Supporting Emerging Adolescence: Addressing Post-Pandemic Mental Health In 6-8th Grade Classrooms

A Resource Book for Educators

Presented By:
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2024
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Welcome

Who is this book for?
This resource book is geared towards educators working with 6th through 8th grade students who want to learn more about how to support their mental health! It includes information that could be helpful for anyone.

What approach guides this book?
This book applies the intersection of health and education to address this timely topic. It also uses a trauma-informed lens in order to further support students and educators.

How should I use this book?
This book includes a range of information from interventions for educators to apply to further resources. Educators should connect with this book in whatever way feels accessible for themselves and their students!
Background

The Role of Schools

Schools function as a protective factor in the lives of many students. As shown in Brofenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Figure 1), schools are within a child’s microsystem and one of their closest influential factors. Due to this, the experiences a child has in or around school contribute heavily to their development. Schools and educators have the opportunity to provide protection and prevention in the lives of emerging adolescents.

![Figure 1. Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory.]

Underfunding in Schools and Lack of Teacher Resources

Low and inequitable funding in schools takes away from their ability to provide the most effective, protective, and equitable environment for all students. As of 2022, more than 12% of students attended school in a district without school psychologists. Schools with high populations of color or English language learners are consistently underfunded based on state and local revenue. Schools with low funding and staffing are not set up to provide teachers with the resources needed to best support students in their mental health journeys.
Background

Emerging Adolescent Mental Health
Across age ranges and demographics, mental health was severely impacted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of emerging adolescents reporting poor mental health is increasing. The trends in CDC data are negative, and highlight a need for increased support.

Mental health in students in 2021
- 42% of students felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities
- 29% experienced poor mental health over a 30 day period
- 22% seriously considered attempting suicide

2021 Data Trends per demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Students</th>
<th>LGBTQ+ Students</th>
<th>Hispanic and Multiracial Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nearly 60% experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
<td>70% reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
<td>Are more likely than Black, white, or BIPOC students to experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% seriously considered attempting suicide</td>
<td>37% made a suicide plan</td>
<td>Can face significant cultural barriers to accessing mental health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% attempted suicide</td>
<td>More than 20% attempted suicide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance
The data shows a pressing need to address this now. Mental health in emerging adolescents is more than feeling sad, and impacts multiple areas of a child’s life. Mental health problems increase other health and behavioral problems, like drug use, risky sexual behaviors, and exposure to violence. Health habits formed during this time set the stage for healthy behavior in adulthood.
Developmental Stages

Current 6th through 8th graders were in elementary school when the COVID-19 pandemic began. At that age, children rely on social interactions to develop feelings of pride, accomplishment, and competence. Remote learning meant that these interactions were not present in the same way, meaning these students missed the school setting to build relevant psychosocial skills.

Now, these students are emerging adolescents, a period where they are grappling with their identity and independence. Schools remain extremely influential, allowing these students to try different roles and develop their sense of self. Many common mental health problems also begin to present around this time, and this trend has increased post-COVID. However, students of this age lack the psychological resiliency of adults, and need extra support and structure to effectively address this.

Depression and Anxiety Disorders by Age
Common Mental Health Issues

Here is a brief background on some common things you might come across with students. We want to emphasize that it is not an educator’s job to diagnose or treat these conditions. This information is included to provide some insight into what students could be experiencing that impacts them in the classroom.

Depression and Mood Disorders

These consist of a low mood that lasts for a significant period of time and interferes with normal, everyday functioning. This is considered an internalizing disorder, as it primarily affects thoughts and feelings. Symptoms can include feeling sad, low self-esteem, and changes in sleep or appetite among other things. Going through a major life change or stressful event can increase risk. Things to look out for include students being persistently sad, irritable, and tired, sudden school difficulties, not wanting to participate in activities they previously enjoyed, or exhibiting suicidal risk signs.

Anxiety

This consists of severe fears or worries that interfere with normal, daily life. It is also considered an internalizing disorder. Symptoms include persistent anxious thoughts, trouble sleeping, physical effects like stomachaches, or experiencing panic attacks. Students may withdraw or lash out, constantly seek reassurance, seem extremely self-conscious, avoid new and challenging situations, or want to stay home from school.

Trauma

Many children experience or witness traumatic events, and experience a wide range of reactions. Among other things, traumatic event can be a natural disaster, act of violence, or serious accident. Symptoms that may appear after the event include physical signs, trouble sleeping, nightmares or unwanted recollections of the event, feelings of guilt, or low mood. In school, students may withdraw from friends, perform poorly academically, or avoid talking about the event. While many of these symptoms are normal in the immediate aftermath, if they persist, students should be connected with a healthcare provider. Considering over 50% of adults report a childhood traumatic event, trauma-informed teaching can be a useful protective element.

Many of the symptoms or presentations have significant overlap. It is not necessary to fully distinguish, but this information may be useful in acknowledging how students may be impacted in how they show up.
Trauma Informed Practices

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, up to two-thirds of U.S. children had experienced serious childhood trauma. During the pandemic a collective trauma swept the world, affecting people in all corners of life. Teaching post-pandemic must be trauma-informed teaching due to the extreme circumstances children were put through at young ages. Methods, guides, and practices in this book are based on research into trauma-informed teaching and incorporate the most critical factors.

Trauma-informed practices are broad and can be adjusted to fit specific school cultures, needs, and student traumas. Below are a few examples of trauma-informed best practices when working with any student, whether or not they have experienced trauma.

Create a Classroom Safe Space
Foster a space where students feel safe, respected, and comfortable can aid in healing and strong school relationships.

Be Aware of and Acknowledge Triggers
Check lessons and materials beforehand and allow students the opportunity to opt out of activities that may include triggering subjects.

Build Strong Relationships with Students
Being a trusted adult in a student’s life can help them feel comfortable at school and allow educators to notice red flags or warning signs sooner.

Move Away From Harsh Discipline
Restorative practices and intentional corrections can allow students to feel comfortable making mistakes in the classroom.

Take Care of Yourself as an Educator
Trauma-informed practices do not stop at the student. Everyone can utilize and benefit from them. To take care of a classroom or a student, one must take care of themselves.
SAMHSA’s Key Principles

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) elaborated on and expanded original principles of trauma-informed education practices to create these six key principles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAFETY</th>
<th>Understanding safety and ensuring that it is available for all school members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY</td>
<td>There is clear communication between all parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEER SUPPORT</td>
<td>Creating systems of help for communities with collective traumas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY</td>
<td>Working with all parties to create plans and methods, horizontal power structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, AND CHOICE</td>
<td>Ensuring that those who have experienced trauma are in control of their further experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES</td>
<td>Access for marginalized communities to identify specific care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intervention Spectrum

Mental health is addressed and treated in a variety of ways. Since students spend a large portion of their time in schools, it can be useful for educators and school professionals to be aware of different processes for promotion, prevention, treatment, and maintenance.

While it is rarely the job of an educator to treat or maintain a mental health condition in a child, the knowledge of best practices can help guide classroom behavior.
Promotion

The promotion of mental health awareness, understanding, and strength seeks to disrupt the possibility of a person developing a mental health disorder. This is done through encouraging healthy behaviors and protective factors.

Some examples of mental health promotion in the classroom are...

- Utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices to ensure that all children are on an equitable playing field
- Keeping and teaching books that discuss mental health struggles and reduce stigma
  - Books should discuss a variety of issues and include diverse subjects
- Encouraging a classroom culture that promotes student wellbeing

In the school as a whole...

- Ensuring that all students have access to appropriate resources and support systems within the school
- Implementing programs to focus on youth/community development, violence prevention, and at-risk student protection
Prevention

A step on from promotion is active prevention of mental health struggles or diagnosed disorders. This can be done on a universal, selective, or individual level, based on the needs of the students and the community and the severity of the situation.

Some examples of mental health disorder prevention in the classroom are...

- Looking out for warning signs and concerning student behavior
- Promoting and teaching healthy habits such as self-care, time management, and strong social connections
- Creating opportunities for supportive connection between students as well as between students and faculty

In the school as a whole...

- Implementing school wide curricula or assemblies that increase mental health awareness and literacy
- Creating specified support groups for at-risk populations such as students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and female students.
- Increasing resources for school counselors to have individual time with students
Treatment

Once a mental health struggle is identified and diagnosed in a child, professionals will move into a treatment phase. While active treatment is not the responsibility of a classroom teacher it can be useful to understand common treatment plans and levels of intervention.

Some examples of mental health treatment in the classroom are...

- Understanding and recognizing professional treatment plans that may be in use
  - Reducing stigma around treatment methods and mental health struggles through normalization
- Learning to recognize warning signs so that early intervention strategies can be utilized
  - For example: referral to counselors, grounding and self-care techniques, etc.

In the school as a whole...

- Advocating for or funding counselors and mental health professionals
- Implementing specified programs that address mental health needs for individual groups
  - For example: support groups for LGBTQ+ students, affinity groups for BIPOC students, disability access groups, etc.
Maintenance

Maintenance is a long term effort to continue treatment and reach stable mental health goals. Like treatment, it is not the responsibility of educators to ensure that it is occurring but it can be aided by classroom and school efforts.

Some examples of mental health maintenance in the classroom are...

- Destigmatizing mental health in the classroom and ensuring that conversations are normalized and continued
- Implementing mental health curricula and trauma informed practices into teaching all students, regardless of risk factors
- Encouraging methods used in promotion and prevention
  - If there is knowledge surrounding specific needs, these methods can be tailored or altered to best help students

In the school as a whole...

- Maintaining mental health staff and ensuring that there are systems in place to support all persons within the school
- Supporting students in their needs and treatment plans through individual, specified, and group efforts
Implementable Actions

The following resources are organized based on the time they would take to implement in a classroom setting, including both prep work and actual implementation. This is a sampling of a broad range of resources and plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>TIME NEEDED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLASSROOM POSTERS</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKSHEETS AND GUIDES</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOOKS, WEBPAGES, AND RESOURCES</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LESSON PLANS</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLASSROOM CONVERSATION</td>
<td>&gt;1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATION</td>
<td>&gt;1 hour</td>
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SUPPORTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

6 Tips to Practice Self-Care

- Spend time with friends
- Take a walk outside
- Move your body
- Nourish your body
- Listen to music
- Watch a comfort movie
How do you...

PRIORITIZE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

Talk with trusted friends and adults if you're struggling. Lean on support provided by those around you.

Take time to rest and relax when you need it. Give your body what it needs.

Create and keep boundaries that feel good to you.

Ask at school or at home for resources so you can learn more.
TAKE A BOX
BREATHE

INHALE

5 SECONDS
EACH

EXHALE
WHAT FLOATS MY BOAT?

Name: _____________  Date: __________

You've probably used the expression, “whatever floats your boat” before in casual conversation. Today, we'll think about what it takes to keep the boat of your emotions sailing freely and easily!

Imagine your mind is a sailboat floating on an open pond. When you're feeling happy, supported, or peaceful the pond is full and your sailboat floats easily. When you're feeling out of control or upset, the water level is much lower and your boat has a harder time staying afloat. Use this worksheet to help consider what makes the water levels in your pond change.

List up to 3 situations where you know your pond is full:

- 🚣‍♂️
- 🚴‍♀️
- 🏃‍♀️

List up to 3 situations where you know your pond is empty:

- 🚣‍♂️
- 🚴‍♀️
- 🏃‍♀️

What helps keep your pond full when things are good?

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

How do you refill your pond when it’s close to empty?

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Who is one person you know you can go to when it feels hard to fill your pond?

________________________________________
### Self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel inspired when...</th>
<th>I’m really good at...</th>
<th>I’m not a natural at...</th>
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### Collaboration

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<th>This is what I bring to a team...</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>This is what I need from a team...</th>
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### Tough Times

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<th>I do ______________ when I need help...</th>
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<tr>
<th>These are the ways I prefer to receive critical feedback...</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>These are the ways I like to receive positive feedback...</th>
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Worksheets and Guides

Infographics and Image-Based Guides to Mindfulness and Self-Care

For Educators: CDC Guide to Mental Health Practices in Schools

Recent data shows adolescent mental health is getting worse and has brought national attention to the important role schools play in promoting mental health and well-being.

- In 2021, 42% of high school students reported having felt so sad or hopeless for at least two weeks in the past year that they couldn’t engage in their regular activities, and 22% of high school students reported that they had seriously considered suicide.1
- The data for female students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning students, and students who have experienced racism in school shows they are even more likely to experience poor mental health.2,3
- When youth experience poor mental health, they are also at increased risk of school absence and dropout, risky sexual behavior, and illicit substance use.4,5
Books, Webpages, and Resources

These are some examples of age appropriate books addressing mental health that can be recommended and made available.
Books, Webpages, and Resources

Say It Out Loud is an interactive online card game centering conversations and learning around mental health.

Easy To Play
Take turns asking each other questions.

Play It Your Way
Play with one other person or in a group.

Learn Together
Express your thoughts. Listen to others. Create a safe space to explore mental health.
Books, Webpages, and Resources

New State of Mind:
Youth Mental Health Guide

For Kids, By Kids Mental Health Guide

“The best way to stay stress free from all this is to set a schedule! Do not fall into the comfort of your own home until school work is done. Reward your hard work once it is completed. Have a treat!”

-Eren

This is an online, accessible mental health guide written by students for students. It contains suggestions for during and after the pandemic, and shows other people’s experiences to reduce stigma.
# LESSON PLAN

**Grade:** Middle School  
**Subject:** Health (Mental Health)  
**Date:**

**Topic:** Checking in on Yourself with the Feelings Wheel  
**Lesson Length:** 30 Minutes

**Lesson Focus and Goals:**
- Improving mental health literacy
- Improving student self-understanding and ability to voice and explain complex feelings
- Integrating coping skills and self-maintenance practices into school life
- Encouraging active conversation around feelings in overall school culture

**Materials Needed:**
- Feelings wheel (attached below)
- Blank feelings wheel (attached below)
- Writing utensil

**Learning Objectives:**
- Students will be able to...
  - Recognize and categorize complex feelings
  - Utilize tools to manage feelings

**Structure / Activity:**

Pass out copies of the feelings wheel and the blank feelings wheel.

Spark the lesson by having students pick 2-3 words on the wheel that they feel drawn (either emotionally or generally) and sharing out if they desire. (~5 minutes)

Introduce the original feelings wheel and explain the structure. The wheel expands from the center, getting more specific as the feelings move outward. Students can use this to understand simple feelings with more complexity or to express feelings they may not have the vocabulary for. (~10 minutes)

Instruct students to use the blank feelings wheel to fill in the words that they feel connect to them. This wheel will not be collected and should only be shared at the discretion of the student. Give students time to both find the feelings words that connect best to them and to briefly journal about the meaning or intention behind these words. (~10 minutes)

Close the lesson by having students store their personal feelings wheel in a notebook or folder and the original feelings wheel somewhere they can easily access it. A copy could also be printed at poster size for classroom use.

**Follow Up:**

Students can now be instructed to use the feelings wheel if they are having trouble expressing or discussing complex emotions. There should be no assessment on this lesson.
LESSON PLAN

Grade: Middle School  Subject: Health (Mental Health)  Date: 

Topic: Build Your Mental Health Toolkit  Lesson Length: 45 Minutes

Lesson Focus and Goals:
- Utilizing self-care tools and putting them into action
- Documenting feelings and helpful tactics
- Creating strong foundations for continued mental health maintenance
- Using art and design to ease possibly complex conversations

Materials Needed:
- Paper
- Writing utensils
- Craft supplies
- Scissors

Learning Objectives:
Students will be able to...
- Recognize what helps them in trying situations
- Document and solidify self-care actions

Structure / Activity:

Warm-up: Introduce the idea of a zine (small, art-based information booklet) and have students follow these instructions to create the structure of their book. (~10 minutes)

Introduce self-care tactics and ways that students can implement them. Specific examples may be taking walks, spending time with friends, practicing mindfulness, or finding community. Graphics or posters may be used to elaborate. (~10 minutes)

Give students time to brainstorm their own self-care strategies that feel appropriate for them. If students need guidance, prompt them to consider times when they have been frustrated, angry, or sad, and to think about what made them feel better. They can also consider what makes them feel happy consistently. (~5 minutes)

Students can then create a zine with their self-care tactics, adding what works best for them as well as drawings, stickers, or any other embellishments. (~15 minutes)

To close the lesson, instruct students to keep these zines and feel free to utilize or update them as they see fit. If there is time and students are comfortable, they may share out some ideas to the whole class or in small groups. The zines will not be collected. (~5 minutes)

Follow Up:

If students desire, zines can be copied and duplicated. This lesson can also be done at the beginning and then end of the year with comparisons.
# LESSON PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade: Middle School</th>
<th>Subject: Health (Mental Health)</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic: Mental Health Literacy</td>
<td>Lesson Length: 1 hour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lesson Focus and Goals:**
- Guiding mental health literacy
- Reducing stigma surrounding conversations about mental health
- Creating paths for self-care, advocacy, and school-wide efforts
- Increase skills surrounding recognizing and caring for mental health struggles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials Needed:</th>
<th>Learning Objectives:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer (individual or group)</td>
<td>Students will be able to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>• Recognize and name common mental health struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing utensil</td>
<td>• Recognize and implement care strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft supplies (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Structure / Activity:**

**Warm-up:** Have students create a K-W-L chart in a notebook or on scrap paper. One column is what they already know about mental health, the second is things they want to know, and the final is used at the end of the lesson to describe what they learned. If time allows, have students who desire share out either what they know or want to know. (~10 minutes)

Place students in groups of 3 and direct them to this website (mentalhealthliteracy.org). Give students time to explore the website and pick out things that interest them. (~15 minutes)

Instruct students to, in their groups, put together a list of 5 things that surprised them, 5 things that confused them, and 5 things they think everyone should know. They can use craft supplies to make these lists creative or simply write them on paper. (~30 minutes)

Close the lesson by having students go back to their K-W-L charts and individually fill out the highlights from what they learned. This can be a reflection of their previous lists or personal information. The charts will not be shared.

**Follow Up:**

Copies can be made of the group lists to be stored by students or taken home. If there are pertinent confusions, they can be addressed in class or moved to a future lesson.

Another lesson could also be built off of what students think everyone should know. This could be built into a larger advocacy effort, especially in higher grades.
If there is a noted lack of or shift in energy in a classroom, either due to current events, external factors, or an unknown reason, a classroom conversation may be helpful alongside other mental health based curricula.

All students are different and need different levels and forms of support. This conversation should be supplemented with other appropriate resources such as guided lessons, individual conversations, or assistance from a school counselor or official. Remember that marginalized students may need identity based support, outside of full classroom conversations.

Reach out to school mental health professionals for specific guidance.

- Introduce the conversation with care and compassion, outlining classroom norms and expectations of respect and understanding. If possible, allow some students to opt out or express concern with a topic without drawing extra attention to themselves.
- Remind students that a classroom is a place for learning, not only about the subjects at hand but also about oneself as a learner. Emphasize that the role of an educator is to support both forms of learning.
- Acknowledge a tone shift and discuss with students if there is a specific (appropriate for classroom discussion) incident that may have opened this issue.
- Work collaboratively with students to create a plan for moving forward that both parties feel supports active and trauma-informed learning practices. This may include extensions on assignments, altered lesson plans, or continued conversations and check-ins with students.
- Ensure that students are aware of the resources available to them in and out of the school.
INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATION PLAN

If a student is exhibiting new and concerning behavior, consider holding a conversation with them about supporting them in the classroom.

Before this conversation is held, guardians, school counselors, or other officials (depending on the situation and external factors) should be contacted and informed. This conversation is not to reveal answers to concerns but rather to find out how to best support a student in the classroom.

Remember that different students experience things differently. Marginalized groups are more likely to be affected and may need more specific supports related to their identity. Work with the student the best you can but remember that the help does not stop in the classroom.

- Find a safe time to invite the student into conversation, ensure that there is no implication that they are in trouble. Then, set up a comfortable time and place in which to talk to the student when you will have enough time to properly care for the situation
- Begin by engaging the student in simple conversation before delving into specifics
- If there are specific trends you have been noticing or worrying about, bring them up in a gentle way, focusing on support rather than mistakes
- Transition into working with the student to find specific support techniques that will help them in the classroom (e.g. quiet time, individual work rather than group work, extra time on assignments, etc.)
- Allow the student to take control of these techniques and guide them through taking care of themselves in ways you have collaborated on
- Remind the student that you are a support system and there to help them do their best in and out of the classroom
Self Care for Educators

In discussions of mental health in schools, educators are often left out. To ensure healthy and thriving classrooms, it is critical to provide teachers and education professionals with the tools and resources to take care of both their students and themselves.

Strong self-care can reduce rates of burnout, create strong school relationships, and help foster a healthier learning environment. The first step to supporting students is supporting yourself.

**Setting Clear Boundaries**
Finding the correct work/life balance and maintaining effective boundaries can help reduce burnout overtime.

**Advocating to Administration**
Whether it be for more resources, equitable time off, etc, ensuring that the perspective & needs of teachers are being voiced is an act of self-care.

**Utilizing School Resources**
Locating existing resources within the school or district can be a helpful first step toward self-care within the school setting.

**Practicing Mindfulness**
Utilizing therapy, finding a personal mindfulness practice, and working toward general self-care aids in school and personal life.
Additional Resources

For Students

Warmlines

Middle Grade Books about Mental Health

BIPOC Mental Health Guide

The Trevor Project

For Educators

Teachers Pay Teachers

Children’s Mental Health Information

School Mental Health Quality Guide
Hotlines + Emergency Care

In Case of Immediate Emergency

- 911

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

- Call/text 988
- For deaf/hard of hearing accommodation dial 711 then 988

Crisis Text Line

- Text HOME to 741741

Warmline Directory

- State-specific directory

Substance Abuse/Mental Services Helpline

- (800) 662-4357

LGBTQ+ Hotline

- Call 1-866-488-7386
- Text START to 678-678

Child Abuse Hotline

- (800) 422-4453
Sources


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Conclusion

We hope this book provides some resources on how to address a highly prevalent and pressing topic. While this may seem overwhelming, it is important to remember to support yourself, and that you are one element of all the support in a child’s life. This is a starting point for potential materials and conversation, but there are many other ways to approach talking about mental health and incorporating it into your classroom in a way that is sustainable for you.

Contact

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