

Mental Wellbeing in the Classroom

This *Teaching Tips* document is based on a workshop delivered by Natalie Roach, Mental Health Coordinator for Workplace Wellbeing Services and Student Health and Wellness.

What is mental wellbeing?

The [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) defines positive mental health as “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.”

As instructors, it’s important to keep in mind that our students may often “find it difficult to maintain emotional health and wellbeing because of the many adjustments they must make when attending university, such as having to balance academics with life commitments” ([Ryerson Mental Wellbeing](#)).

A 2016 National College Health Assessment found four major mental health-related inhibitors to academic success at Ryerson: stress (45%), anxiety (33%), sleep difficulties (31%), and depression (25%). In a snapshot of students from 2016, Ryerson students reported:

Anytime in the last 12 months	2010	2013	2016
Felt so depressed that it was difficult to function	37%	44%	49%
Felt overwhelmed	56%	61%	89%
Seriously considered suicide	7%	12%	15%
Attempted suicide	1%	2%	3%

Mental Wellbeing and Learning

When students struggle mentally, the impact manifests itself in academic performance. Stress, anxiety, and depression “decrease students’ intellectual and emotional flexibility, weaken their creativity, and undermine their interest in new knowledge, ideas, and experiences” (Douce & Keeling, 2014). Depression can suppress the brain’s ability to form new memories. Chronic stress has been shown to reduce “the desire to explore new ideas and to solve problems” (Stixrud, 2012).

Because mental health is the most frequently cited student challenge, and the most frequently identified impact is academic performance, it makes sense that one clear site for intervention could be the classroom (Patterson & Kline, 2008). To support student learning, instructors should aim to create conditions supporting mental wellbeing, and thus learning, through teaching practices. Instructors can benefit from a supportive classroom environment as well—in the words of Jennifer Poole, Associate Professor in Ryerson’s School of Social Work, creating a classroom environment that supports mental wellbeing leads to “more engaged and committed students, better relationships, [and] higher work quality.”

Classroom Practices to Support Mental Wellbeing

[Simon Fraser University](#) has mapped out a set of inter-connected conditions for creating wellbeing in the learning environment.

1. **Positive Classroom Culture:** “Creating an enjoyable and welcoming classroom culture can enhance positive wellbeing for students and instructors. This can be accomplished through humour, inspiration, open-mindedness, connecting with students or deeply engaging them in their learning.”
2. **Optimal Challenge:** “Students perform and feel their best when they are challenged, but have adequate resources to meet the challenge.”

3. **Social Connection:** “Facilitating interaction helps students build social networks which foster resilience and are an asset to well-being. Social connection in the class can help create a sense of community and positive classroom culture.”
4. **Flexibility:** “Providing students with some flexibility over their learning experiences helps them to feel empowered and supported, contributing to their well-being.”
5. **Personal Development:** “By providing opportunities for personal and professional growth in class you can increase students’ skills, resiliency and preparedness for the future.”
6. **Inclusivity:** “An inclusive learning environment demonstrates an intentional consideration for all students and in doing so, can enhance positive well-being.”
7. **Real-life Learning:** “By connecting learning to life you offer students opportunities to build their personal skills and confidence in their future.”
8. **Services and Supports:** “The in-class experience provides an important opportunity to connect students with resources that can support their personal well-being and readiness to learn.” Visit the website for [Ryerson Student Affairs](#), including [Student Learning Support](#) and [Mental Wellbeing](#).
9. **Instructor Support:** “As an instructor you play an important role in setting a positive and supportive tone that can go a long way in helping students to feel welcome and at ease.”
10. **Civic Engagement:** “Providing students with opportunities to make a valued contribution through their coursework can boost their emotional well-being.”

Instructor Behaviour

In 12 of 38 studies reviewed by Orr and Bachman-Hammig, instructor behavior was a powerful contributor to the quality of students’ experiences (2009). **Empathy and approachability** were highly valued attributes, as well as **respectful, positive, and understanding** instructors. For students, feeling that the classroom was a caring and safe environment took precedence. Approachability and empathy have also been identified as effective teacher characteristics when working with adult learners.

Students also appreciated when faculty didn’t hesitate to work with them, and in fact many students valued **faculty mentorship** as “equally important to the postsecondary experience as academic learning” (Orr & Bachman-Hammig, 2009).

Simple ways to demonstrate approachability and empathy can include sharing mistakes, being flexible and inclusive in both teaching style as well as assessment methods, and using the course outline and D2L to connect students with supports. Instructors can also think about ways to infuse course content with wellbeing topics, as in the [Engelhard Project at Georgetown University](#), which tries to find “opportunities within the regular academic content... where topics of mental health, wellness and student well-being can be highlighted, linked to course content and also considered from a personal perspective.”

Training and Support

The [Ryerson Mental Wellbeing website](#) provide students, staff and faculty, and families of students to get help, help others, and/or find out more about mental wellbeing. The site provides links to services and resources available on-campus, in the community, and online to improve and gain an awareness of mental wellbeing.

The [Centre for Student Development and Counselling \(CSDC\)](#) offers free, confidential counseling services for students in crisis.

Faculty and staff are invited to participate in Mental Health 101, a training session on how to respond to students who may be in mental health distress. Please contact Natalie Roach (natalie.roach@ryerson.ca) to find out more on upcoming sessions.

Work Cited

- American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Ryerson University Executive Summary Spring 2016. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association; 2016.
- California Education Supports Project. (n.d.). The Critical Connection Between Student Health and Academic Achievement: How Schools and Policy Makers Can Achieve a Positive Impact. University of California: California.
- Douce, L. A., & Keeling, R. P. (2014). A strategic primer on college student mental health. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Campus_Mental_Health_Primer_web_final.pdf
- Georgetown University. (2011). Engelhard Project Overview. Retrieved online at <https://cndls.georgetown.edu/engelhard/join/>
- Orr, A. C & Bachman-Hammig, S (2009). Inclusive postsecondary strategies for teaching students with learning disabilities: A review of the literature. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 181-196.
- Patterson, P., & Kline, T. (2008). Report on Post-Secondary Institutions as Healthy Settings: The Pivotal Role of Student Services. Canadian Council for Learning
- Stixrud, W.R. (2012). Why stress is such a big deal. *Journal of Management Education*, 36(2), 135-142.
- Student Services, Simon Fraser University. (2014). Well-being in learning environments. Retrieved from <http://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/learningenvironments/WLE.html>