

How can schools 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 problems" in Chapter 3 of the **School Administration Guide**: [http://www.edb.gov.hk/FileManager/EN/Content_693/sag%20\(2011-12\)-e.pdf](http://www.edb.gov.hk/FileManager/EN/Content_693/sag%20(2011-12)-e.pdf). For more information on various mental illnesses, please visit the following website of the Hospital Authority: <http://www.ha.org.hk/kch/eng/education/edu-index.html>.

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.).
- (ii) Teachers should be alert to the following signs indicating possible mental health problems:
 - emotional and/or behavioral problems over a sustained period of time
 - withdrawn behavior and lack of concentration
 - fatigue and tiredness over a period of time
 - irritability, emotional ups and downs
 - declining grades which are unusual for the students
 - history of family problems, recent separations, death of family member, etc.
 - frequent absence or long term absenteeism
 - problems with peers and social isolation
- (iii) 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 information not be disclosed to other parties without the consent of the parents.

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, coordinate follow up actions and when necessary, liaise with and make 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. Protective factors including personal strength, 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 educational psychologist, psychiatrist, 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:

- allow for difficulties with concentration and thinking, 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
- provide special examination accommodation according to students' needs by arranging a quiet room and/or more time for examinations

- prepare a low-stimulation ‘safe and quiet place’ where the students can take breaks for calm down if they are very anxious or overwhelmed.
- talk in simple and direct ways; listen and encourage, especially point out positive changes
- remind the students that they do not need to discuss the psychotic experience with everyone who asks, help the students with what to say to maintain privacy
- suggest that the students could confide in trusted friends, if comfortable
- encourage students to take medication and attend therapies regularly to enhance recovery
- watch out for early signs of relapse, seek medical advice as needed
- If students with mental health problems exhibit thought and language disorders, experience hallucination or delusions, do not argue with them the hallucination or delusions, might distract them by encouraging focus on doing things that interest them
- watch out for warning signs of suicide. Access the EDB webpage for symptoms, Suicide Risk Assessment Checklist and E-book on Crisis Management <http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeID=2316&langno=1>
- call the police or the ambulance in case of emergency such as 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. WHO (2000) advocates four levels of work to promote students’ mental health:
 - 1st level: focus on promoting harmonious interactions within the school and the entire community that is conducive to the development of mental health and interpersonal relationship
 - 2nd level: focus on promoting mental health of all students and teachers in terms of accurate related knowledge, attitude and behaviours
 - 3rd level: focus on those students who may be experiencing problems and need additional support by organizing early intervention activities
 - 4th level: focus on those students with significant mental health problems, provide professional intervention to help them cope
- (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. Researches showed that in schools with higher level of connectedness, the levels of student suicidal behaviour, 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, nurture strong collegial support among school staff
- ensure students with sufficient assistance and channels 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, let them make contributions and gain recognition
- appreciate uniqueness of students and give them assurance so as to help them excel with their potential and achieve success

Details of related programmes and strategies using whole-school approach can be found in the Package on Prevention of Student Suicide 2010 (EDB) (<http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeID=930&langno=1>).