



The TOOLBOX

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS



MENTAL HEALTH: PREVENTION AND SCREENING

TOOL: Prevention | Intervention

TARGET AUDIENCE: Teenagers in the general population

TOOL INTENDED FOR: Professionals



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– Details: Teachers and school professionals.

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NEEDS AND BEHAVIOURAL MANIFESTATIONS

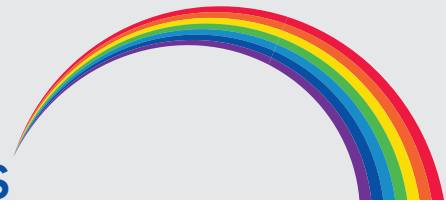
- Adolescence is a key period in human development, marked by many major hormonal, biological, social and identity changes. However, it is also a period of heightened vulnerability related to the exacerbation or chronic condition of mental health problems. Numerous studies retrospectively questioning adults with mental health problems trace the beginning of their difficulties to adolescence. In Canada, 14% to 25% of school-aged youth may have mental health problems and half of them report problems before the age of 14.
- The pandemic and prolonged period of confinement that we have just experienced may have had significant impacts among this population. Some studies thus suggest an increased risk of distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, depression, anxiety, emotional fatigue, irritability and self-harm in contexts similar to those we have just experienced. Many of these effects may continue even after the situation has been resolved.

SPECIFIC GOALS

- To take preventive action to help teenagers with their post-confinement transition to school.
- To screen children with post-confinement adjustment or mental health difficulties upon returning to school.

DESIGN

- **Vincent Domon-Archambault**, psychologist



PREVENTION – RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that students' post-confinement return to school is positive, this section suggests some mental health prevention strategies.

1 - PREPARE THE GROUNDWORK

The start of the 2020-2021 school year may require many adjustments and changes. Students should be informed in advance of the planned process in a clear, simple and precise manner. The rationale for changes may also be briefly explained. This will foster a sense of stability, consistency and predictability. These are essential aspects in order to reduce stress experienced at the start of the school year and promote calm. Ideally, the letter should be sent one week before the start of the school year.

2 - GIVE YOURSELF TIME TO ARRIVE AND SETTLE IN

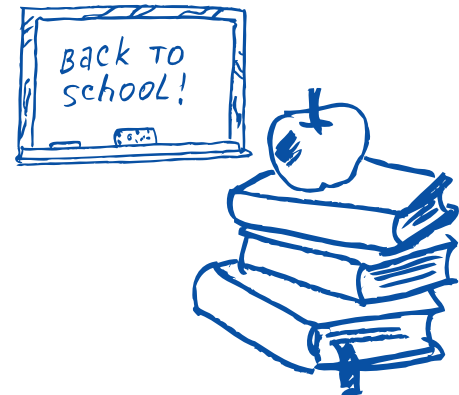
While it would be tempting to quickly make up for lost academic time, it should be borne in mind that stress and mental health difficulties are not conducive to learning. To learn, students must be in a good frame of mind.

Many young people will definitely need to vent and talk about their experiences when they return. It might be appropriate to allow room for expression in class. This will **normalize the emotions experienced** and promote their management. Other teens may also need to get used to human contact again and the pace of school. There's no need to spend a great deal of time; 20 minutes may be enough. You can also tell students in class that they can talk with you privately if they prefer (see section on interventions).

A classroom environment that focuses on respect and open communication as well as discussion about mental health will promote healthy adjustment in teens.

3 - DO FOLLOW-UP

Since the effects of the pandemic and confinement may take longer to appear in some people, it may be appropriate to allow room for expression mentioned in point 2- at a determined frequency for the first months after returning to class. A meeting, initially every couple weeks, could eventually be held every month or so.





4 - LISTEN TO YOURSELF AND TALK ABOUT YOURSELF

As teachers and professionals, you too have experienced the pandemic's impact. It is therefore important to allow yourself to talk about it or seek help if you feel the need. This situation is normal. The bonds of trust and mutual assistance with colleagues and management are essential. A school environment that is generally open to recognizing and addressing mental health among professionals and students contributes to a climate of dialogue and openness among everyone who attends school.

Talking about your experience and how you coped will be instructive for students. It will normalize their experience and give them potential solutions.

5 - CONSIDER ASSIGNING A DESIGNATED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL IN CONNECTION WITH POST-CONFINEMENT ADJUSTMENT

This professional, who could be a psychologist or a psychoeducator (or any professional trained in mental health), could act as a resource for both staff and students. An email box or a phone line to leave a message or send a text message would facilitate the process. The professional could then schedule an appointment at a convenient time. The caller could contact the resource for themselves or on behalf of a peer whom they are concerned about.

Based on the documented effects of confinement on mental health, it is important to make everyone aware of this resource and to normalize help-seeking.

6 - PLACE PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

During this post-confinement period, healthy lifestyles are of great importance for properly adjusting and returning to normality. Sleep, diet and physical activity are obviously important, but we tend to forget healthy emotional and social lifestyles. A supportive environment, promoting emotional communication and encouraging healthy conflict management, will be very beneficial for students in these difficult times. The Jasmin Roy Sophie Desmarais Foundation offers various tools in this regard.

7 - SEND PARENTS A LETTER

Before the start of the school year, it would be very helpful to send parents a letter that summarizes all the recommendations described in the previous sections. This would reassure them about the measures taken and inform them about the resources available at school if needed.

Some key words to remember:

- Plan and prepare
- Give yourself time
- Allow room for expression
- Allow yourself to talk about mental health
- Acknowledge and normalize the experience and help-seeking





SCREENING - RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a list of some of the signs and symptoms that may be seen in youth with adjustment or mental health difficulties. This is not an exhaustive list or a diagnostic tool. It is intended simply as a general checklist and guide to inform the decision to reach out to designated mental health professionals in the school, if necessary. If in doubt, we encourage you to speak with the professionals concerned in order to obtain more information.

This screening strategy will be greatly facilitated by the implementation of recommendations in the previous section.

1 - OBSERVATIONS

As a teacher, you see first-hand the changes and difficulties your students may be experiencing. This will be particularly valuable during post-confinement. While it's impossible to screen for or notice everything, the following are some symptoms to look out for and that may suggest difficulties or suffering in teens.

- Isolation (staying away and refusing social contact)
- Irritability
- Emotional lability (rapid and drastic mood changes)
- Severe fatigue
- Sadness or crying
- Self-harm
- Excessive worries
- Dependence on others (inability to be alone, tendency to be clingy)
- Tantrums
- Frequent conflict
- Agitation or motor slowdown
- Somatic complaints (for example, headache or stomach ache)
- Problems concentrating
- Academic difficulties (particularly in children who did not have any previously)
- Opposition (active or passive) and refusal to cooperate
- Change in appetite
- Distorted reality (sees or hears things that are not there)
- Distrust and hostility
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Appetite disturbance
- Suicidal ideation*

* In the event of suicidal ideation, you should immediately contact the designated professionals in your school so that they can tell you what to do.



To guide you in the analysis of the above symptoms and the steps to be taken, the following parameters should be kept in mind:

- **Change:** Does the situation indicate a change in the teen compared to what was previously observed? A significant change is worth analyzing.
- **Chronic condition:** : Does the situation persist? A situation that lasts several weeks should be of concern to you.
- **Intensity:** : How serious are the signs? Symptoms that significantly stand out from what is seen in the average child of the same age should be examined.
- **Concurrent symptoms:** Are several signs observed in the same teen? Several concomitant symptoms suggest difficulties
- **Impaired functioning:** Is the teen's social, academic or family life affected by the signs observed? If one of the areas is significantly affected, support may be appropriate.

Some of the symptoms on the list are not as alarming or disturbing as the others but deserve just as much attention by analyzing them based on the described parameters.



2 - ACTIONS

– **If you have any concerns or questions, it may be a good idea to discreetly talk about them with the child concerned, as you probably already have a bond of trust with them.**

- It is better to express your concerns rather than have a confrontation.

For example, if a teacher notices that a student often looks sad and isolated in class and in the hallways, they can ask the student to stay a bit longer after class and say, "Hi, I just wanted to take a little time to see how you're doing. I've noticed lately that you've not been your usual self..." Let the child respond. If they say they are in fact not doing well, continue the conversation and tell them that you are available for them. If they deny it or says that it's not the case, tell them that in any event, they can trust you and come back to see you if necessary.

Another example: If a student says they are feeling anxious during a group conversation on COVID-19, we can speak with them discreetly at the beginning or end of class: "Hi, I was thinking about what you said in class about feeling anxious and I think it's great you mentioned it. I imagine it isn't easy and I just wanted to make sure you're getting help for this. Is there anything I can do to help?"

- You can ask the teen if they have someone who is giving them help or someone to talk to about it. If the teen says that it's not the case, you can give them the contact information of TEL-JEUNES and briefly explain that it's an anonymous and free support service they can contact at any time of the day or night to talk about any topic they are concerned about. TEL-JEUNES can be reached by phone, text message, chat or email.
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- Except for urgent symptoms (suicidal ideation or self-harm), it is important to respect the teen's pace and not force them to talk about it or seek help. You can touch base with them in a few days or weeks later to find out how the situation is developing.

– **If you have any doubts or concerns, ask the designated mental health professional. They can help you with the screening or intervention process or intervene if necessary.**



USEFUL RESOURCES



Orben, A., Tomova, L., & Blakemore, S-J. (2020).

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K Brooks, S., Webster, R.K., Smith, L.E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020).

The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it : rapid review of the evidence.

The Lancet: *Rapid Review*, 395 (10227), 912-920.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)

The School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse (SBMHSA) Consortium (September 2013).

School-based mental health in Canada: a final report. Mental Health Commission of Canada: Ottawa.

<https://www.teljeunes.com/Tel-jeunes>

<https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/advice-and-prevention/mental-health/recognising-signs-of-mental-illness-in-children/>

<https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/child-and-youth-mental-health-signs-and-symptoms/>

