

MindMatters Plus: INFO SHEET NO.12

MANAGING THE POTENTIAL FOR STIGMA

Use: Building Staff Capacity

Audience: All Staff

Intent: Early Intervention

Adolescents value being considered 'normal' by others and often prefer to merge into a group of peers as they continue to clarify their individual identities. Simultaneously they value authentic relationships with supportive adults who care about them and can help them make sense of themselves and their worlds. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Ask the Children Series)

Whenever schools identify students and offer extra support in a particular area, they engage with this tension for students and need to consider how best to provide support without risking a negative experience of stigma for the student. When the support being considered relates to mental health concerns (such as screening for anxiety and depression for example) the risk of stigma is greater as community misunderstanding about mental illness and associated fears of staff and parents can be added to those of students ("Are you saying we're mad?").

The MindMatters resource and professional development have provided schools with awareness of the vital importance of becoming well informed about mental health issues. They have focused on ways to engage with students about related issues in a positive and constructive way within the normal operation of the school.

The following tips draw on the experience of MindMatters Plus which has focused efforts on students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing. See Topic sheets 2,3,6,7 and the Students Supporting Students DVD for related ideas.

Promote diversity and inclusion within the broad school community so that individual differences are valued.

The following reports from young people are taken from Topic sheet 3 Unheard Voices.

Students point to the need for a positive school ethos that endorses messages of acceptance of diversity and also responds strongly to overcome discrimination.

The overall ethos, environment or 'atmosphere' of the school is important to the engagement of young people with support needs in mental health and wellbeing. This is particularly necessary to avoid any sense of stigma associated with mental health needs.

Young people identify two aspects to a school's ethos: its portrayal and celebration of diversity, and the way it responds to negative behaviour such as discrimination and bullying.

"I think it's good with this school that most teachers here do recognise everyone's originality and personality and stuff like that. So we're not all put in together."

"Schools need to be vigilant in addressing all forms of bullying to prevent feelings of inadequacy that are manifested in problems such as eating disorders."

Students say that schools could:

- develop specific approaches to address issues of 'respect' and 'fairness';
- make sure that individual behaviours (such as how teachers speak with students) provide appropriate and inclusive models;
- encourage initiatives led by students to build a positive and inclusive ethos in the school;
- create displays (posters, photos etc) that illustrate diversity in positive ways;
- respond immediately and, where appropriate, publicly to negative and discriminatory behaviour.

Tips for health and wellbeing related curriculum for teachers for building inclusion

- Be conscious that the health issues being explored in any lesson may have particular significance for at least one student in the class and you may or may not know that.
- Build a collegial environment within the staff room and school which allows for personal and professional reflection and feedback so that all teachers can adopt progressively inclusive and encouraging language and practices.
- Monitor whether your expectations are reasonable of what a particular student can achieve at a particular time to avoid stigma related to poor performance.
- Design learning activities so that students have opportunities to come up with choices that are relevant to their lives.

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Tips for all staff generally

- Be aware of your language as it reflects your personal values - for example in relation to how males and females 'should' cope.
- Discourage students' disclosure of any sensitive, personal information which they may later regret or which may compromise someone else. Classroom agreements re privacy could refer to not using names and statements instead such as 'I know someone who...', 'What if a family member...?' When sensitive information is disclosed avoid suggesting that what the student has said is of no importance, show respect for any experiences and feelings students want to share, be aware of how other students respond and if you feel that the student needs help you can privately suggest that you would be happy to talk to them after the lesson.
- Speak about families in a way that accommodates the diversity of family arrangements that are the reality for students.
- Encourage students to speak up to you if they are having trouble meeting commitments and be prepared to negotiate an alternative arrangement so that the commitment is met and the value of 'speaking up' is reinforced.
- Challenge bullying behaviour, harassment or negative stereotypes relating to eg, culture, sexual preference, mental illness, ability, appearance immediately as being unacceptable.

Tips when implementing universal mental health and wellbeing programs such as Heart Masters for all students in a particular setting or geographical area

- Plan ways to manage the groups so that students within the group who have serious emotional, behaviour and/or learning problems can be provided with additional support without 'losing face' with their peers.
- Arrange supervision and debriefing support for group leaders.

Tips for avoiding stigma when offering further support for some students

Tips for inclusive student services support

- Model diversity through the student welfare/support team.
- Encourage a community of care and respect and engage students in roles such as peer helpers.
- Support students' friendship networks.
- Advertise avenues for support as a 'normal' part of school communication - eg school diaries/handbooks, assemblies, news sheets, school websites, at school events, in student services areas.
- Display visual material that affirms diverse images of people and provides support information.

Tips for indicated programs such as ACE where students are identified as having a particular need

- Choose the language to describe the program carefully – it needs to be honest and to focus on the positive: eg focus on the skills to be learned in the program 'this is a resilience, problem solving and communication skills building program'.
- Personally invite students nominated to join the group.
- Where the activity is voluntary, stress this and explain the right to withdraw without penalty or the agreements necessary for participation.
- If a program is not voluntary explain the situation to the student honestly and clarify their choices.
- Make sure school executive and students are comfortable with the venue and that privacy, consistency and minimal interruptions are priorities.
- Negotiate students' release time from class and catch-up work to minimise the impact of students' absences and some students' anxiety about missing classes.
- Vary group times to ensure students do not miss one subject or favourite activity a number of times.
- Protect the confidentiality of the group processes by setting clear limits and group rules with participants, parents and other staff.
- Remember that if students find that the program meaningful and helpful this will counterbalance initial embarrassment and is also likely increase the credibility of the program amongst peers for the future of the program.



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School Support for Students with Mental Health Support Needs

Tips for case management

- Consider students who are the focus of case management as active agents in the process and in managing their own lives. For example, involve them in meetings which relate to them whenever possible and consult them on key issues such as who else needs information and what they will be told.
- Respect privacy and incorporate clear agreements re confidentiality.
- Support students to manage differences in norms between the home and the school.

References

1. NSW Commission for Children and Young People website:
<http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/ourwork/ask.html>
2. Rapee, R. M., Wignall, A., Sheffield, J., Kowalenko, N., Davis, A., McLoone, J., & Spence, S. (in press) Adolescents' reactions to universal and indicated prevention programs for depression: perceived stigma and consumer satisfaction. *Prevention Science*.

Relevant learning from the MindMatters Plus initiative:

“Identification of students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing is a complex process that has the potential to alienate and stigmatise students but which need not do so if undertaken thoughtfully and in partnership with students.”