

Recognising those in need of support

Even in a supportive school that promotes wellbeing, some people may find it difficult to ask for help and need encouragement to seek support.

There are several warning signs or risk factors that might indicate the need for additional support or professional advice. These include negative thoughts or feelings that are extreme or persistent; or a change in someone's behaviour, academic performance or ways of coping with stress. The presence of warning signs or risk factors does not necessarily indicate a mental health problem, but may suggest the need for extra support.

There are a number of feelings, thoughts, behaviours or situations that a child or young person who may need extra support might be experiencing. These could include:

- **Feelings:** Feelings of anxiety, guilt, sadness; swinging between positive and negative feelings; feeling bad about themselves, e.g. their appearance.
- **Thoughts:** Experiencing frequent negative or worrying thoughts, sometimes about study pressures or school failure; having difficulty concentrating or making decisions; experiencing rapid thoughts or ideas.
- **Behaviour:** Being withdrawn and avoiding social contact; crying easily and frequently; expressing irritation or aggressiveness; showing a decline in academic performance; being lethargic; talking or writing about things that do not make sense; neglecting their personal appearance; changes in patterns of sleeping and eating; exhibiting extreme

behaviours, e.g. aggression, risk taking, substance use; self-harming or suicidal behaviour.

- **Situations:** Being bullied, teased or ostracised; family conflict; breakdown of relationships and friendships; concerns over sexuality; having a parent or carer with a mental illness; surviving a traumatic event; having a serious chronic illness.

A child or young person may experience several of these signs or situations, particularly over a couple of weeks or longer. As a teacher, consider talking to a young person and/or referring them to a counsellor if they tell you about or seem to be experiencing some of them. If it is a younger child who you feel may need extra support, express your concerns to your principal, and then if appropriate speak with the child's family to discuss your observations.

It is important to remember, that it is not the teacher's role to diagnose, label, counsel or treat the mental health problems of students. Rather, the role of the teacher is to observe the behaviour, thoughts, emotions and situation of the students. A minor or short-term change, or an isolated incident, may not be a problem. There is more cause for concern if the behaviour or issue seems to be severe, persists over time, or if there are several problems occurring together.

How should I respond to a troubled student?

If you feel a student may have emotional or mental health problems, here is a guide to how you might respond. The same principles apply if you think a colleague or other adult may need extra support. Just remember the G R I P framework:



G – Gather

- Gather and analyse information to decide whether the person might need additional support.
- Look out for the warning signs and risk factors, such as changes in academic performance, behaviour, or relations with others.

R - Respond

- Talk to the troubled person. Be compassionate and listen with empathy to their story - avoid getting too involved, being judgemental, or suggesting solutions.
- Respect confidentiality, but be honest about your duty of care - you have to tell others if there is a risk of violence, abuse or self-harm.

I – Involve

- Involve others, including family if appropriate; link the student with the school counsellor, or with another counselling professional or youth worker.
- Maintain a connection with the student and follow up a little later to see if things have improved.

P – Promote

- Promote a healthy school environment (see Promoting Resilience on the Response Ability website at www.responseability.org).
- Be a model for your students; promote tolerance, do not allow put-downs, and encourage people to challenge their negative self-talk.

But what would I actually say?

If you have never had to discuss a sensitive issue with someone, think about what language you might feel comfortable using and how to make your conversation natural. It might help to set up a role-play with another student teacher or staff member. Here are some tips:

Ask - Find a quiet moment to talk and ask open-ended questions, rather than those which can be pushed away with a simple yes or no. Rather than saying, “Is everything okay?” try a question which invites a more detailed response, such as, “How are you feeling?” or perhaps, “How are things going at the moment?”

Be approachable - If the person is not ready to talk to you, reassure them that they can choose to talk another time. “That’s fine - if you did ever have things on your mind though, you can always talk to me about them.”

Suggest someone else - If you are still concerned but the person does not want to talk to you, encourage them to find someone else. For example: “Sometimes it helps to talk about things ... if you did have something on your mind, who could you talk to?” You might suggest a brother or sister, a friend, another teacher or the school counsellor.

Listen – Listen with empathy and give them room to tell their own story. Avoid getting too involved, offering solutions, or reacting emotionally or in a judgemental way. Their values and situation may be different from your own. Reflect back what they say to make sure you understand and to show empathy. “I can understand that - it must be hard for you when your parents are fighting.”

Talk about confidentiality - Respect confidentiality, but be honest about your duty of care. You have to tell others (but only those who need to know) if there is a risk of violence, abuse or self-harm to the student or someone else. Explain this in a firm but understanding way. “I want you to trust me and be able to talk to me. In general, I won’t pass on things you tell me in confidence. But if I think someone’s going to get seriously hurt, I have to tell someone else about it, so we can help. It’s part of my job as a teacher.”



Involve others - If the situation is complex you need to refer a student to someone else, such as the school counsellor. Explain this in a helpful way, and offer to link the student with the right person. “I can see you're in a really difficult situation I think talking to (name, e.g. school counsellor)... might help. Would you be able to tell him /her what you told me? I can come with you / introduce you, if you like.”

Maintain a connection - Keep in touch, even if other people have taken over the main role of trying to help. Observe the student's behaviour and relationships to see whether things have improved. Find a quiet moment to ask: “How are things going with ...?” Or, “How have things been since you talked to ...?”

Keep trying - If the problem has not improved, encourage the student to persevere. You might say: “I'm sorry to hear things haven't gotten any better for you ... Did it help when you talked to...?” A long term or complex problem may need more work, so empathise and offer encouragement: “I know that must be frustrating ... but maybe this will take a while to work out... Will you keep working on it with ...?”

If no progress is being made, the student might connect better with someone else. Encourage them to keep trying. “That must be really disappointing ... Let's see, what else we could try? It might help to talk to someone else, like (suggest a person or service) ... Can I help you get in touch with them?”

Promote - Ask yourself what the school can do as a whole. This might mean reviewing policies or procedures after an incident has occurred, or working together on how to re-integrate a student back in to the school community after some time away. Perhaps you can encourage other teachers to take a more active role in creating a supportive environment, or you could raise issues about professional development. While your response to a troubled individual is important, do not forget your role as a member of the wider school community.

What about suicidal thoughts?

If you think that a person may be so unhappy they might consider suicide, ask about suicidal thoughts – this will not

make them attempt suicide, but may help you to get appropriate help for them. “Are things so bad that you have been thinking about hurting yourself?” If a student is suicidal:

Do not panic, ignore the situation, act shocked, make them feel guilty, threaten or be angry with them, dismiss their problems, and do not promise to keep the situation secret.

Do ask if they have a plan to act on their thoughts, take them seriously and stay calm. If they seem very distressed or close to hurting themselves, remove weapons, car keys or other items they might use, and make sure someone stays with them.

Get help. Seek urgent professional support for the person by linking them with a school counsellor, GP, mental health worker or other professional. If there is an immediate risk, contact a mental health crisis team or emergency department at your local hospital. For more detailed information refer to the Response Ability fact sheet, Suicide: Responding to Risk.

Further support and information

If you or someone you know is experiencing a problem with thoughts, feelings or relationships, there are a number of professionals who may be able to help.

Whenever you start at a new school, develop a relationship with your school counsellor and find out about local services. Here are some services you could consider:

- The school counsellor, or support workers available through district offices;
- Local GPs, especially youth friendly ones;
- Youth centres and services (government or non-government);
- Youth health / mental health services (part of local government health services) such as Headspace: www.headspace.org.au;



- Your local hospital (child and adolescent services; emergency services);
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer support groups;
- Local drug and alcohol support groups or services (government or non-government);
- Psychologists or counsellors (many operate privately in the community);
- Psychiatrists (doctors who have specialised in mental illness); and
- Lifeline (13 11 14) or Kids Help Line for ages 5 to 25 (1800 55 1800).

Sources and Links

If you or someone you know would like more information about mental health, particularly the mental health of young people, here are some suggestions:

Response Ability: www.responseability.org

MindMatters: www.mindmatters.edu.au

Health Direct Australia: www.healthdirect.gov.au

HeadStrong: www.headstrong.org.au

Orygen Youth Health: oyh.org.au

SANE Australia: www.sane.org

ReachOut.com: www.reachout.com