

# Student Mental Health Journeys

*Conceptual Tool*



Part of the Holistic Mental Health Approaches 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 Holistic Mental Health Approaches Toolkit

This toolkit is an introduction to systemic and comprehensive approaches to a mentally healthy campus and community strategy. It has been developed to support the policy-mandated collaboration of the Alberta post-secondary student mental health strategy. Achieving the intended outcomes of this strategy requires post-secondary institutions, student leaders, healthcare organizations and community support agencies to work closely together to align services and supports, and navigate student transitions. This requires common understanding of terms and diverse worldviews, shared frameworks, and tools. This toolkit can be used to support purposeful, theory-based approaches for designing and implementing health promoting and health-enabling environments strategies.

## About Student Mental Health Journeys

The **Student Mental Health Journeys** tool includes two types of journeys – a human’s macro life journey, and a set of micro-journeys that are important to inform purposeful design of health promoting / capacity building strategies.

### **Who could use this tool?**

- Individual services, programs, and organizations
- Regional hubs;
- Funders and government.

### **What purposes could this tool serve?**

- Learning about the student experience and ways to center the student experience in mental health strategies;
- Offering helpful tools to be used in everyday practice by staff, and faculty.

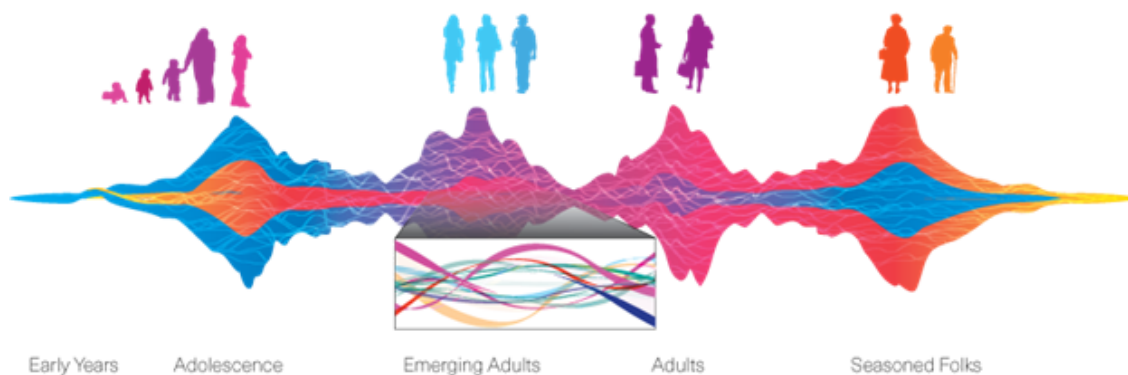
# Mental Health Journeys

As described in other parts of these toolkits, many factors interact to influence a person's positive mental health – over time as a process, a journey that never ends – thus the phrase “positive mental health is a developmental journey with many ingredients”. This concept of ‘journey’ aligns with Keyes’ vertical axis of his ‘dual continua’ – moving upwards from languishing to flourishing is one way to characterize the potential for developmental growth along this journey.

These descriptions of the underlying patterns of students’ positive mental health journeys are intended to provide highlights that will help to ground health promoting strategies in ways that respect and work with students’ stage of their journeys.

## Life Journeys

Our lives have many developmental stages, where we weave our development and wellness from many strands. These strands are within ourselves and in our environment.



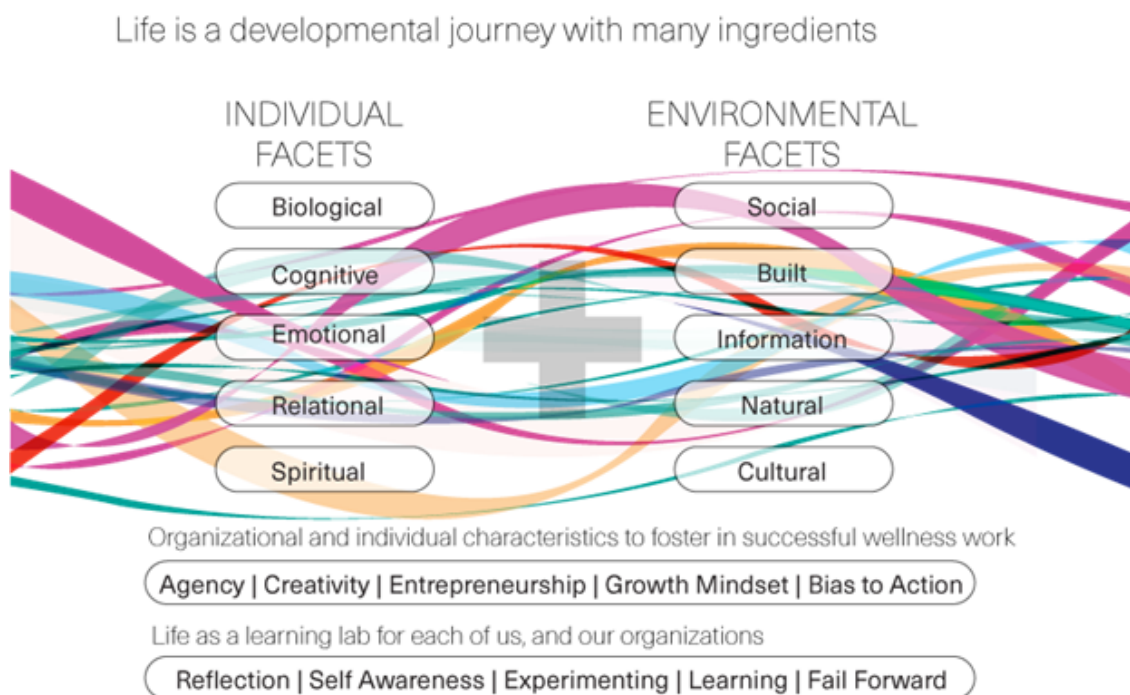
Successful collaborations must consider all of these strands

Students' mental health journeys in their post-secondary years are a continuation of, and an opportunity to redirect historical patterns. Each person's life-span journey evolves through a series of developmental stages, building on the foundation created through the prenatal period and intergenerational influences. This way of looking at a life journey could as easily be called a person's *life-span health journey*. The student's mental health journey is one or more segments of that person's life journey. Times as a student can occur in different developmental stages. This is one way in which the current world differs from a historical patterns that segmented the student experience in to only one life stage.

# Life Journeys cont.

a student arrives, armed with the capabilities they established through their earlier life developmental stages. For some, the post-secondary experience provides challenges that greatly exceed any they have experienced, as well as being separated from their traditional ecosystem supports, so their capacity to cope productively is significantly challenged. In turn, students' strengthened or weakened capacity developed while at post-secondary will influence their journey through the rest of their life-span, as well as influencing others in their lives, their ecosystems and descendants. This means the potential return on investment for individuals and society in health promoting, ecological capacity building strategies in post-secondary campuses is significant.

Illustrated in the graphic are the five main facets that comprise the developmental stage: biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional. Underpinning all of these is brain development and brain plasticity, and the meaning-making that a person develops with the influence of their environment. A person's overall capacity for coping with their life challenges ebbs and flows, growing or weakening through life with the strength of these facets and their experience of support, trauma or neglect from their ecosystem.



People's positive mental health, challenges, and resiliency emerge from the interplay of these different facets. By understanding developmental stages and strengthening varied facets and environments - the holistic approach - teams will create more resilient communities and individuals.

# Micro Journeys

Underlying the patterns seen at the human and life level are a set of micro-journeys – those that are seen using research instruments that can track living systems. Three micro-journeys are described briefly, because they give pointers for refining health-promoting strategies to be more purposeful, and to improve the ability to choose metrics that measure what is really being targeted with a strategy.

## **Stress Response Journey**

One critical micro-mental health journey is the stress response at a person's biological level, sometimes called the stress response. The stress response is a set of body reactions to new or threatening situations. The reactions were established over the course of human evolution so we would have appropriate automatic reactions to the dangerous situations we faced as early humans. Some stress is essential to life, it is of concern when the level of stress far exceeds our ability to deal with it.

The cycle happens very quickly but happens in a series of steps which are largely outside of a person's conscious awareness. These happen continuously through a person's day. A person's patterns of reaction to stress are based on the brain pathways that have been developed, based on what the person has learned and remembered in their life, influenced by learning from their family and social group. Understanding this is relevant for students because learning and memory, and thus success at school or work are very sensitive to stress. Thus, knowing the different steps helps be more precise at design health promotion strategies that can help the person learn better skills for relieving or managing their stress.



Read more about the [psychobiology of the stress response](#).

Health promotion strategies need to address both legs of this journey:

- First, cognitive and emotional strategies can help the person retrain their meaning-making process.
- Second, once the fear response (flight, freeze or fight) has been triggered, then relaxation and/or mindfulness practices help to reduce the impact.
- Positive psychology practices can also influence the stress response.

Stress relief strategies will help only in the short term. A student will need to develop a routine practice of stress management skills to develop any significant capability to handle stress in productive ways.

# Micro Journeys cont.

## **Capacity Building Journeys**

If a student wishes to go beyond stress relief and stress management to improve their capacity to engage with life challenges, they can add practices that help them learn from their experiences. Learning can either be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal learning means growing more confident and competent at the same level. Vertical or transformational learning means making the developmental leap to a higher level of complex problems. Such improved capacity is a life asset since it advantages the person throughout their life journey.

Health promotion strategies aimed at capacity building may involve helping a student learn a key skill (such as how to have a meaningful communication), or helping a student learn their own processes and meaning-making, how to experiment with new ways of interpreting events and or ways of responding. Capacity building may also include strategies to influence one's environments, including by collaborating with others.

## **Stages of Change**

A person, campus, organization or community does not change abruptly from one state to another, and the journey is not a linear one. Rather, the journey is characterized as moving from one stage to another. One way of characterizing these stages is relevant to the readiness to change. A person starts in a place where change may not even be recognized as a possibility – they have accepted the current state as 'just the way they are', 'just the way life works'. Others may have moved through this stage but still considering whether the effort of change is worth the cost (perhaps in time, in change in identity, the potential loss of relationships). Still others may have moved on, tried some ways to change, and have 'slid back' into behaviours that they are more skilled at.

The reason this is important is to make sure to align health promoting strategies to the stage the person is in. This is easier to see in one-on-one strategies, but is also very important to build into strategies that are aimed at groups.



View the rest of the [Holistic Mental Health Approaches Toolkit](#)