechanism for collaboration with stakeholders concerned

Schools should adopt a multi-disciplinary team approach to the planning and evaluation of the support strategies for students. There should be regular monitoring, review and evaluation of the students' conditions as well as the effectiveness of the rendered support. The team should comprise of staff (guidance and discipline teachers, school social worker, student guidance personnel, class/subject teacher) and other professionals (such as psychiatrist/psychiatric nurse, clinical psychologist, educational psychologist, family/medical social worker). Also, parents and the student concerned should be invited to participate.

E. Establish good communication between home and school

- (i) Schools should ensure home-school communication is frequent, timely, focused on facts and problem-solving.
- (ii) Schools need to inform parents regularly about how the student is performing (e.g. through the use of notebook, daily chart, e-mail to record successes, progress, difficulties and mood information).

F. Adopt appropriate and effective support strategies

Schools should be flexible and patient so as to help students minimize stressor, facilitate achievement, build up confidence and enrich coping skills. They should also adopt appropriate and effective strategies such as:

- Understand students have difficulties in concentration and thinking, and allow sufficient time to respond to questions or instructions

- modify schedules, if required (for example, at the initial stage when students resume lessons, a flexible time table for attendance is acceptable)
- adopt varied instructional techniques and modalities such as multi-sensory strategies, concise and precise instructions, etc.
- reduce homework demands if possible, especially at an initial stage of the illness
- provide special examination accommodation according to students' needs and professionals' recommendations by arranging a quiet room and/or giving prompts
- prepare a low-stimulation 'safe and quiet place' where the students can take breaks for calming down if they are very anxious or overwhelmed
- talk in simple and direct ways; listen and encourage, especially appreciate and point out positive changes
- remind the students that they do not need to discuss their psychotic experience with everyone who asks and help the students with what to say to maintain privacy
- suggest that the students could confide in trusted friends, if comfortable and on a voluntary basis
- encourage students to take medication as prescribed and attend therapies regularly to enhance recovery
- watch out for early signs of relapse and seek medical advice as needed
- if students with mental health problems exhibit disorganized thought and language or experience hallucination or delusions, do not argue with them, but try to direct them to focus on what is happening in real life
- watch out for warning signs of suicide. For the knowledge and skills in detecting warning signs of suicide and/or suicidal behaviours of students, and practical tips for responding to students' suicidal behaviours, please refer to the "A Resource Handbook for Schools: Detecting, Supporting and Making Referral for Students with Suicidal Behaviours": [https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/teacher/prevention-of-student-suicides/Resource%20Packages%20and%20Guidelines/A%20Resource%20Handbook%20for%20Schools%20\(March%202017\).pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/teacher/prevention-of-student-suicides/Resource%20Packages%20and%20Guidelines/A%20Resource%20Handbook%20for%20Schools%20(March%202017).pdf)
- call the police or the ambulance in case of emergency for example where safety of the students and those around them are at stake.

G. Adopt a whole school approach to promote mental health

- (i) Schools should adopt a whole school approach in cultivating a safe and healthy environment to promote mental health education where all students and teachers should be equipped with correct knowledge, attitude and behavior. With reference to the multi-level 'Health Promoting Schools Framework' advocated by WHO in 2000, schools are encouraged to adopt a three-tier support model as follows to detect and support students with mental health problems:

Tier 1: focus on early detection of students who are vulnerable and provide additional support by teachers through teaching, counseling and guidance and other activities

Tier 2: focus on those students at risk who may be experiencing problems and need 'add-on' support by organizing early intervention activities by school guidance personnel

Tier 3: focus on students with significant mental health problems requiring in-depth assessment and intensive individualized support from specialized helping professionals such as psychiatrist, educational/clinical psychologist, social worker

- (ii) An effective whole school mental health promotion approach should involve the creation of a school environment that encourages a sense of belonging and students' connectedness to the school and among peers. With connectedness to people, students would feel being accepted and acknowledged. Researches showed that in schools with higher level of connectedness, the levels of student suicidal behavior, violence and drug use were lower.

- (iii) Some target strategies to maximize connection for students with high mental health support needs are:
 - help students feel safe and being cared through nurturing strong collegial care and support among school staff and cultivating a supportive environment
 - ensure students with sufficient assistance and various choices to meet the academic, behavioral and organizational expectation of the school
 - make use of multiple points of contact (within the curriculum and other areas of school life) where sound social networks could be built with peers
 - provide students with learning opportunities and help them excel with their potential, let them make contributions, and gain sense of achievement
 - appreciate uniqueness of students and give them recognition.