



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

RESOURCE

Quick Guide: Supporting Colleagues and Students with Mental Health Challenges

Purpose

As educators, we are often in a unique position to notice when a colleague or student may be struggling with their mental health. This resource is designed to offer practical, appropriate steps you can take to offer support, start conversations, and connect others (and yourself) with the help they may need (APA 2022).

Use this as a reference to guide your awareness, communication, and care – both for those around you and for yourself.

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

Being able to recognize when someone might be struggling with their mental health is the first step towards offering support. A sign is something you may notice through observation, while a symptom is a subjective experience that someone may express to you. Consider the following signs or symptoms below as indicators that someone could use a check-in or some extra care.

Keep in mind that no single sign or symptom confirms that someone is experiencing a mental health challenge. However, recognizing signs or symptoms and considering them in context of what you know about the person can help you better understand the state of their mental health.

Signs and Symptoms of Adults and Adolescents

Avoiding friends or social activities	Extreme mood changes	Changes in school performance
Difficulty concentrating or completing work	Changes in eating and sleeping	Thoughts of suicide
Excessive feelings of worry, fear, or sadness	Inability to carry out daily activities or handle stressors	Overuse of substances like drugs or alcohol

Signs and Symptoms of Children

Excessive worry or anxiety

Hyperactivity

Changes in school performance

Frequent nightmares

Frequent disobedience or aggression

Frequent temper tantrums

Start the Conversation

It can feel uncomfortable to start a conversation about mental health, but a few simple and compassionate words can open the door for someone to feel seen and supported. You don't have to be a mental health professional to show your concern and start the conversation.

These sentence starters will help you get started!

- "I've noticed you seem (quiet, tired, different) lately. How are you doing?"
- "You're important to me, and I wanted to check in. Is everything okay?"
- "I care about you, and I want to support you however I can."
- "If you ever want to talk or need anything, I'm here for you."
- "Would it be helpful if I helped you find someone to talk to?"

Educate Yourself on Resources

The more we understand mental health, the more effective and empathetic we can be in providing support. Educators don't need to be therapists; however, ongoing learning reduces stigma and builds confidence in supporting others.

To support your learning, here are a few valuable resources to explore.

- [Responding to Student Disclosure of Emotional Pain, Trauma or Mental Illness](#): *This resource offers practical strategies for school staff to effectively and compassionately respond when students share experiences of emotional distress, trauma, or mental health challenges. It emphasizes active listening, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and connecting students with appropriate support.*
- [WISE Safe Person 7 Promises](#): *The WISE Safe Person 7 Promises outline commitments educators can make to create a supportive environment for students discussing mental health concerns. These promises focus on being trustworthy, maintaining confidentiality, and fostering a stigma-free environment, encouraging open and honest communication.*
- [Emotional Regulation Plans](#): *These personalized plans are developed collaboratively with students and families to identify supportive strategies and tools to help students navigate their*

emotions. They are proactive, designed when the student is calm, and used to guide adults in offering consistent, respectful support during moments of distress.

- [Compassion Resilience Toolkit](#): This toolkit supports educators in building resilience, preventing burnout, and maintaining compassion for themselves and others. You may consider the following resources to strengthen individual resilience and a supportive school culture.
 - [Compassionate Boundary Setting](#): Offers guidance on how to set healthy professional boundaries that support well-being without sacrificing care.
 - [Wellness Compass Practices Assessment](#): Helps educators assess their personal wellness in different areas (e.g., physical, emotional, relational), promoting intentional self-care habits.
- [Teacher Care Meetings](#): These meetings are structured into 20-minute sessions designed to support educators experiencing stress or burnout. These meetings provide a safe space for teachers to discuss challenges, receive peer support, and develop strategies to enhance their well-being and professional satisfaction.

Help Address Barriers

Sometimes people want support but face real challenges getting the help they need. These small, meaningful actions can be done while still respecting your own boundaries and capacity. These actions are about being present, *not* perfect.

Barrier	Impact	Support
Lack of Time	They may feel overwhelmed with work, family, or school responsibilities and can't find time for therapy or self-care.	Help them identify small, manageable windows of time. Encourage starting with just one step, like a 15-minute phone call or check-in.
Financial Limitations	Therapy or support services may seem unaffordable, especially without insurance.	Offer to help them look into sliding-scale providers, community mental health centers, or school/district-supported resources that are free or low-cost.
Lack of Transportation or Accessibility	Getting to in-person appointments may be difficult due to transportation issues or mobility needs.	Suggest telehealth options, many of which are covered by insurance or offered by local providers. Help them search for virtual services that meet their needs.
Not Knowing Where to Start	The process of finding support can feel confusing or intimidating.	Offer to help them navigate. Look up resources together, walk them through how to make a call or submit an inquiry, or connect them with someone who's familiar with the system.

Fear of Judgment	They may feel ashamed, afraid of being perceived differently, or unsure if they'll be taken seriously.	Reassure them that seeking help is a strength, not a weakness. Share stories (if/when appropriate) of others who've found support and let them know they're not alone (APA 2022).
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Seek Support for Yourself

Supporting others can take an emotional toll, especially if you are carrying a lot. Your well-being matters, too! Be mindful of your own needs and don't hesitate to seek help.

- Notice when you're feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or depleted.
- Set boundaries, take breaks, and protect time for rest.
- Talk with someone you trust or seek support through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or a mental health professional.

Be There for the Long Run

Offering meaningful support often means continuing to show up in small, steady ways over time. Even after someone takes steps towards help, ongoing encouragement can make a difference. A quick check-in, remembering something they shared, or simply being available to communicate care without needing to do more than you are able.

It's less about doing a lot and more about being a consistent, trusted presence. Let them know you're in their corner, even if they don't need anything at that moment.

References

American Psychiatric Association (APA). 2022. "Helping a Loved One Cope with Mental Illness."
<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/helping-a-loved-one-cope-with-mental-illness#:~:text=Start%20by%20expressing%20your%20concern,Use%20%22I%22%20state,ments.>



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May 2025

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