

Framing Mentally Healthy Campuses

Conceptual Tool



Part of the Student Led Initiatives Toolkit.

Introduction

About the Tools and Toolkits

These tools and toolkits are hosted by **Healthy Campus Alberta**, a provincial community of practice committed to cultivating caring campus communities in Alberta. Originally developed by **Alberta Campus Mental Health Innovation** (an initiative carried out by the **Alberta Students Executive Council**), the tools and toolkits are learning-focused, living documents that serve to support our community of practice.

About the Student Led Initiatives Toolkit

This toolkit was developed for student leaders in post secondary institutions who are planning and implementing student mental health initiatives on their campus. Others who are planning and delivering post secondary mental health initiatives may also find the toolkit useful for their purposes, including those aimed at students as well as faculty and staff, or those aspiring to take their institution to a new level of mentally healthy campus. It will be particularly useful to understand the roles and contributions that students, student leaders and student associations can make in advancing the impact of mentally healthy campuses.

Framing Mentally Healthy Campuses

It is important to think about the frame, or boundaries of a student led mental health initiative. Your frame directs which fields of knowledge you'll want to consider in developing activities. Let's say you set the frame as relating to individual people who have or are at risk of developing severe and persistent mental illness. That means you'll limit your activities to those that fields such as psychiatry and psychology consider appropriate for treatment, support or prevention of such illnesses. On the other hand, if you choose a mental wellness oriented and mentally healthy campus frame, you'll choose activities that are directed by the fields of knowledge in community health/ community development, therapeutic landscapes and positive mental health. This conceptual tool brings intentionality to the possibilities of frames for student led mental health initiatives.

After reading this conceptual tool, you will be able to...

1. Define a "mentally healthy campus" and explain why viewing campuses as communities
2. Articulate why postsecondary students are well-positioned to create and contribute to mentally healthy campuses.

The ACMHI Story

The Alberta Campus Mental Health Innovation (ACMHI) project began in 2012 with one member of the Alberta Student Executive Council (ASEC) engaging fellow members in taking action on existing and growing mental health challenges. The desire was to embark on a collective approach to improving students' mental health and reducing stigma on member campuses. Over the course of three years, 2013/14 to 2015/16, ASEC and ACMHI then implemented their innovation strategy. ACMHI undertook a set of activities in its third and fourth year to develop a series of legacy resources from the innovation. One of these was to create a set of Legacy Tools in a web-based Toolkit for future Student Leaders. These toolkits are now available on the Healthy Campus Alberta website.

Innovation Approach

Over and above any specific innovative projects that Student Leaders developed on their own campus, five characteristics made the ACMHI initiative innovative:

Led by Student Leaders. Student Leaders of member associations in ASEC conceived and implemented the initiative over the course of several years, to meet their collective and individual aims.

Centred on the Student Experience. Student leaders, being students themselves, have a natural orientation to choose activities that would align with the student experience, and how students contribute to the whole of the mental health of the campus.

Collective Approach. Innovation occurred at the members' individual campus level and at the collective level. This enabled a range of relatively small, medium and large post secondary institutions to benefit from individual and collective strategies.

Mental Wellness Orientation. Student leaders captured the essence of the broad definition of positive mental health for both individuals and groups: more than the absence of illness.

Whole System Approach. The frame for the initiative was a Mentally Healthy Campus, and not simply mental health or mental illness of individuals.

Individual and Collective Approach

At the individual campus level, student leaders developed proposals that, if approved, were implemented on their campus in collaboration with university administration and the community. At the collective level, ASEC and ACHMI created a provincial advocacy strategy, managed funding logistics, and worked collaboratively to establish Healthy Campus Alberta.



Toolkits



Foundations of a Mentally Healthy Campus

What is a Mentally Healthy Campus?

A post secondary campus is more than people – whether students, staff, faculty or administration – more than buildings, classrooms and the landscaping, although these are what we can see when we arrive on a campus. We can think of a post secondary campus as community. Recognizing a campus as a community helps us to pay attention to the reality that a whole variety of elements work together to create and maintain the campus community's culture. People, whether students, faculty or staff are both beneficiaries and contributors. Physical buildings and layout are not just vehicles for holding classes, offices and research labs, but are factors that influence the health and safety of all the people in the campus community. The overall culture either stewards the positive interaction of all these elements, or runs in a way that hampers or damages them.

Key Foundations

There are five key foundations that are important to understanding mental wellness:

- Mental wellness and mental illness or issues are not opposites, but are a continuum;
- Mental wellness is process as well as a state;
- Mental wellness is both individual and collective;
- Mental wellness relates to brain development and observable behaviours and states;
- We are influenced by, and influence, our environments. We contribute to, as well as benefit from positive enabling environments.

Learn More about Mental Health



View the [Overview of Mental Health Conceptual Tool](#) to understand key concepts related to mental health.



View the [Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addiction Framework](#).
View the [First Nations Mental Health Continuum Framework](#).
View the [Mental Health Strategy for Canada](#).

Foundations of a Mentally Healthy Campus cont.

The Whole Systems Approach

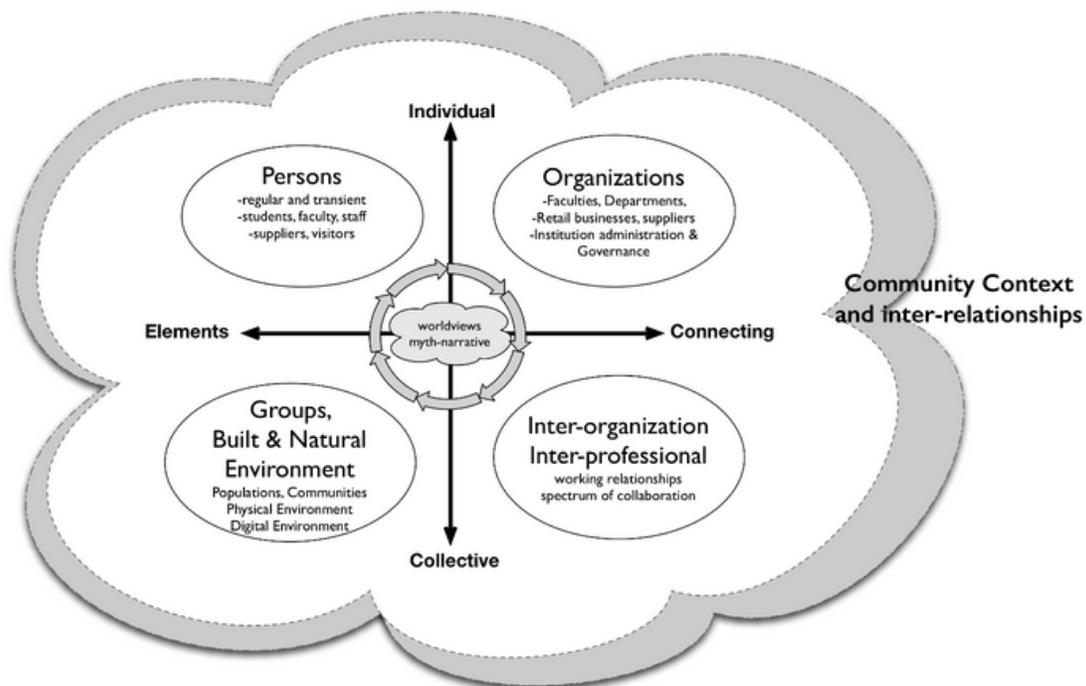
Viewing a campus as a community is a whole system approach, which understands that overall impact is created by the interactions of all its elements. According to this approach, a mentally healthy campus community...

- is one where all of its elements – people, environments and collective culture work together to promote the mental well-being of all of its members, the inclusiveness of its culture and the sustainability of the physical environment;
- both contributes to, and benefits from mentally healthy communities and regions in which it is located.

Factors and resources associated with a mentally healthy campus community are visualized in the graphic, including:

- *Persons* as individuals (and services directed at individuals);
- *Groups, Built and Natural Environment* (and services directed at these elements);
- *Organizations*;
- *Inter-organization and inter-professional* working relationships and collaborations.

These factors are nested within *community context and inter-relationships*.



By taking a whole system approach, and taking action on all the other elements of a mentally healthy campus, planners can make sure their strategy both influences the wide range of factors that influence people's mental health AND helps those elements to influence each other. This creates a momentum; a movement that is self-reinforcing and can magnify the impact.

Why Students?

Why are post secondary students a critical group?

Having mental wellness as well as mental illness and issues support helps make the best use of the investment in post secondary education.

There is growing evidence that student mental health is a critical foundation for students to optimize their learning and be successful in their academic work. Students who experience mental illness also experience poor academic performance, increased anxiety, and loss of interest in learning. Many life assets are important soft skills valued by employers in a dynamic changing world. Influencing post secondary students to develop positive mental wellness habits and beliefs, has a great return on investment over and above the improvement in academic performance. It is an investment in future parents; employers and employees; educators and health providers and other helping professions, neighbours and citizens, throughout their lives.

Post secondary education is an important time in people's development.

Most people who are going to have lifelong mental health issues will be diagnosed before they turn 24 years of age. This is also an important time of life for developing habits and beliefs. So, developing healthy ways of coping with life challenges can help create helpful and lasting life habits. Older students are in life transitions and are still at a point where the potential for changing habits and beliefs is possible. Better treatment protocols and resources support people to live more normalized lives, and improve the ability to succeed in higher education. It is critical that there are adequate resources for supporting people to maintain their treatment plans while in the high stress environment of postsecondary education is critical.

Post secondary institutions are considered to be high-stress environments.

Student surveys show that many students experience high stress, anxiety and sleep difficulties, which have a negative impact on their academic performance. Some post secondary institutions or programs can be more high stress or competitive than others. Learning healthy choices in the face of a high stress environment is good preparation for one's future. Post secondary campuses are a community, enabling the development of positive relational skills, beliefs and attitudes through developmental stages.

Student led initiatives help students develop skills and experience.

Students who conceive, plan and implement mental health and illness initiatives are developing important life and career skills over and above their improved awareness of mental health, mental illness and issues, and the importance of reducing stigma to their own wellbeing.

Why Work Together?

Working Together

There are many strategies

to choose from when attempting to improve mental wellness, and treat or prevent mental illness and mental health issues. One is to focus directly on the desired outcome in individual people; another is to address the systemic factors that lead to the desired outcome. The physical, social, and policy environment are important systemic factors to consider. Collective action, or working together, is a part of a whole systems approach, recognizing that many people and units within the institution's structure, provide services addressing mental wellness and mental illness / issues.

It's helpful to focus on shared outcomes when you want to work with others. Being creative about how to create a desired outcome can lead to some powerful partnerships. Here's a sample of the range of actions that a Student Leader might consider taking:

Do – deliver service directly.

Advocate – encourage others to take action themselves.

Partner – share with another group, with either partner leading. If done well, this can make resources stretch farther and the initiative benefits from the differing strengths of the partners.

Collectively Act – engage with a wide range of people or groups. This requires some sort of coordinating body that facilitates discussions towards a shared vision and agenda, helps develop shared measures and evaluation, and undertakes common functions.

Celebrate – recognize others who are contributing to your shared end.



Collective action, done well, builds on successes over time. As strengths are built, they lead to unforeseen opportunities and better use of everyone's resources. This builds synergy (the impact becomes stronger and stronger over time as it builds on itself. This is the 'flywheel' effect.



Read about the flywheel effect in the [Strategies for Mentally Healthy Campuses Practical Tool](#)

Why Student Led?

Student led mental health initiatives offer multiple advantages.

Peers influence students.

Students are often more comfortable talking about difficult situations with fellow students who they trust.

Students have lived experience.

Students have a better grasp on the realities of the current student experience than others, even those who are on campus. This is not to say that others have no grasp of the student experience, but the student perspective is a valuable piece of the puzzle.

The student experience is holistic.

Part of the student experience is that it involves more than just the time on campus. Students' experience is a whole person experience in a whole life and a whole community – work, family, personal relationships are all part of a person's experience and events in one ripple through all the others – there's a domino effect. It's hard for others to see all those other parts of a student's experience and remember they're part of the puzzle.

Students can be innovative.

Students are not necessarily limited by traditional views of mental health strategies. If innovation is desired, then student-led initiatives offer an opportunity to explore approaches that are driven by different worldviews. Successful initiatives can then be leveraged in a comprehensive strategy.

Students are creative.

They can often find less expensive ways of achieving a desired outcome.

Students themselves are impacted.

Students involved in conceiving, designing and implementing mental health initiatives develop a deeper understanding of mental wellness and mental health issues than most students. So developing and implementing the strategy helps them develop skills such as strategy development, project management and evaluation. They also learn more about the leadership challenges involved in changing culture, decisions that involve ethics of resource allocation, and other leadership dilemmas.



View the rest of the [Student Led Initiatives Toolkit](#).