HEALTH *and* Wellness Guidelines *for* International Students

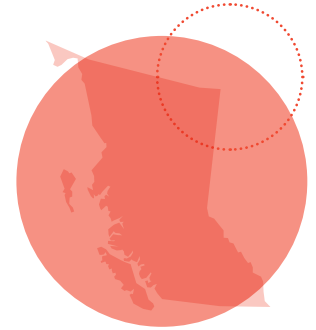UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FROM A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Understanding Mental Health & Well-being from a Latin American 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 Latin American perspectives on mental health, as identified in academic research. It is meant to complement and extend your own experience in working with international students.

Latin American 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.
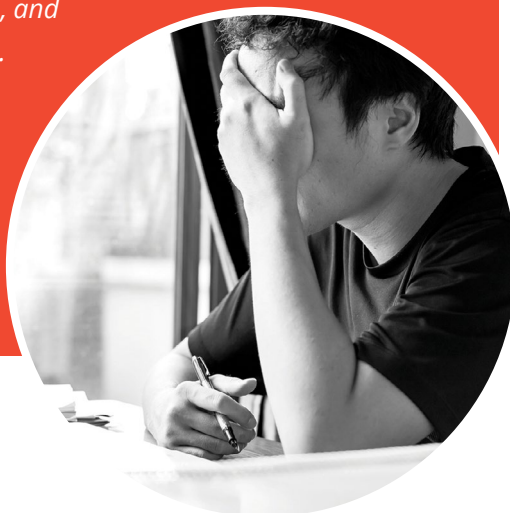
It can be particularly challenging if the student's ability to effectively communicate in English is limited. This can cause everything else to suffer; from academic performance to the student's capacity to connect with others and express concerns. For students who were high academic achievers in their 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.

LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

This document speaks primarily to the background of students from:

- *Mexico*
- *Central America*
- *South America*

The cultural understanding of mental health and illness in Latin American countries can be a little different than in Canada. However, between and within Latin American 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: Family and Gender

Latin American countries have collectivist cultures where the needs of the family are prioritized over the individual. Family members are expected to support each other emotionally and materially, and decisions are made for the betterment of the family unit. Family structures are typically patriarchal with prescribed gender roles. As in, males should be strong, provide for, protect and defend their families. Traditional female roles emphasize a woman's role as caring for their families, enduring suffering with dignity, submissiveness, chastity, dependence, and selflessness.

SCHOOL DISTRICT REFLECTIONS

There can be significant differences among countries / regions, and students. Not all students from this region will reflect these values or fit this pattern.

One school district with Latin American students, primarily from urban areas in Brazil, reports that this description does not match their experience. Their students tend to be less conservative and have good access to mental health care.

Traditional Latin American gender roles can be different than our own, so it is important to acknowledge and check our biases. If students share their experiences and are met with a push against those roles, it can be alienating rather than supportive. Religion can also play a strong role in Latin Americans' lives.

Warm, close and caring relationships both within and outside the family are valued, and deference is paid to elders and parents, with greater respect being paid to men than women. All people are considered to have an intrinsic worth – a value that can, in some cases, help reduce mental health stigma.

Understanding of Mental Health Problems

Mental health stigma is reasonably high in many areas of Latin America, with Brazil, Panama, and Chile having lower levels. In some areas, mental health professionals are scarce, leaving many people untreated.

Beliefs around mental health are mixed:

- Most believe that you should seek treatment from a mental health expert or doctor for a serious mental health problem.

- Many believe that mental illnesses are caused by bad character or the way that a person was raised.

- Some think that getting treatment can bring shame to your family, and associate mental illness with weakness, uselessness, and an inability to meet family obligations.

Strong gender roles can mean that stigma affects males and females differently. Males may hide mental health problems and be reluctant to receive treatment because they are worried that it might undermine their current or future role as family providers and protectors. Females with mental health problems may be viewed as unable to fulfill their family roles.

Approaches to Support and Treatment

In Canada, seeking help for mental health-related problems has been normalized. In some parts of Latin America, students experiencing a mental health problem may feel that seeking help could bring shame to their family, or that they are not worthy of respect.

Students with strong social support are less likely to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, or stress and the relationships found in Latin American families can provide that support.

Some research indicates that Latin Americans prefer informal counseling from family members, religious leaders, and close friends over professional counseling. Given this, it is important to meaningfully include the student's family in determining an appropriate treatment path.

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 counselors, 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.

Seeing the bigger picture – that all students, who may have mental health challenges, can improve their help-seeking behaviour.

For Individual Students

Make wellness check-ins 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.

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	GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
• *Mental health check-in questions.*	• *Check-in* • *Suitable for all students*	✔	✔			
• *The Strong Minds Strong Kids website provides tips for adults who are helping teens manage their stress and classroom resources for secondary schools.*	• *Tips for adults* • *Classroom resources* • *Free*		✔			
• *Kelty's Talking to Youth About Mental Health resource provides tips for starting and responding to conversations about mental health.*	• *Tips for adults*	✔				
• *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.*	• *Mental health challenges* • *Signs and symptoms*			✔	✔	✔
• *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.*	• *SEL* • *Classroom resources*					✔
• *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.*	• *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 class-room 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	GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
• *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.*	• *Grade 5 -8 reading level* • *Mental health promotion* • *Signs and symptoms* • *Self-help* • *Discussion starter*	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
• *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.*	• *Infographic* • *Discussion starter*		✔			
• *Here To Help's Plainer Language Series of booklets and audio clips provide reliable mental health information.*	• *Grade 4 reading level*					
• *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.*	• *Mental health promotion* • *Benefits all students* • *Discussion starter* • *Self-help*	✔				✔
• *Other booklets and audio clips include anger, depression, anxiety, mental illness, and suicide.*	• *Issue focused* • *Discussion starter*			✔	✔	✔
• *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.*	• *Grade 8 reading level* • *Video* • *Self-help*			✔		

RESOURCE	TYPE / HIGHLIGHTS	GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH	STRESS	ANXIETY	DEPRESSION	OTHER
• 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.	• _App_ • _Mindfulness_ • _Free_		✔	✔		
• _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.	• _Grade 8 reading level_ • _Video, audio_ • _Mindfulness_	✔	✔	✔		✔

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