Health Promoting Schools

Mentally Healthy Schools

Promoting mental and emotional wellbeing
‘...young people spend close to half their waking hours in school and inevitably the quality of experiences with teachers and peers in that setting will affect emotional wellbeing.’

(Patton 2000)

**Aims of Mentally Healthy Schools**

**Mentally healthy schools aim to:**

- promote mental health for all students and staff
- educate for and about mental health
- implement a range of initiatives to support the specific mental health needs of students, staff and their families.

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This booklet is to provide information for school personnel ( Principals, Board of Trustees members and teaching staff).
Promotion of mental and emotional wellbeing

Mental and emotional wellbeing include how adults and young people feel, think, behave and think about themselves. Mentally healthy schools stress the importance of every teacher being a teacher for mental health. For example, initiatives to promote mental health such as anti-harassment and bullying programmes can be most effective when every teacher stands as a role model as well as protecting and modelling respect for the rights and responsibilities of students.

Four key factors have been identified that underpin mental health promotion in schools:

- an acknowledgement of the importance of school ethos and climate
- a comprehensive approach to mental health
- empowerment and student involvement
- addressing barriers to learning.

(Bennett & Coggan 1999)

The following definitions and features underpin mental health promotion initiatives in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Mental Health

Mental health is one of the four dimensions of hauora/wellbeing. Taha hinengaro/mental and emotional wellbeing is interdependent with other dimensions of hauora – taha whānau/social wellbeing, taha tinana/physical wellbeing and taha wairua/spiritual wellbeing. The concept of hauora as applied to mental health represents the need for individuals to be connected socially, emotionally and spiritually in a way that enables them to have a sense of belonging and to feel valued and acknowledged as members of whānau/family and the wider community.

Mental Health Promotion

Mental health promotion aims to help individuals and communities take control over their own lives and improve their mental health. It involves strategies that foster supportive environments and individual resilience while showing respect for culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.
The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa and Mentally Healthy Schools

The six key principles of the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002:9) are based on the understanding that youth development:

- is shaped by the ‘big picture’
- is about young people being connected
- is based on a consistent strengths-based approach
- happens through quality relationships
- is triggered when young people fully participate
- needs good information.

This means that young people are more likely to grow up knowing that:

- they can make a positive contribution to society and have opportunities to do so
- they have supportive and caring connections with a range of groups and people who care about them
- they can influence their own lives through choices and skills
- they feel good about who they are and what they can offer.
Mentally Healthy Schools and the healthy development of young people

- Student and staff wellbeing is supported through the maintenance of a safe social and emotional working and learning environment.
- An environment where students and staff are valued and where they are encouraged to reach their full potential is provided.
- A sense of self-worth of all members of the school community is fostered through the implementation of relevant policies and practices.
- Positive mental health is modelled.
- Positive effort and achievement is acknowledged.
- Communication is respectful.
- Attitudes are caring and nurturing.
- Relationships between staff and students are warm.
- Positive help-seeking behaviour is encouraged by providing accessible and culturally supportive systems and services.
School climate and ethos

A mentally healthy school climate embraces the entire social and teaching and learning contexts of the school. The evidence for a healthy school ethos is that the climate of the school reflects the philosophy and formal statements that describe what the school is about, and that these ideas are owned and shared by all members of the school community.

‘Schools with positive climates are places where people care, respect and trust one another, and where the school organization cares, respects and trusts people. In such a school people feel a high sense of pride and ownership which comes from each individual having a role in making the school a better place.’

(Pransky 1991)

The development of a healthy student self-concept and sense of mental and emotional wellbeing is the direct result of all that happens within the school towards both students and other members of the school community.

Pransky (1991) has referred to school climate as ‘those qualities of the school and the people in the school which affect how people feel when they are there’.
The following comments by young people reflect how school climate and ethos impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing.

‘When I first came here (school), there was the Principal and he was very welcoming. People were very friendly right from the start and teachers had a big input. That would probably be a big factor. It felt warm.’

(Year 10 student)

‘I found the teachers here (school) more down to earth and they are willing to speak to you as a human being rather than you are the student and you are here to learn. Here, it’s more like they want you to learn, not expect you to. I really enjoy my subjects now.’

(Year 13 student)

A whole school approach to mental health promotion

Mental health promotion aims to reach as many people in the population as possible. The inverted triangle over the page offers a way for schools to identify the range of mental health initiatives they are already involved in. The triangle also positions mental health education, interventions and treatment within a mental health promotion model.
The World Health Organization’s four-level, whole-school approach to school change

**World Health Organization model**

Each layer of the model is underpinned by the following perspectives:

- believing in the capability and capacity of young people to develop, learn and achieve wellbeing
- looking for strengths and assets as opposed to problems and deficits
- avoiding the trap of labelling and reinforcing ‘problematic’ behaviour or a pathological focus on mental illness
- understanding both at an individual level and at a community level the factors that are impacting on a young person’s mental and emotional wellbeing.
Involving children and young people in mental health promotion initiatives

‘The main impact is that students have had their say and that this information has been acted on.’

(teacher)

Involving young people is an important part of mental health promotion. The reasons for this are that:

• empowering young people to make decisions about how school affects their lives helps foster resilience
• involving young people in working in partnership with adults means that strategies for mental health promotion are developed from a shared philosophy rather than an agenda set by adults.

The following comment from a teacher demonstrates the value of the active involvement of young people.

‘It’s been the power of good for some of the students because we didn’t involve all of our ‘good kids’...we specifically involved some of the ones who’ve been suspended or in trouble and some of them have turned around in behaviours with no other types of interventions and some of them at least have a better relationship with some of the adults in the school.’
What schools can do to promote mental health

In school settings promoting the wellbeing of children and young people can involve:

• promoting resilience
• enhancing connectedness to school
• fostering personal identity and self-worth
• implementing mental health education programmes such as Mental Health Matters
• providing supportive pastoral care and guidance systems
• promoting avenues for seeking help
• providing a safe and supportive learning and social environment
• providing programmes to enhance protective factors
• developing clear processes for the identification, support and referral of students at risk
• supporting young people in distress
• implementing school procedures for providing immediate crisis support, traumatic incident management and ongoing support for those affected by the crisis event.
Questions schools can begin to ask about mental health

- What understanding do staff, parents/caregivers and students have of mental and emotional wellbeing?
- How does the school support the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff and students?
- What are some further ways that the school could promote mental and emotional wellbeing?
- What are the challenges to addressing mental and emotional wellbeing in the school?
- How might the school community become involved in the promotion of mental and emotional wellbeing?

These, and any other questions the school might develop, are a positive way to begin assessing and evaluating where the school is currently at and where to from here.

Resources

- Guidelines for Mentally Healthy Schools. Mental Health Foundation 2001

Websites

- Mental Health Foundation [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)
- Health Promoting Schools [www.hps.org.nz](http://www.hps.org.nz)
For further information contact your local Health Promoting Schools advisor and visit the HPS website: www.hps.org.nz

Contact details for your local HPS advisor:

A Health Promoting School fosters a happy, healthy, supportive and caring environment for students, staff and families.