

## Mood Problems at School

Everyone experiences periods of sadness, irritability and/or loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities from time to time. When these feelings interfere with thoughts, self-worth, behaviours and/or the ability to function every day, for most of the day, then a mood problem may be occurring. Major Depressive Disorder, or Depression, is the most common type of mood disorder, but young people can also experience low moods that alternate with elevated moods, or even manic episodes (Bipolar Disorder). Educators have an important role to play in recognizing shifts in mood and in noticing when these fluctuations are out of character. Educators are not mental health professionals but they can provide helpful support that can make all the difference for a student struggling with a mood problem.

### Creating Supportive Classroom Environments – Tier 1 Supports

**Tier 1 supports are good for all!** Inclusive and calm classroom environments facilitate academic learning and social-emotional well-being, and help students to regulate mood

#### WELCOME

- Review general classroom-level strategies for creating welcoming environments.
- Greet each student warmly every day. Show them that you are glad they are part of your class, and that you are pleased that they are at school today.
- Consider including time at the beginning of class for checking in and connecting with students as they settle into the academic work.
- Show an interest in student stories, opinions, and concerns. They may be “trying on” new ideas and you can help to influence this in positive ways through careful listening and support.
- Convey by your words and actions that each day offers the chance for a fresh start, Model an optimistic stance. Share your enthusiasm for learning!
- Create a learning environment that facilitates risk-taking and participation, where a growth mindset is encouraged.
- Notice when students are late or absent frequently, and wonder why, especially if this is a change in behavior. Offer a particularly warm welcome for those struggling to get to school.

#### INCLUDE

- Review general classroom-level strategies for creating inclusive environments.
- Step back to consider if your classroom is emotionally-safe for all students. Consider ways to alter the physical space, peer dynamic, and/or classroom norms to enhance a sense of belonging for ALL students.
- Practice inclusion in your words, examples, actions, and visual displays (e.g., culture, sexual orientation, special needs).
- Reduce stigma by normalizing emotional ‘ups and downs’ and by being a good model for coping with life stress.
- Get to know your students, and listen for opportunities to enhance their sense of belonging.
- Create a culture of caring within your classroom, through which students know they can ask for help when needed.

#### PARTNER

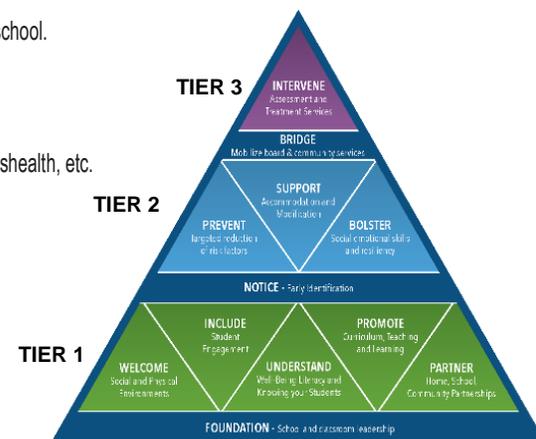
- Set a positive tone in interactions with parents and families, being open to conversations about mental health.
- When you notice a change in student behaviour / emotions, be prepared to describe what you have observed.
- Review the system of support for students with mental health problems, as it applies to your school, board and community.
- Understand your board and school protocols for suicide prevention (i.e., know who you turn to if a student chooses you to disclose a serious mental health concern).
- When you aren't sure about something related to mental health, ask! Every school board has a Mental Health Leader who supports school teams.
- Develop a system of support to ensure your own personal resiliency and self-care. Being an educator is challenging work. Take good care of yourself!

#### UNDERSTAND

- Consider what you need to know in order to recognize and support a student who is experiencing a mood problem at school.
- Consider what you need to know in order to support a student who comes to you in crisis.
- Consider what you need to know in order to offer instruction, or answer a student question, about mood problems.
- Participate in professional learning opportunities to enhance your knowledge about mood problems at school.
- Learn more about mood problems from high-quality resources like Supporting Minds, ABCs of Mental Health, aboutkidshealth, etc.
- Consolidate your learning using the SMH ASSIST on-line tutorial related to mood problems at school.

#### PROMOTE

- Model a calm, steady approach to challenges in the classroom. Maintain a positive tone in communication.
- Have predictable routines in the classroom and announce changes in advance.
- Reinforce social-emotional learning skills, like problem-solving, stress management, and conflict resolution.
- Explicitly teach executive functioning skills, like time management and study skills.
- Build in time for mindfulness/contemplation, self-regulation, and/or class-wide stress reduction techniques.



## Noticing Signs of Mood Problems

Most students are resilient and their occasional difficulties with mood are short-lived. If feelings of sadness or irritability become intense, out of proportion, and/or persistent over long periods of time, this may signal a more serious problem with mood. Through daily classroom interactions, educators may notice changes in student emotions and behaviour. While different signs occur at different ages, the chart below offers a listing of common signs to watch for.

Signs you might observe...	Things students may describe...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Sad mood, tearfulness</li><li>✓ Irritability, quick to anger</li><li>✓ Lack of interest and involvement in previously enjoyed activities</li><li>✓ Difficulty concentrating on tasks/activities, forgetfulness, inattention</li><li>✓ Decreased academic performance and follow-through on tasks</li><li>✓ Hypersensitivity (e.g., cries easily, overreacts to small issues)</li><li>✓ Separation anxiety</li><li>✓ Impulsive and risky behavior</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Changes in appetite</li><li>✓ Changes in sleep patterns</li><li>✓ Physical complaints (aches and pains)</li><li>✓ Sense of boredom</li><li>✓ Feelings of low self-worth</li><li>✓ Substance use</li><li>✓ Impulsive and risky behaviour</li><li>✓ Suicidal thoughts and behaviors</li></ul>

If these signs of difficulty appear to be severe, prolonged, or significantly interfere with day-to-day functioning, you may wish to have a conversation with the student and/or their parent/guardian about what you have observed. Talking with members of the school mental health leadership team can also be appropriate. In some situations, a referral to professional mental health support within the school board or community may be needed. **All disclosures of suicidal thoughts or behaviors must be taken seriously. Follow your school protocols for response and support. Never leave a student who has expressed suicidal thoughts alone without support.**

## Supporting Students with Mood Problems

Tier 2 supports can help to prevent the onset of mood problems, and/or can support recovery and minimize the negative impact of mood disorders. Educators are not mental health professionals and are not expected to provide assessment or counseling support to students who are exhibiting signs of mood problems. They are, however, able to observe, document and work collaboratively as part of a team to provide caring support at school.

For students who may be experiencing a problem with mood:

### PREVENT

- Develop understanding and vocabulary around mental health within the classroom, to reduce stigma for students who may be struggling.
- Pay particular attention to Tier 1 strategies for students at greater risk.
- Provide advance organizers and check student understanding of concepts and tasks
- Offer ample notice of tests, assignments, other deadlines. Limit timed tasks and other stressful academic demands.
- Develop a classroom coping plan with the student (this may include developing signals to indicate when they need extra support, or to remind them of a coping strategy).
- Develop a home-school communication system to share information about the student's academic, social, and emotional progress.

### SUPPORT

- Demonstrate empathy and compassion.
- Acknowledge the effort required to attend class each day.
- Check to see that there is a support person (you, another teacher, a school administrator) available to welcome the student each day.
- Check-in with the student at several points during class.
- Chunk assignments and provide support and encouragement for attempting school work.
- Correct errors or suggest improvements in the context of offering praise and support.
- Set realistic expectations and priorities collaboratively, including the student whenever possible, providing accommodations for learning (e.g., extra time for tests and assignments).
- Be aware that some situations may be particularly difficult for the student. Understand that refusals to participate may be associated with their mood problem.
- If students fall behind academically, reassure them that they can catch up. Show them the steps they need to take and be flexible and realistic about your expectations.

### BOLSTER

- If a student is returning to school following hospitalization or a prolonged absence, work collaboratively with the student, their family and their support team to develop a plan of specific strategies for reintegration considering issues of stigma, workload, missed content and reassurance.
- Look for natural opportunities to teach/reinforce problem-solving, relaxation techniques, and other coping skills.
- Model an optimistic outlook, and help the student to "find a silver lining" when challenges occur.
- Be aware and familiar with your board's procedures for dealing with students who are expressing suicidal thoughts.
- Practice self-care – it can be difficult to support students who are struggling with a mood problem.

Questions? Contact us at [kshort@smh-assist.ca](mailto:kshort@smh-assist.ca).



