

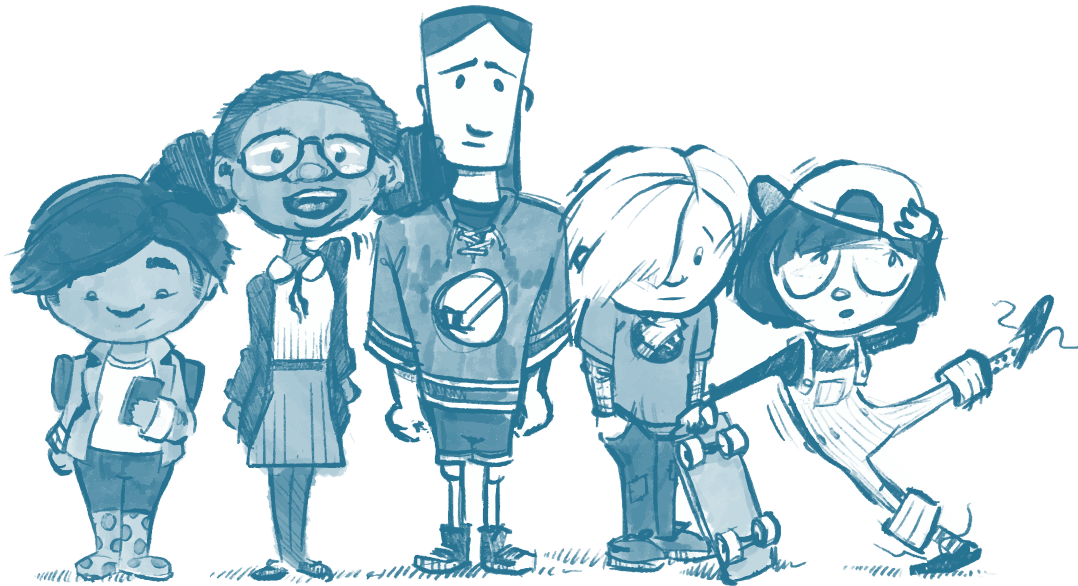
Module 6:

Getting Mentally Healthy

- What is good for physical health is good for mental health
- Coping with stress appropriately will help build resilience and new skills
- 'The Big 5' pillars of health enhance both physical and mental health



Getting Mentally Healthy



Everyone has mental health that can be promoted and sustained through healthy lifestyle routines and evidence-based mental health promotion activities. Our mental health can also be enhanced by learning how to deal with negative emotions and feelings as well as dealing with stress and everyday life challenges.



The Big 5 pillars of health

- restorative sleep
- strong social connection
- vigorous physical activity
- healthy eating
- helping others

The following is a set of healthy lifestyle practices that everyone* can apply to promote mental health:

**Students come from a variety of backgrounds (e.g. from households that may experience income instability, food insecurity, insufficient social support networks, etc.). When engaging in classroom activities, it is important to consider the many factors that are outside of a student's control, which may influence what The Big 5 looks like for them.*



Exercise

Thirty minutes of daily vigorous exercise (e.g. going for a run, playing soccer) is recommended. However, any amount and kind of movement is better than none at all. Being active has many physical, social, emotional and mental health benefits and is universally necessary for growth and development in children. Physical activity can also play an important role in the treatment of mental problems or disorders in children and youth.



Sleep

Consistent, restorative sleep is essential for our physical and mental health. Establishing a sleep routine and taking steps for positive 'sleep hygiene' can help (e.g. no cell phones in the bedroom and stopping screen time at least half hour before going to bed). Restorative sleep helps children and youth better retain new information and manage their emotions.



Healthy Eating

Good nutrition supports mental health and well-being, giving our bodies and brains the power and nourishment they need. Eating a balanced diet and following published food guidelines – such as Canada’s Food Guide (<http://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>) – and avoiding fad diets, can help keep us physically and mentally strong.



Supportive Social Connections

Good quality relationships (e.g. with friends, family, trusted adults) can help us live happier lives and cope better when mental distress and mental health problems arise.



Helping Others

Helping others can also benefit our own mental health and wellbeing (e.g. volunteering, being part of a team). Sounds like a win-win! Helping out in big or small ways can reduce stress as well as improve mood, self-esteem and overall happiness.



Remember: The Big 5 looks different for each of us!

Understanding, Managing and Embracing Stress

Applying effective strategies to cope with stress is an essential approach to help students learn new skills and build resilience in the long run. Stress is the body's reaction (physical, cognitive, and emotional responses) to any change that requires an adjustment or response. This reaction is based on the brain signalling function (see Module 3, 'Mental Health and the Brain') and alerts us not only to life-threatening danger (where we can experience the 'fight or flight' response), but also to numerous life challenges and opportunities (including what is called the 'excite and delight' response). It is a fundamental error to consider the stress response to always be of the fight or flight variety. Indeed, unless we live in circumstances such as conflict zones, poverty or experience severe and persistent traumas (such as abuse or neglect) our stress response is not considered toxic stress. In these situations, the stress response can be so severe or prolonged that for some (but not all) people, it can lead to negative health outcomes.

Most daily stress doesn't merit a fight or flight response. Instead it is a signal that we need to change something in our environment or how we are responding to it. If we do that successfully, the stress response goes away and we are said to have adapted. Then we remember successful adaptations and apply these to new challenges, demonstrating we have learned a new skill. Successful adaptations bring multiple new skills which build resilience. So, most daily stress is normal, adaptive, and can be health-promoting. The Harvard Centre for the Developing Child (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>) has created a useful table which illustrates differences in types of stress. It is noted that even with toxic stress, there are protective factors that help mitigate potential negative impacts. These factors can be both biological (some people are more 'stress-resistant' by nature) or environmental (particularly the presence of a caring, trusted person – such as a parent, grandparent, spouse, partner, friend, etc.).

We all need some degree of stress to perform well. The degree of stress we need to perform well varies from person to person and we need to practice to find that 'sweet spot'.

When faced with a stressor (challenge, opportunity, threat, etc.) our brain and body initiates the stress response. If we avoid the stressor, the next time that we encounter similar stressors, the stress response will become more intense and severe, resulting in maladaptive outcomes. Our challenge is to help our students (and ourselves) learn how to better manage our stress response: not by avoiding stressors and not by focusing solely on stress response reduction, but by building skills and coping strategies that help us use the normal stress response for our growth and development.

**Positive**

Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

Tolerable

Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

Toxic

Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.¹

The Big 5 pillars of health discussed above are fundamental ways to help students manage stress, improve their mood, optimise their performance and enjoy life. In addition, there are the three-step stress management techniques:

1. Focus on what you are thinking when you feel the stress response

This is the difference between thinking that the stress signal is 'bad' or 'negative' and thinking that what you are experiencing is a cue to alert you to a challenge or opportunity in your environment.

2. Determine what the stress signal is alerting you to and figure out how to address it effectively

We need to determine what is the challenge or opportunity and then figure out how to successfully address it or problem-solve.

3. If necessary, apply specific techniques to modify the intensity of the stress response

There are different ways to decrease stress signals, such as controlled breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Employing such strategies can help reduce the intensity of the stress response so we can face the challenge and build resilience.

¹ The Harvard Centre for the Developing Child
(<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>)

The field of mental health is extensive and there is much to learn about the brain, mental disorders, treatments and prevention. While not exhaustive, we hope this background information has increased your confidence to deliver the EMHLR modules in your setting. For more information and support please go to <http://mentalhealthliteracy.org>.

