



Supporting Minds Strategies at a Glance:

Ideas to Support and Bolster
Students with Mental Health
Problems in the Classroom



School
Mental Health
Ontario

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**We work together with
Ontario school districts
to support student
mental health**



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**Have questions about these strategies?
Consult with your board Mental Health Leader,
or the school mental health professional
assigned to your school (e.g., social work
services, psychological services).**

Introduction

Every day in Ontario schools, educators work to create classroom environments that are welcoming and inclusive for all students. As outlined in the *Aligned and Integrated Model*, understanding and promoting mental health at school, and partnering with families and communities to build wellness, can further encourage a sense of identity, belonging, and resilience amongst children and youth. Educators can learn more about universal supports for mental health through *MH LIT: Mental Health in Action* and related resources.

Having a mentally healthy classroom is good for all students, but especially important for those who may struggle with their mental health. A tiered approach focusses on a whole class approach allowing the majority of students to succeed, and providing a continuum of support for those who need a little more. With this in mind, the strategies shared in this resource are for classroom use however, sometimes when students have mental health problems, they also require additional support in order to optimize their learning and wellness.

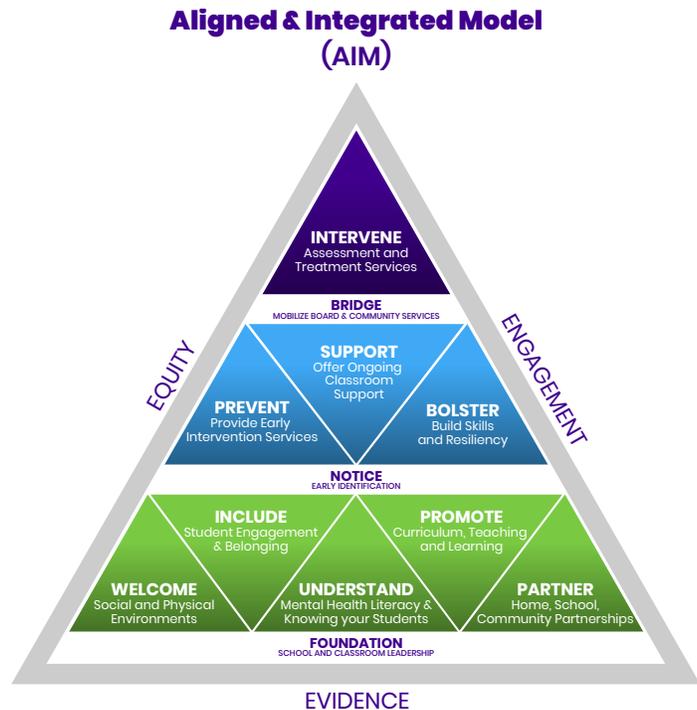
This resource offers ideas for helping educators in the classroom to:

- **SUPPORT** by offering accommodations and modifications to help students to be successful in the classroom
- **BOLSTER** by helping to build skills and strategies for supporting mental health

It provides an 'at-a-glance' collection of the classroom strategies listed within [Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Supporting Students' Mental Health and Well-Being](#). You can find more detail about common mental health problems and ideas for classroom support in this (2013) resource document, and in our related Info-Sheets (e.g., [Mood Problems at School](#)) and On-Line Tutorials (e.g., [Anxiety Problems in the Classroom](#)). This **Supporting Minds Strategies at a Glance** resource focuses on some common mental health problems that are routinely observed at school:

- Anxiety Problems
- Mood Problems
- Attention and Hyperactivity/ Impulsivity Problems

It is important to note that while the strategies shared in this resource have been informed by evidence, every student is unique. As a result, some of the strategies suggested will work, and others may not. Also, consider that a student's mental health needs can change over time, requiring more or less support, and that the strategies associated with a particular problem area may or may not apply even when a student carries a related diagnosis. That is because often mental health problems are complex and co-morbid (occur together). Knowing each student, and routinely communicating with families, caregivers, and service providers (as appropriate, with consent) can enhance student wellness when more support is needed in the classroom. You are an important part of the student's Circle of Support!



Anxiety Problems in the Classroom

Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems in the Classroom

Observable Behaviour	Some Suggested Classroom Strategies
<p>General anxious behaviour at school (e.g., expressed nervousness, worry, fear that is out of proportion with the circumstances, and/or related avoidance of tasks that may cause anxiety)</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with the student at the beginning of each day. • Provide predictable schedules and routines in the classroom. • Provide advance warning of changes in routine, and develop a coping plan for unexpected events, as needed. • Maintain a calm, patient tone of voice when talking to the student. • Set reasonable academic expectations that take anxiety into account but are not too low and do not single out the student. • Notice brave, non-anxious behaviour. Notice when the student is being brave in attempting something they find challenging. • Reduce schoolwork and/or homework based on information from parents/guardians and the school team about how much stress the student can handle. • Help the student focus on his or her strengths and ability to improve performance with effort. Encourage and reward all positive steps in managing anxiety. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the student to take small steps towards accomplishing a feared task. • Provide strategies for relaxation that can be used in the classroom (e.g., 4-square breathing, positive self-talk, brief "mental vacations", tense and relax). • Help to reinforce skills and strategies suggested by the parent/guardian and mental health service providers involved in the student's care plan.



Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems in the Classroom	
Observable Behaviour	Some Suggested Classroom Strategies
<p>Anxiety related to Academic Performance – Feeling overwhelmed by large assignments</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check with the student that assignments have been written down correctly and that they understand what is required. • Modify assignments to chunk the work, permitting students to submit one chunk at a time (rather than trying to meet one final deadline), and providing positive reinforcement for each submission. • Build the student’s confidence by acknowledging partial success or effort (instead of praising only complete pieces of work). <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the student to learn to chunk tasks into manageable parts, and to create a schedule for completing each part. • Show students how to reduce the “size” of the chunk until they experience success, if the student continues to struggle. • Help the student with effective and realistic time management. Encourage them to practice including “buffer time” in their planning. • Encourage the student to finish one task at a time before starting another (i.e., discourage multitasking).
<p>Anxiety related to Academic Performance – Trouble with Test-Taking</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with the student routinely to ensure that they understand the course material. Offer additional help as needed. • Facilitate different arrangements for taking tests (e.g., provision of a separate, quiet room for a student who is upset by distractions). • Clearly indicate (when appropriate) how much a test or exam will count towards the final grade (all students). • Allow extra time to complete tests for students who are upset by time pressure. • Avoid giving surprise quizzes or tests. • Avoid “minute math” or other tests with time pressure. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the student with effective study skills. Include “tricks” for remembering difficult content, like funny mnemonics or rhymes. • Provide strategies for relaxation that can be used before or during a test (e.g., 4-square breathing, tense and relax). • Offer ideas for effective test-taking (e.g., write down things they have memorized before they turn the test over, identify an easy question to start with, circle any items that are giving them difficulty to come back to later, etc.). • Help the students to say calming things to themselves before or during tests if they start to feel overwhelmed (e.g., “if I stay calm, I can show what I know better”, “I’ve got this”, “all I can do is my best”).

Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems in the Classroom

Anxiety related to Academic Performance – **Difficulty with Class Presentations**

SUPPORT

- Normalize the sense of anxiety most students feel in relation to speaking in front of the class
- Offer a number of “practise” opportunities where students speak in front of the class as part of a team, or in front of small groups, prior to individual class presentations
- Individually reinforce the presentation tips you have given to the whole class. Emphasize ways to decrease anxiety that you think would be most helpful for them (e.g., focus their eyes on the teacher at the back of the class instead of looking directly at their classmates, use visuals so classmates are looking more at these materials than at the student, etc.).
- Help the student to select a topic from those provided that they will feel confident speaking about
- Do all you can to maintain the expectation that the student will engage in the class presentation requirement. The best way to overcome a fear of public speaking is to engage in public speaking! Avoidance of the fear will only make it harder the next time.
- In consultation with the parent/guardian, if necessary, consider offering an accommodation (e.g., presenting only to a small group, pre-recording the presentation, presentation just to the teacher, use of a memory aid like cue cards, etc.). Help the student to work towards an independent full class presentation next time, or later in the year.

BOLSTER

- Invite the student to think of things that would make them feel more confident when speaking in front of the class (e.g., topic they know something about, taking time to prepare, creating catchy visuals like slides or props, using humour if that comes naturally to them). Public speaking is about confidence.
- Encourage the student to practice saying their presentation in front of the mirror, in front of their family, in front of the teacher, etc prior to doing this in front of the class. When it comes to performance, practise is the key.
- Encourage the student to practice their relaxation skills before doing their presentation (e.g., deep breathing, positive self-statements, etc.).



Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems in the Classroom

Anxiety related to Academic Performance – **Reluctance to participate in class**

SUPPORT

- Identify activities the student can do that will help increase his/her level of comfort with participating in class (e.g., returning forms to the school office, helping with the school newspaper, working in the library).
- Facilitate opportunities for participation through work in pairs and small group discussions, not just full class sharing or questions/answers.
- Use ‘think-pair-share’ options when possible, to encourage all students to be thoughtful in their contributions, and to give quiet students a chance to offer their ideas in a “safe” way. Pair the student with another student who is open and welcoming.
- Encourage the student to cue you when they know an answer and feel ready for you to call on them (rather than surprising them).
- Have the student answer yes/no questions first (instead of open-ended ones) if a student is very worried about responding to questions in class,.
- Gradually work up to rehearsing questions and answers with the student before class, to prepare the student to answer out loud in class if the student is reluctant to answer any question.

BOLSTER

- Help the student to participate successfully in small ways, working up to things that they find more difficult (e.g., encourage them to ask a question as a way to enter a class conversation, rather than offering an opinion).
- Encourage the student to have a few ideas about how they might contribute to a class discussion, but to hold these lightly. Class discussions move quickly and if they over-plan what they might say they can easily miss their chance.
- Suggest the student write a few key words on a piece of paper when they raise their hand to participate, in case they think they might freeze and forget what they were going to say.
- Invite the student to “try out” an idea with a trusted peer before saying it to the class.

Anticipatory Anxiety (e.g., excessive reassurance seeking, expressing frequent worry thoughts)

SUPPORT

- Answer questions with a simple explanation and repeat only once, using the same words. Provide realistic, specific, reassuring information.
- Encourage the student to save further questions for a specific time, and then be available at that time.
- Positively reinforce any progress towards increased independence.

BOLSTER

- Encourage the student to write down his/her worries or questions before seeking help from an adult.
- Remind the student of their relaxation strategies if they start to escalate their anxious behaviour (e.g., 4-square breathing, mindful practices, using reassuring self-statements (“it will be okay”, “best to focus on what is happening not instead of worrying about something in the future”)).
- Encourage the student to busy themselves with something positive (e.g., helping a friend, being active) rather than spending energy worrying.
- Remind the student of the importance of maintaining an optimistic outlook and looking for silver linings even in difficult situations.

Strategies for Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems in the Classroom	
<p>Perfectionism (e.g., fear or worry about making mistakes or getting things wrong, reluctance to hand things in unless they are perfect)</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for ways to reinforce the joy of learning in your class • Reframe mistakes as learning opportunities and ways to grow as a person. • Reassure the student that “everyone makes mistakes sometimes” and that “nobody is perfect”. • Model imperfection! Make mistakes and show how people can recover from errors without anyone thinking any less of them. • Highlight student effort and critical thinking over perfection when using exemplars in class • Recognize the student for finishing a task on time without continual revising to make it perfect. • Avoid drawing unnecessary attention to mistakes in student work (e.g., avoid posting test scores or publicly commenting on students’ mistakes). <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the student to use brainstorming as a skill, where ideas do not need to be well-formed or perfect to be helpful • Encourage the student to produce (and submit) rough drafts. Challenge them to purposefully hand in draft work that has at least 3 “errors” in it! • Offer the student positive self-statements that promote a gentler expectation (e.g., “All I can do is my best”, “This one doesn’t need to be perfect, good enough is good enough”) • Remind the student to look for the silver lining when they don’t achieve the grades they wish for on something (e.g., “I didn’t get an A on that assignment, but I did learn a lot about climate change that inspired me”, “my grade on that speech was low because I was nervous, but I did it! and I think I can do better next time if mostly look at the teacher instead of getting distracted by my friends”).
<p>Separation Anxiety (e.g., difficulty separating from caregiver or others, worry that something bad will happen to someone they love while they are apart)</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a plan for the student’s arrival at school (e.g. provide an immediate reward for attending) with appropriate staff (with parental permission). • Provide consistent and predictable arrival routines. • Arrange for a buddy to greet the child in the playground and help with the transition into the classroom. • Provide positive reinforcement for brave behaviour and refrain from commenting on anxious behaviour. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the student to select an activity that they can do when they arrive at school that keeps them happy and distracted as they transition to class • Invite the student to replace worry thoughts about their parent/caregiver with more realistic thoughts (e.g., “my Mom will be okay until I’m home”, “my Dad will feel happy and proud of me if I’m brave instead of worrying”) • Provide age-appropriate relaxation skills to the student when they are calm and remind them to practice these strategies when they start to feel afraid (e.g., hot chocolate breathing)

Mood Problems in the Classroom

Strategies for Supporting Students with Mood Problems in the Classroom

Observable Behaviour	Classroom Strategies
Negative mood, lack of interest in school or other activities, low self-confidence, irritability	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Warmly welcome the student each day (e.g. greet the student at the door and ask a question about something of interest to the student). Remember it can take a lot of effort for the student to attend school.• Use hopeful language, and demonstrate caring in your interactions with the student. Listen.• Work with student’s strengths and build on them when they complete activities in class. Look for any spark of interest and try to find ways to extend and expand this.• Provide students with responsibilities and tasks that they may enjoy.• Ask open-ended questions for which there is no specific, correct answer, to enable the student to contribute to discussions without fear of “being wrong” in front of others.• Establish a format and routine for regular communication between the school, parents, and any mental health professionals who may be involved, using a daily agenda, or e-mail “check-in”. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with the student to develop clear expectations for classroom performance that they feel are reasonable.• Help the student to set realistic goals and to monitor their progress.• Remind the student of strategies they have found that help them to cope with stress or feeling overwhelmed (e.g., chunking work, breathing strategies, exercise, helping others, reframing negative thoughts).• Correct errors or suggest improvements in the context of offering praise and support, as the student may be unusually sensitive to criticism.• Provide the student with opportunities to participate in making decisions about class activities and assignments, to help increase his/her motivation, interest, and feelings of success.

Strategies for Supporting Students with Mood Problems in the Classroom	
<p>Difficulty focusing, low energy, difficulty completing assignments</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule instructional/study periods for times when the student is most likely to be alert. • Seat the student near the front of the classroom where you can readily provide assistance • Write instructions on the board to provide a visual cue for students who are having trouble focusing on spoken information. • Assign one task at a time. • Support the student with chunking assignments, and have the student hand in one chunk at a time. Provide positive reinforcement when each unit is completed. • Strategically introduce opportunities for the student to participate in structured positive social interactions with peers (e.g., group assignments, small-group work). • Pair the student with a kind, supportive classmate to help with learning. • Make sure the student has all relevant class notes and study information prior to a test. Ask to be sure they understand the material and provide needed additional support. • Provide extra time for the student to complete tests. Favour multiple-choice questions instead of open-ended or oral questions. • Allow frequent breaks if this is part of the student’s coping strategy and care plan. • Adjust the student’s workload, as needed, in consultation with the student, their parents/guardians, and service providers, according to the care plan. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the student with guidance on how to organize and plan the day (e.g., use of a checklist or agenda). • Help the student to chunk assignments and prepare for tests well in advance of deadlines. • Help the student break a project or large assignment into small, manageable chunks and make a schedule for completing each chunk. • Remind the student to use strategies like exercise breaks and mini-rewards to keep motivated and able to concentrate
<p>Significant fluctuations in mood, elevated mood (mania), bouts of serious depressed mood</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider many of the strategies above to help with low mood, difficulties with concentration, and enhancing school performance • Consult with parents and mental health professionals (if involved) to identify strategies they recommend to best help the student to navigate school life. This may include identifying any limitations that may affect their ability to learn. For students who are taking medication, it may be appropriate to discuss potential side effects, how they may affect the student’s learning, and how to adjust instruction to compensate. • Establish a method for regular communication between the school and parents/guardians about the expectations for the student and/or homework tasks, tests, and class assignments. • Each day, check in with the student on arrival to determine how they are feeling. Where possible, provide alternatives to stressful activities on difficult days and adjust the workload to prevent the student from becoming overwhelmed. • Allow extra time for the transition to a new activity or location. <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the student choose and focus on attainable goals. Keep a focus on things that are working positively and maintain a hopeful stance. • Set up a procedure to allow the student to cue you if they need to exit quickly and safely from an overwhelming situation. • Remind the student to use the strategies that they have learned for coping with stress and staying positive.

Attentional Problems in the Classroom

Strategies for Supporting Students with Attentional Problems in the Classroom

Observable Behaviour	Classroom Strategies
<p>Difficulty staying focused; easily distracted, appears to daydream, doesn't seem to listen</p>	<p>SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt, teach and positively reinforce routines and classroom expectations for working and moving from one activity to the next. • Maintain a predictable classroom environment with clear schedules, routines and warning of changes in routines or activities to support the student. • Provide easy-to-follow directions and instructions (e.g., explain one step at a time; chunk multi-step directions) and post rules where everyone can see them. • Establish a routine and set of rules for moving from one activity to the next and reinforce on-task behaviour such as raising a hand before speaking, engaging in quiet work. • Limit visual and auditory distractions in the classroom as much as possible, when students are completing tasks requiring sustained attention. • Teach in manageable chunks and find ways to support active engagement in learning by understanding the student's interests and strengths. • Check-in with the student to see if they heard and understand the instructions (e.g., "OK, so, tell me what you must do"). If the instructions need repeating, repeat them verbatim without adding any new language or instructions. • Help the student to stay focused by providing visual schedules and visible timelines and by keeping tasks short and achievable. • Facilitate different arrangements for taking tests (e.g., test taking in a quiet room/location). <p>BOLSTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the student to develop a plan for what can help them to be successful in the classroom (e.g., some students require limited noise or preferential seating to focus). • Teach the student to use checklists and to check items off as they are completed. • Help the student to record each day's homework and what they need to do in a planner or journal. Check to ensure they have recorded the information accurately. • Help the student to learn how to chunk work, and provide positive reinforcement for each submission of work towards a final goal.

Strategies for Supporting Students with Attentional Problems in the Classroom

Difficulty with executive functioning skills; **organizing, trouble starting and completing work, planning and setting goals, managing and regulating emotions**

SUPPORT

- Prompt, teach and reinforce new learning concepts. Some students require direct instruction, a reduced amount of information, chunking critical instructions, time for mental processing and feedback at each step.
- Help the student to achieve success in completing assignments and tasks by simplifying instructions, outlining steps one at a time and setting achievable timelines. This will also reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed and may increase their ability to be productive or successful.
- Provide checklists and graphic organizers to support sequencing and organization. These can be things like advance organizers, structured note-taking sheets, manipulatives or visual representations.
- Use small-group instruction or peer-assisted learning strategies to provide the student with guided, proactive instructions.
- Provide concrete examples and scoring rubrics so the student will know what a well-completed assignment looks like.
- Help the student prepare for transitions by identifying ahead of time when a transition will occur. Establish a format and routine for regular communication between the school and home to support work completion.

BOLSTER

- Help the student to develop and use strategies for organizing themselves such as how to use a calendar and an assignment planner effectively. Help the student to organize their materials and learn strategies that will help them stay organized (e.g. how to organize a binder, setting reminder alarms on a phone or watch for important tasks, colour coding).
- Facilitate opportunities to support organization (e.g. weekly clean up, organizing desk, notes, personal belongings, materials etc.)
- Support the student in creating their plan for the work to be completed to make sure they know what the steps are. Sometimes it is helpful to walk the student through the first portion of the task to get them started.
- Help the student to learn how to chunk work, and provide positive reinforcement for each submission of work towards a final goal.
- Suggest ways the student can stay organized by noting key information and reminders visually.
- Teach the student to estimate how much time the task will take and then monitor how long it does takes.

Strategies for Supporting Students with Attentional Problems in the Classroom

Difficulty with overactivity and impulsivity; **restless, can't sit still, interrupts, difficulty taking turns, acts without thinking**

SUPPORT

- Teach and model a planned approach to tasks and conversations with attention to short work sessions, and completion of one task at a time.
- Schedule short brain and movement breaks in the day to maximize learning.
- Provide opportunities to learn by doing, to give students an outlet for excess energy.
- Chunk units of learning, into 10 to 15 minute blocks, followed by review, to consolidate learning.
- Find ways to support active engagement in learning by understanding the student's interests and providing opportunities that facilitate multi-sensory and active learning.
- Remind the student to be mindful of what is happening 'in the moment' and to listen and pause before speaking.
- Use an attention cue to prompt the student to stay focused on the task and gently use reminders as required (e.g. praise or cues as needed).
- Develop and systematically use a system to reinforce on-task behaviour and ensure the student understands the connections.

BOLSTER

- Invite the student to help participate in creating class rules for contributing to discussions, etc.
- Work with the student to develop strategies to help them to remember to wait their turn and to think before they speak. Strategies like taking a breath before raising their hand, or tapping their finger three times before speaking, or putting a note ("wait") on their desk to remind them not to interrupt, can help them to slow down and organize their ideas before speaking.
- Work with the student to develop strategies to monitor how they are regulating their movement, and what positive actions they could take in response.
- Explore with the student the degree to which having a movement break every so often, or standing up to work, or using fidget toys (e.g., pipe cleaners, mindful colouring pages) might help them. For some students the movement helps them to focus and learn.
- Use a daily report to help with noticing and highlighting good impulse control, and providing feedback for things to work on.



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