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**EDUCATOR SUPPORT:  
International Students and Mental Health**

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## International Students and Mood Disorders: Tips for Educators

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Mental health issues are prevalent globally, and are one of the leading causes of disability at the workplace and at school. While not adequately researched, it is well accepted by health care professionals that early intervention could be the key to reducing the burden of psychiatric disorders across an individual's lifespan. However, there are considerable limitations to implementing early strategies for care. Limitations can be related to individual or societal beliefs about mental health and treatment seeking, diagnostic uncertainty, or systemic issues that result in a lack of resources.

On the individual level, you as educators are in a unique position to have a positive impact on the mental health outcomes of your students. Why? For the very basic reason that a student or parent may not be ready to acknowledge the problem or may not be aware that there is a problem. Following are some key behaviours to look out for in your students; they likely indicate a mental health issue that would be classified as a "mood disorder" (a disorder primarily affecting the ability to regulate one's mood).

**Read on for signs that may indicate that a student is struggling with a mood disorder.**

## MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER

**BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR** persistent sadness and/or loss of interest. If these mood changes persist for a minimum of two weeks, and are accompanied by three or more of the behaviours listed, it may indicate depression.

Depression is the most prevalent of psychiatric disorders and can be seen in children from an early age, although symptoms typically present themselves in adolescence. It is characterized by mood dysregulation, a persisting sadness, or lack of interest, accompanied by negative changes in appetite, sleep, concentration, or energy, as well as the presence of agitation, slowed thought/movement, or suicidal thoughts.

**Take note if a particular student is:**

- Frequently dispirited or despondent in facial expression, speech, or posture
- Becoming aloof and withdrawn; avoiding social situations
- No longer participating in class activities
- Showing decreased confidence in school performance
- Incapable of focusing on tasks or slower to complete them
- Fidgety during lectures
- Often yawning during class
- Demonstrating a decreased quality of work

## BIPOLAR DISORDER

**BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR** hyper moods and/or irritability. If these mood changes persist for a minimum of four days, and are accompanied by three or more of the behaviours listed, it may indicate a manic episode.

This disorder is characterized by episodes of major depression as well as mania. This means a confirmed diagnosis can only be made once an individual goes through both “swings.” In some cases, it may initially appear that the individual has depression—until a manic episode occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood. Mania is characterized by an elevated “high” or hyper mood that is not reflective of one’s usual demeanour; this can result in impulsive conduct that leads to negative consequences. Typically, if the depressive episodes are more severe, the mania is less severe and vice versa.

**Notice if a particular student is:**

- More happy, confident, or cheerful than usual; laughing inappropriately
- More sociable with classmates
- Unable to stop talking or talking so fast that they are difficult to understand
- Easily distracted by the slightest interruption
- Discussing new ideas or plans that seem unrealistic
- Frequently disrupting the class or being aggressive
- More active than usual; obviously restless in class
- Acting reckless and getting into trouble

## What Next ▼

If you think a student may be suffering from major depression or bipolar disorder, it is important to consult your school guidelines on how to handle mental health issues on the school grounds or in the classroom. Resources are also available for educators seeking additional information and tips for intervention. It is critical to respect family, cultural, and spiritual beliefs when educating students or their guardians about mental health. Above all, your contact with a student or parent regarding a potential mood disorder may be the vital first step in recognizing that there is a problem.

## Educator Resources ▼

**Children’s Mental Health Ontario – Resources for teachers**  
<http://bit.ly/14Npzmm>

**Mental health in schools – How teachers have the power to make a difference**  
<https://bit.ly/2LL90Ps>





## Speaking to Parents and Caregivers About Mental Health Issues

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A mental health issue can have a devastating impact on a child's success in school and in life. While it is understood that treatment should be sought as early as possible, it is difficult to do so when a mental health issue goes unrecognized. This problem is heightened in the case of children and adolescents if the individuals who play the main role in their health care (e.g., parents or caregivers) do not have enough information. Parents of students studying abroad face additional challenges: differences in cultural perceptions of mental illness, language barriers, and not being physically there to help their child with day to day care. In these instances, teachers, homestay coordinators, or homestay parents may need to get more involved in the child's care and may have to approach parents to discuss specific mental health concerns. With so many factors involved, it becomes clear that communicating to parents or caregivers about a child's mental health problem is a complex issue that requires a great deal of sensitivity.

**Read on for some things to keep in mind when navigating mental health communications with a student's parents or caregivers.**

1

**Understand that cultural perception is number one.**

Even within one city, people have different experiences and backgrounds that shape their beliefs. On a global scale, this effect is more pronounced. Before talking to parents or caregivers, take a little time to learn more about the child's background in order to gain an understanding about how mental health is viewed in their culture or by their religion. Having this information on hand will greatly help in the communication process, and will help you present yourself as a credible, thoughtful, and caring person. Once you demonstrate an understanding of their beliefs, it will be easier to educate them on how mental health is perceived in North America and let them know about the treatments that are available.

2

**Do what you can to overcome language barriers.**

Parents of international students may not speak English very well—if at all. In these cases, you may need to communicate through the agent that placed them. Even if the parents speak English, be careful to speak slowly and carefully. Do not to use alarming language; certain words may sound frightening to a non-native speaker of English, such as “depression,” “illness,” or “diagnosis.”

3

**Explain the effect on the child's performance and social life.**

Avoiding alarming terms and focusing on how symptoms are affecting the child can help circumvent potential differences in cultural beliefs. It also makes it less scary for parents to hear and helps present symptoms in a relatable way. For example, if a child is depressed, you could say “I notice Anne has been feeling sad for the last few weeks. It seems to be having an effect on how she is able to concentrate in class or make friends”. After all, a student's social and academic performance is very important to parents or caregivers.

4

**Don't play the blame game.**

It is extremely important not to approach this issue in a way that makes the parent or caregiver feel blamed or guilty. Avoid making comments that imply they have somehow caused the symptoms (e.g., “you aren't involved enough in your child's life” or “you don't provide enough support”). These types of statements will put them on the defensive, and may mean they are less open to speaking with you or accepting the suggestions for help that you are offering. The goal is to help the student, and ensure that appropriate care is sought. In order to do this, you and the parents need to be on the same side.

5

**Let them know what systems are in place to help their child.**

Parents who hear that their child is in any sort of distress will understandably feel anxious—especially when they are living in another part of the world. Knowing that there are people and programs available to help can go a long way in reassuring parents that their child is being taken care of. Openly communicating options for support also allows them to become a part of the treatment process. Keeping them involved is beneficial to the child, and gives parents a greater sense of control over the situation while they are so far away.

Mental health is a difficult topic to discuss, especially if it is about someone else's child. It becomes even more difficult if the parent is living in another country. Above all, be sensitive to a parent's feelings and cultural beliefs.

Getting caregivers and parents involved and on board is an important step to ensuring a child gets the help that they need.



Dr. Sakina Rizvi received her PhD in the Faculty of Pharmacy and Collaborative Program in Neuroscience at the University of Toronto. She has over 10 years of experience in psychiatry, with a focus in Major Depressive Disorder. Currently, Dr. Rizvi is a Scientist in the Arthur Sommer Rotenberg Suicide and Depression Studies Program at St. Michael's Hospital and Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto. In addition, as Co-Lead for the Ontario Depression Network, her goal is to promote mental illness advocacy, education and resource building across Ontario.

## HOW STUDYINSURED™ HELPS

### WE UNDERSTAND.

As international students, moving to a foreign country on your own, where you may not speak the language and are learning a new school system, can be challenging and sometimes even lonely.

As part of the Stay Healthy At School Program, StudyInsured™ offers access to a toll-free 24/7 mental health phone line. This service provides students with one-on-one private, confidential counselling directly by phone for a variety of mental health concerns.

The mental health phone line immediately connects students to culturally sensitive, multilingual mental health professionals, whenever and wherever they need it most.

### GET HELP FOR ISSUES INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO:

- Depression and anxiety
- Sleeping and eating disorders
- Relationship issues
- Abuse
- Homesickness/adjustment stress
- School conflict management
- Academic stress
- Addiction/gaming/substance abuse

### CONTACT US FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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