

TIP SHEET 1

Teachers make a difference to student wellbeing: a reassuring message.

Use: Building Staff Capacity

Audience: Executive Team and Teachers

Intent: Promotion/prevention

Teachers and educational staff are often working under huge pressures to meet the needs of young people and create an atmosphere where it is possible for students to feel safe, feel connected and experience success in learning.

The link between educational achievement and positive mental health is clear (AIHW, 2005).

The process of working towards a mentally healthier education setting can be both challenging, invigorating and provide a renewed sense of optimism for the role that schools can play in the lives of young people.

Often though, teachers and others who care for young people despair about the degree of influence they can make on young people's lives within their work roles.

Dr Judith Murray, from The University of Queensland, shares some reflection points for teachers in their day-to-day work with students with support needs in mental health and wellbeing.

1. Hope

While nearly all young people will experience circumstances during their lives that distress them only a minority will experience long term problems. The majority of young people will respond positively to simple supportive interactions and patience.

2. Respect

Treat all distress in a respectful manner as no matter how we perceive its severity, the circumstances and the inner turmoil certainly matters to that young person.

3. Positive attitude

Maintain belief in the ability of young people to deal with the problem. Use your knowledge to help young people find the solution that has meaning for them in their context.

4. Intuition

Often the young people and their family and peers will be aware that a problem has become serious. Listen to verbal and non verbal information and remember that often it will be a teacher's intuition based on a continuing relationship with the young person that proves most accurate.

5. Stand by your own objective judgements

Be alert to, and aware of, warning signs such as a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness, major and, or continuing changes in usual behaviour, and behaviour that is consistently extreme compared with what you see around you.

Stand back from the influences of others. People may have a biased impression. A student may have been given a label in less than ideal conditions.

“Their life experience will shape them but not defeat them”

J. Murray

6. Connecting with support from outside the school

Invite personnel from outside agencies to be part of your school and for students to know what these agencies provide before problems arise. Collaboratively work with the young person to find additional support when you know that you alone cannot help or when an issue is out of your realm of expertise. Make sure that the message students receive about referral is about valuing them and doing what matters for them rather than wanting to shift the problem to someone else.

Stay in contact with the young person who has been referred.

7. Timing and time

When they are given space and time, students will feel that the school climate values their physical and emotional safety and also recognises there are times when it is acceptable to feel overwhelmed. Giving time and space often occurs when you just sit with them as they regain their strength and clear thinking without them feeling that they have to fix the problem immediately.

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005). A picture of Australia's Children: Report on health, development and welfare of Australia's children aged 0–14 years. Author.

Murray J.A. Approaches to children, Young People and Mental health: Confusion in the ranks, confusion among the commanders. Australian Journal Of Guidance and Counseling, 15,182–194.

Dr Judith Murray – School of Psychology, University of Queensland
Annette Shriner – AGCA MindMatters Plus Professional Officer

Relevant learning from MindMatters Plus initiative:
“Strategies to support staff well being are critical for on going support of all students.”

http://mplus.agca.com.au/key_learnings.php