



HEALTH *and* **Wellness Guidelines** *for International* **Students**



UNDERSTANDING
MENTAL HEALTH AND
WELL-BEING FROM AN
EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE



Understanding Mental Health & Well-being from an East Asian Perspective

Studying in British Columbia can enrich international students' lives and provide opportunities to expand their horizons. However, moving away from their support systems and to a different culture can undermine their strengths as well as their well-being.



USING THIS RESOURCE

The document is meant to provide greater insight into East Asian perspectives on mental health, as identified in academic research. It is meant to complement and extend your own experience in working with international students.

East Asian countries are not all the same, and every country includes a wide range of perspectives based on education levels, socio-economic status, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and other factors.



Specific Challenges for International Students

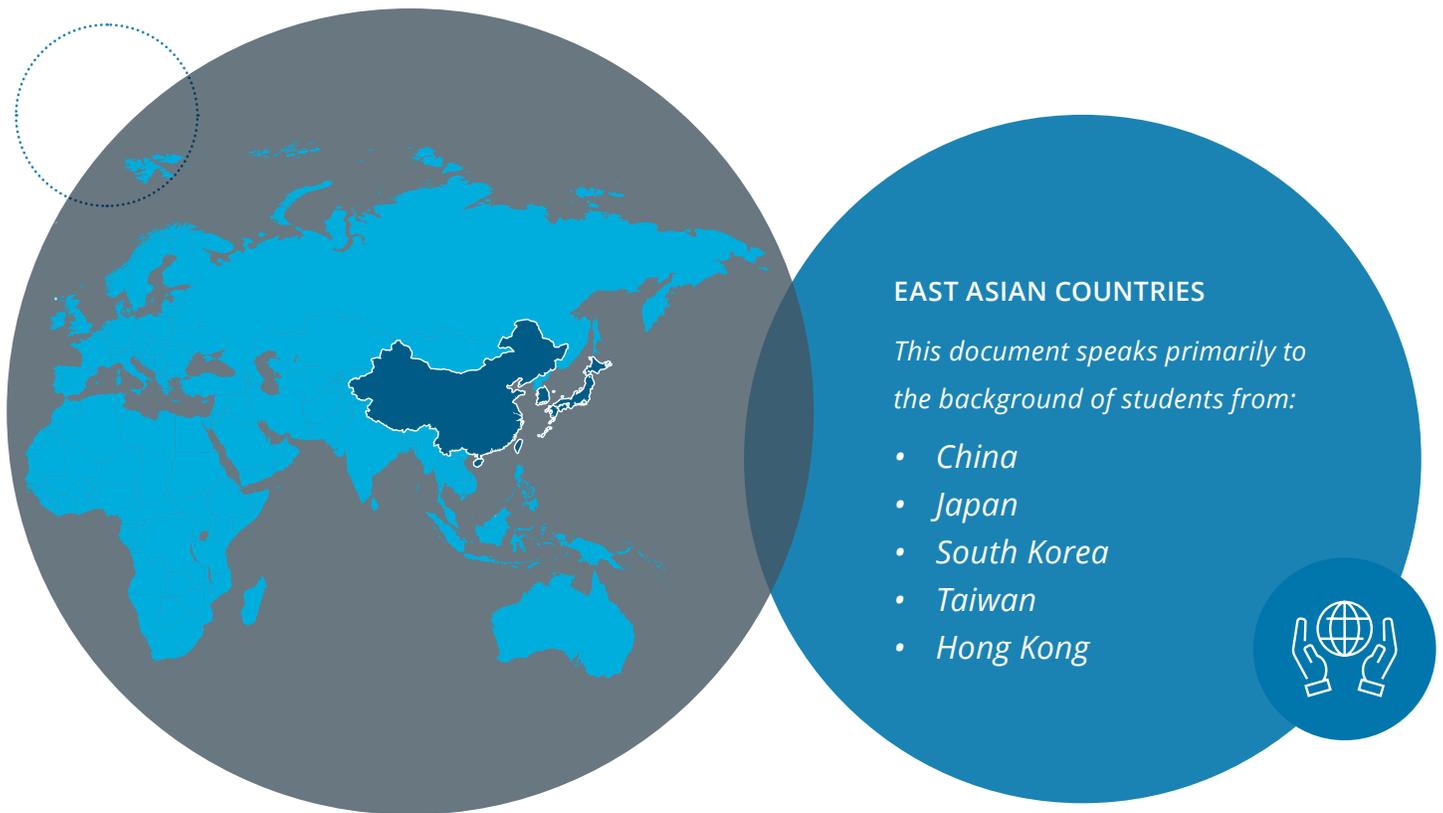
Poor mental health can affect students' confidence, motivation, and concentration which can impact their academic success. While mental well-being is a growing concern for all students, international students face additional challenges. English language barriers, adjustment to a new culture, a lack of nearby family and social supports, and unfamiliar teaching practices can make the transition difficult. Living away from home in a foreign country for the first time can aggravate the situation.

It can be particularly challenging if the student's ability to effectively communicate in English is limited. This can cause everything else to suffer; from academic performance to the student's capacity to connect with others and express concerns. For students who were high academic achievers in their home country, struggling academically can be particularly distressing. For students who are not strong academically, learning in English can compound their challenges.

Cultural Context and Understanding of Mental Health & Well-being

In Canada, we believe that mental illness is caused by a complex interaction of genetic, biological, personality, and environmental factors and that it can affect people of all ages, cultures, education and income levels. We also believe that every life has its ups and downs and that increasing self-esteem, coping skills, and social support can help people be more resilient, and bounce back from adversities. While stigma still exists, more and more Canadians speak openly about their mental health and well-being. An understanding of mental well-being and how to manage it is woven through the B.C. K-12 education curriculum in an age-appropriate way.

The cultural understanding of mental health and illness in East Asian countries can be quite different from that in Western countries such as Canada. However, between and within East Asian countries, there can be wide variations, influenced by religious, ethnic, and cultural background, family education levels, socio-economic status, and other factors. It's also worth remembering that many elements of a person's identity can interact with their mental health and their cultural backgrounds, such as sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, learning differences, or invisible disabilities.



Cultural Underpinnings: Collective vs. Individual Cultures

East Asian countries are collectivist cultures that prioritize individual needs after those of the family and the larger community. They value conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family loyalty, and social harmony. In contrast, Western cultures like Canada prioritize individuals and value autonomy, self-determination, and choice.

Understanding of Mental Health Problems

The level of mental health literacy – the knowledge, beliefs, and abilities that enable the recognition, management, and prevention of mental health challenges – is generally lower in East Asian countries than in Canada. Those with more traditional East Asian beliefs may attribute mental illness to an imbalance of the body's energy flow (*yin yang*), personality traits, or, in some cases, punishment from God. Such beliefs, along with the value placed on emotional self-control and conformity, contribute to high levels of mental health stigma. Many East Asians see mental illness as reflecting on a person's family and could bring the family shame.

Because of the high value placed on emotional self-control and their understanding of mind and body as inseparable, East Asian students may describe emotional distress or mental health symptoms in physical terms, such as changes in appetite or weight, nausea, headaches, aches and pains, tiredness or sleep issues.

SCHOOL DISTRICT REFLECTIONS

There can be significant differences between the cultures in this region and between students. While some districts found the depiction consistent with their experience, not all students will reflect these values or fit this pattern.



Approaches to Support and Treatment

In Canada, seeking help for mental health-related problems has been normalized. In East Asian countries, counseling and other mental health supports have typically only been provided to those with serious mental illnesses. This, coupled with their cultural values, means some East Asian students find counseling stigmatizing, shameful, and a violation of their family hierarchy. These beliefs can cause students to avoid or delay seeking help until the situation is serious. Also, students who are new to mental health discussions may not be aware that counsellors are even available to them, or know how to access them.

HELP SEEKING

Some students from East Asian countries may be reluctant to seek help, as it can be seen as shameful to do so.



Many East Asians prefer self-help strategies for dealing with emotional and mental health problems, such as physical activity, relaxation, getting out more often, and/or talking to friends, family, or a religious leader. For some, emotional support from friends and family does not include disclosing the source of the problem but instead focuses on their connection and relationship.

Being in Canada, where mental well-being discussions are normalized, can help some East Asian students be more open about their problems than they would be at home.

Strategies to Consider

Individual international students have differing needs, family and cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and preferences. The strategies that you use to support their mental well-being need to consider that.

For Your Overall International Student Program

Building the capacity of all international students to support and manage their own well-being can prevent more serious issues in the future.

Infuse mental well-being throughout your program – in pre-arrival processes and materials, in the orientation process, and by continually reinforcing it throughout their stay. The goals are:

- *Normalize conversations about mental well-being*
- *Encourage students to manage their own stress and well-being*
- *For students to know how and who to reach out to for help*
- *For the supporting adults to know what to do when students reach out and how to identify the those who need help, but have not reached out*

Continue to foster purposeful connections – ensuring that each student feels connected to two or more adults at school/in the program. Encourage and facilitate peer relationships among students through sports, drama, music, clubs, or volunteer activities.

Start with the basics – reinforce that [healthy eating](#), [regular physical activity](#), [healthy relationships](#), [good sleep habits](#), and limiting screen time contribute to mental well-being. Remind students that stress is normal, and has a positive side as well as a negative one.

Consider social-emotional skills – international students may not have had the same exposure to social-emotional learning (*SEL*) as other B.C.

students and may be less equipped to speak about and manage their emotions and well-being. Work with your district’s well-being lead or SEL/classroom teachers to understand how SEL skills are being taught in your district.

Build the capacity of program staff – so they are confident and comfortable speaking about mental well-being and effective strategies for managing it. Draw on your district’s expertise, including that of counsellors, SEL teachers, and the district well-being lead. Explore professional learning opportunities. (*See also Additional Resources*)

Have a plan – work with your colleagues to develop a process/plan on how you address emerging mental health concerns in your students. It might include guidance on what to be looking for, when and to whom to escalate the issue to, when and how to approach parents, and how to activate the list of supports and resources in your district and community. Having a plan in place can help you address issues before a crisis occurs.

Build on school/district-wide mental health initiatives – for example, in Mental Health Awareness Month (*October*) hold a workshop for international students on strategies for the stress they face adapting to a different culture.

For Individual Students

Make wellness check-in's routine – when you meet with students. Ask how they are feeling, and explore how they are managing their stress. (*Example of a check-in [here](#). Stress symptoms [here](#).*)

Try to catch problems early – being alert to, and addressing issues that are developing helps avoid more serious problems later, and makes it more likely that self-help strategies will be beneficial. (*Signs and symptoms: [student-friendly here](#) and [more detailed and clinical here](#).*)

Reach out to school staff – who are interacting with international students daily to get their feedback on students' mental well-being and academic progress.

Use your cultural knowledge – be culturally humble. For some students and their family mental health counseling may not be accepted. Explore whether this is the case with the student. If so, you may need to focus on alternate strategies, such as self-help ones. For example, if you assess that the student is feeling anxious, you might help them with coping strategies. To get clues as to the support and treatment options that would be accepted in a student's family, ask if they have felt this way before; what has helped in the past and what would they do if they were home.

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Additional Resources

→ Educators, Program Staff, and Homestay Parents

These resources are focused on building the skills of, and supporting the adults who support international students.

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS	G. MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health check-in questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check-in • Suitable for all students 	✓	✓			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Strong Minds Strong Kids website provides tips for adults who are helping teens manage their stress and classroom resources for secondary schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips for adults • Classroom resources • Free 		✓			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelty's Talking to Youth About Mental Health resource provides tips for starting and responding to conversations about mental health. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips for adults 	✓				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelty also provides detailed descriptions of the signs and symptoms of many mental health challenges and disorders. For a more plain-language version, see the Foundry website. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health challenges • Signs and symptoms 			✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CASEL's Examples of Social and Emotional Learning in High School English Language Arts Instruction provides simple activities and teaching methods to increase the social and emotional skills of secondary students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL • Classroom resources 					✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With UBC's online Teach Mental Health course, educators develop their own mental health literacy and learn how to use the classroom mental health resource. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health literacy • Professional learning • Free 	✓				

→ Students

While these resources are focused on students, they are also great for adults with limited time and/or mental health knowledge. Consider using the resources WITH students, for example as part of ELL classroom materials, to gauge their understanding of the material, and open the door to deeper conversations. Many of the resources could be used as discussion starters for small groups or individuals.

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS	G. MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Foundry website has reliable, youth-focused information. It includes basic healthy living information for all students, mental health signs and symptoms including for stress, self-assessments, self-help approaches, and other ways to take action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 5 -8 reading level Mental health promotion Signs and symptoms Self-help Discussion starter 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Psychology Foundation of Canada's Stress: What Can You Do About It? infographic could be used as a discussion-starter for individual students or groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Infographic Discussion starter 		✓			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Here To Help's Plainer Language Series of booklets and audio clips provide reliable mental health information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 4 reading level 					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Tips for Good Mental Health booklet provides mental health promotion and prevention information. Use as a discussion starter for individual students or groups as part of your orientation process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health promotion Benefits all students Discussion starter Self-help 	✓				✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other booklets and audio clips include anger, depression, anxiety, mental illness, and suicide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue focused Discussion starter 			✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety Canada's Anxiety in Youth materials include a video explaining anxiety and self-help activities for students such as challenging negative thoughts and building confidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 8 reading level Video Self-help 			✓		

→ [STUDENTS ADDITIONAL RESOURCES CONT'D]

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS	G. MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre's Breathr mindfulness app provides simple and quick guided meditations and exercises appropriate for students. Mindfulness has been shown to help manage stress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> App Mindfulness Free 		✓	✓		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SickKids' About Kids Health website has mental health resources and videos, including some that promote good sleep habits, building resilience, and thinking positive thoughts. It also includes guided meditation and mindfulness practices (audio) that would be suitable for groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 8 reading level Video, audio Mindfulness 	✓	✓	✓		✓

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