

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Well-Being from a Catholic Perspective: Addressing Mental Health Literacy within Religion and Family Life Programs

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10.10)

The last ten years have witnessed remarkable growth in our individual and collective ability and willingness to engage in a conversation about mental health and well-being. While educators have always worked to ensure that students not only learn but thrive, the focus on well-being was often implicit.

It was only four years ago that Ontario’s Ministry of Education first began to explicitly develop a Well-Being Strategy for Education, recognizing the important relationship between a child’s sense of well-being and his or her capacity to learn. The Ministry continues to focus attention and

encourage initiative as schools and school systems are asked to play active roles in addressing concerns for well-being and mental health for students and staff alike.

Consistent with this strategy, the recently revised *Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum, Grades 1-8* (2019) introduces a heightened focus on mental health and wellbeing with specific learning expectations included at each grade level. The overarching focus is on raising awareness about the importance of mental health and resilience, building mental health literacy, and equipping students with language to allow them to better discuss and express

their mental health needs, and those of their friends and family. These important expectations should be addressed not only within the context of Health and Physical education but in fact can and should be addressed across the curriculum in many subject areas. In Catholic schools, there is rich potential for

this to be integrated as part of the Religion and Family Life program.

This monograph is intended to contribute to the conversation about mental health and well-being for students that is ongoing within educational communities, and to ensure that the discussion is premised on a rich Catholic/

Christian understanding of the human person.

As Catholic educators, we believe that every human being has inherent human dignity and is made in the image and likeness of God. This fundamental concept is at the core of all that we do in Catholic schools.

“The Church sees in men and women, in every person, the living image of God himself.” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 105).

This foundational belief shapes and informs all relationships within the school — relationships with students and their families, staff, and the broader

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community. Respect for life is the core of Catholic Social Teaching. Such respect ensures that we make sure each and every person lives life fully, experiencing the abundance of God’s love and participating in all parts of human society.

“**Create inclusive places of learning that invite and enable each child and young person in your care to grow fully to be all that God knows and hopes them to be.**” (*Renewing the Promise*)

Initiatives related to mental health and well-being recognize this inherent dignity and align perfectly with the foundational respect for the human person. The Catholic church community has a long tradition of addressing human well-being, and the salvation history of the Catholic/Christian Church demonstrates a profound focus on the question of human growth and fulfillment. For Catholic schools, this has always found expression in the care for every child. Promoting the well-being and positive mental health of all students to reach their God-given potential is a gospel mandate and a moral imperative for Catholic schools which aligns with this important initiative of the Ministry of Education.

Catholic schools share the mission and mandate of the Roman Catholic Church to address the development of the whole person, incorporating elements of faith into the holistic education of students. Catholic education encourages an understanding of human life as an integration of body, mind and spirit and fosters the search for meaning as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. Health, wholeness and well-being contribute to students’ ability to learn to be life-long learners and live healthy, active lives. Mental health impacts all areas of development.

In the recent pastoral letter, *Renewing the Promise*, the Bishops of Ontario encourage teachers and education workers to ensure that our Catholic schools are safe, welcoming, Christ-centered learning environments, essential for student success and well-being: “Create inclusive places of learning that invite and enable each child and young person in your care to grow fully to be all that God knows and hopes them to be.” (*Renewing the Promise*)

In Catholic schools, faith is foundational to all

aspects of the operation — ethos, organization and structure, program and curriculum. We pray, we mark the liturgical seasons, we strive to embrace Catholic Social Teachings, and we celebrate liturgies and sacraments. The spiritual dimension is the basis of our system. As followers of Jesus, we strive to follow his example, being his disciples.

“Catholic schools must be places where students can hear Jesus’ invitation to follow him, where they can receive his command to love all people, and where they can realize his presence and his promise to be with them always. Only in this way can students be nurtured and encouraged to be who they are meant to be, persons of dignity and freedom, created in the image and likeness of God as modelled in Jesus Christ.” (*Renewing the Promise*)

To fully realize this vision, educational experiences must prioritize students’ cognitive, social, emotional learning, physical, mental and spiritual health.



“Catholics share a distinctly Christian view of the human person; that is, the human person is not a construct but a creation, the impetus for his or her birth being love, not accident...In the Judeo-Christian worldview each person is created *imago dei* in the very image and likeness of God. And because God creates all things good, the human person is endowed with a fundamental inviolate dignity...In the Catholic/Christian view of the human person as creature, we see *personhood at the center of the emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual and physical domains of human experience*. None of these

manifestations of the human experience exist in isolation from the others. They are not mutually exclusive. There is continual tension and interplay among them. – For example, human emotions impact physical experience; spiritual, emotional and cognitive expressions are interwoven with our social experience.”²

“ Every human life is sacred and created in the image of God. Every human life has purpose. It is not economic privilege, nor intellectual prowess nor athletic ability that dictates a child’s worth. Our common humanity, wholly created from God’s bountiful goodness, gifts each person with essential dignity and value.

Each component is influenced by a person’s environment or context, including community. At the centre is an enduring core. Our role as Catholic educators is to create the conditions that support the development of the knowledge and skills that form an integrated whole, equipping students to lead and live healthy, active lives in an ever-changing, complex world. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops remind us:

“In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. ...While our society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all.”³

The focus on the dignity of the person, offers our students a Christian vision of who we are and how we are meant to live together. Every human life is sacred and created in the image of God. Every human life has purpose. It is not economic privilege, nor intellectual prowess nor athletic ability that dictates a child’s worth. Our common humanity, wholly created from God’s bountiful goodness, gifts each person with essential dignity and value.⁴ A person’s worth and dignity cannot be diminished by any condition, including mental illness. We are committed to promoting mental health and well-being by focusing on strengths, building resilience through social, emotional, and behavioural competence, supporting

students with mental health problems, and creating safe, welcoming, Christ-centered and inclusive environments for all.

Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations

The human person does not create himself or herself in the Catholic/Christian tradition. We discover who God has intended us to be. Catholic education addresses this desire of the person to understand human life as an integration of body, mind and spirit. Rooted in this vision, Catholic schools foster the search for meaning as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. In the discovery of our gifts we discern who we have been called to be.⁵

This journey of learning and self-discovery in Catholic schools is guided not only by the curriculum but by the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations. The OCSGEs are not defined simply as knowledge and skills but rather values, attitudes and actions and are informed by reason and faith. A deeper look at each of the Catholic Graduate expectations makes even more explicit the connection to mental health and well-being, beginning with self and moving outward into community.

A resilient, Discerning Believer, who

- develops attitudes and values founded on Catholic **social teaching** and acts to promote social responsibility, human solidarity and the common good;
- seeks intimacy with God and celebrates communion with God, others and creation through prayer and worship;
- understands that one’s purpose or **call in life** comes from God and strives to discern and live out this call throughout life’s journey; and
- integrates faith with life.

A Self-Directed, Responsible, Life Long Learner who

- demonstrates a confident and positive sense of self and respect for the dignity and welfare of others;
- participates in leisure and fitness activities for a balanced and healthy lifestyle;
- examines and reflects on one’s personal

values, abilities, and aspirations influencing life's choices and opportunities.

A Collaborative Contributor who

- develops one's God-given potential and makes a meaningful contribution to society;
- respects the rights, responsibilities and contributions of self and others.

A Caring Family Member who

- relates to family members in a loving, compassionate and respectful manner;
- ministers to the family, school, parish, and wider community through service.

A Responsible Citizen who

- acts morally and legally as a person formed in Catholic traditions;
- accepts accountability for one's own actions;
- witnesses Catholic social teaching by promoting equality, democracy, and solidarity for a just, peaceful and compassionate society;
- contributes to the common good.

Fully Alive

The **Fully Alive** program was created to help our students to be fully human. While it is most commonly recognized as the program used in Catholic schools for family life education, and more specifically as a resource for teaching about human development and human sexuality, it is in fact a broad designed to provide our students and their families an opportunity to reflect on and to be guided by the wisdom drawn from Christian human experience. The progression of knowledge and skill development, in concert with our faith journey, is calling each individual to fully be the person they were born to be; to fulfill the original selfhood given to each one of us, at birth by God. The **Fully Alive** program engages students in learning about the factors that contribute to health and well-being and builds skills to live healthy, faith-filled lives. As such, the **Fully Alive** program has rich potential to be used as a classroom resource to assist teachers in addressing curriculum expectations that focus on mental health literacy.

Theme One of **Fully Alive**, 'Created and Loved by God', focuses on the human person, created out of love in the image and likeness of God. The uniqueness, dignity and meaning of each human life are explored in this theme. Theme Two, 'Living in Relationship', presents the relational nature of the human person, a reflection of God. The lessons are fundamental for a sense of personal identity and self-worth.

“ This expression of being fully alive, is impacted by and animated in community. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes this and reminds us “the human person needs to live in society...”

Catholic educators have the unique privilege to kindle the divine spark in each child and facilitate movement towards living a resilient, faith-filled life; a way of being. By focusing on and nurturing students' strengths, educators help promote positive mental health and well-being. The belief that we are made in God's image calls for a holistic education that engages the whole person; head, heart and hands. As active participants in their learning, our students are empowered to achieve their full potential. Though their development as whole persons they are called forth; equipped to be co-creators, fully alive for the glory of God.

This expression of being fully alive, is impacted by and animated in community. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes this and reminds us “the human person needs to live in society...” [1879]; Parker Palmer, author and educator, focuses on issues in education, leadership, community, and spirituality. While he draws upon a different faith tradition than Catholicism, he builds from a similar insight, reminding us that “Community begins not externally but in the recesses of the human heart. Long before community can be manifest in outward relationships, it must be present in the individual as ‘a capacity for connectedness’, to recognize our interdependence.”⁶

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We cultivate a capacity for connectedness through explicit teaching and contemplation so that our children and youth come to know, understand and appreciate the reality of our interdependence and our shared humanity. We are made for community. Parker Palmer emphasizes that our understanding of community needs to be capacious enough to know and recognize that I am my brother and sister’s keeper whether it is through the stranger I have never met, the poor around the world, my immediate neighbours, classmates, schoolmates, coworkers and colleagues to whom we are accountable, or my family and friends. He notes “a capacity for connectedness is both possible and necessary if we are to inhabit the larger, and truer community of our lives.”⁷

Individuals and communities thrive, not when they are kept the same, but when they are resilient enough to weather expected and unexpected change. The ongoing process of inquiry, in which we engage to learn, is necessary for the journey of self-discovery that contributes to the health and well-being of our students, our school communities, and the world. This progression by which individuals are gifted, discover and develop those gifts within community, ultimately for the benefit of the community, is also recognized in Catechism of the Catholic Church, which reminds us that each human receives “certain talents that enrich” their identity and which they develop [1880].

Our Catholic schools are places of encounter where daily students experience the attention, compassion, care and kindness of educators, who create the conditions to accompany students to fully become the person God intends them to be in order for them to be able to reach out to their community in compassion and in service.

Mental Health and Well-Being

This provides a broad context to shape our understanding of mental health and well-being.

Mental health is one of the essential components of the integrated whole. Well-being is shaped by the presence of all the factors that contribute to healthy growth and development. Mental health is developed through the same progression of knowledge and skill development that forms emotional, spiritual, and physical, spiritual, and cognitive development.

Mental health is much more than the absence of mental illness. The Health and Physical Education (2019) curriculum policy document defines positive mental health in this way:

Positive mental health is “the capacity of each and all of use to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.” (Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum [2019] page 307)

The Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum 2019

Ontario Catholic schools have addressed the human development and sexual health aspects of the Health and Physical curriculum as part of the Family Life education using the Fully Alive program for over thirty years and will continue to do so. The Institute for Catholic Education is developing additional supplementary resources that provide teachers of the **Fully Alive** program with the tools so that the additional specific learning expectations for mental health literacy and wellbeing that were introduced to the HPE curriculum in 2019 can similarly be integrated and addressed as part of the family life program.

The HPE (2019) curriculum introduces Mental Health Literacy as a subtopic within the Healthy living strand of the curriculum. The overarching focus is on building mental health and resilience. These mental health literacy expectations can be addressed

across multiple subject areas in addition to the health classroom and can be further supported through school-based and system level initiatives. In Catholic schools there are very natural opportunities for these important messages to be integrated as part of the Religion and Family Life program, not to replace but to supplement additional resources that may be developed locally, or in conjunction with School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO). The ICE resources under development provide practical examples and necessary information for educators in Catholic schools to effectively address mental health literacy within a faith context.

“The Fully Alive program provides a unique opportunity for developing the social-emotional learning skills that will help students develop a deep understanding of who they are; a beloved child of God and help them to connect positively and productively with the larger world.”

The 2019 Health and Physical Education curriculum has 4 strands (A: Social Emotional Learning Skills; B: Active Living; C: Movement Competence: Skills, Concepts and Strategies; D: Healthy Living.)

Strand A: Social Emotional Learning Skills

This strand is aimed at helping students to develop social-emotional learning skills to support overall health and well-being, positive mental health, and the ability to learn, build resilience and thrive. In all grades, learning related to the expectations in this strand happens in the context of learning related to the other three strands and is assessed and evaluated within these contexts. The **Fully Alive** program provides a unique opportunity for developing the social-emotional learning skills that will help students develop a deep understanding of who they are; a beloved child of God and help them to connect positively and productively with the larger world.

Strand D: Healthy Living

Healthy Living includes a newly introduced subtopic, Mental Health Literacy, within the Healthy Living

strand, explicitly addressing specific learning expectations for each grade level. Throughout the elementary grades, the HPE curriculum expects students to learn strategies to identify and manage their emotions, recognize sources of stress and how to cope, the value of perseverance, how to build relationships, develop self-awareness and confidence and think critically when making choices and responding to the world around them. Learning in this strand is intended to provide opportunities to learn how to limit risk and to build protective factors that will increase resilience as they encounter life's challenges. The Family Life Education Curriculum (2012) followed in Catholic elementary schools incorporates many of these same expectations but presents them within a distinctively Catholic framework.

The **Fully Alive** program is divided into five themes: *Created and Loved By God, Living in Relationship, Created Sexual: Male and Female, Growing in Commitment and Living in The World.* The mental health curriculum expectations align most appropriately with Theme One, Created and Loved By God and Theme 2 Living in Relationship. Lessons developed for **Fully Alive** can address mental health literacy ensuring that students will learn about mental health, strategies for building good mental health, how to identify mental health problems, and where and how to find help in their community, while continuing to address all the family life curriculum expectations for which the **Fully Alive** program was designed. Such an approach provides yet another opportunity to enhance the mental health and well-being of individuals within our community so they can fully participate in lifelong learning and fully realize and celebrate their Catholic faith journey.

Building Student Capacity

A specific progression across the grades is proposed to develop students' mental health literacy. This progression is captured in the Scope and Sequence “Fully Alive – Mental Health Literacy Expectations Scope and Sequence Chart” that follows.

Fully Alive – Mental Health Literacy Expectations Scope and Sequence

**Based on the Revised 2019 Ontario Ministry of Education Health and Physical Education Expectations*

Primary: Grade 1–3

Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that taking care of our mental health means we are taking care of our physical, social, emotion and spiritual selves • Understand that our thoughts, our feelings, and our behaviours contribute to our mental health • Reflect on the things that they can do to take care of their body, mind and spirit • Understand that they can use different strategies to manage their feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate an understanding of how they respond to challenging and uncomfortable situations • Identify strategies for coping and challenging an uncomfortable situation • Describe behaviours that can be harmful in relating to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize that how our brain works affects our feelings (i.e. fight/flight/freeze) • Identify factors that contribute to stressful feelings and ways to manage your feelings
<p>Students learn that taking care of our mental health includes our physical, social, emotional, and spiritual selves and that our thoughts, feelings and behaviours affect our mental health.</p>	<p>Students learn how they respond to strong feelings and strategies for coping with uncomfortable situations and when they might need to get help.</p>	<p>Students recognize that how our brain works affect our feelings and identify ways to manage their feelings.</p>
<p>Fully Alive: Theme 1, topic 5</p>	<p>Fully Alive: Theme 1, Topic 3 Fully Alive: Theme 2, Topic 6</p>	<p>Fully Alive: Theme 1, Topic 3</p>

Junior: Grade 4–6

Grade 4

- Demonstrate an understanding of how choices they make every day have a positive impact on the gift of their mental health
- Differentiate between situations in which they have some control and situations over which they have less immediate influence
- Identify different strategies to cope with these stressors

Students build on their knowledge of stress, learn to understand their focus of control and identify coping strategies.

Fully Alive: Theme 1, Topic 1

Grade 5

- Understand the signs of mental health problems
- Understand their role, and the limits of their role, in helping others
- Define the term 'stigma' as it relates to mental health
- Demonstrate an understanding of how our attitudes contribute to or prevent stigma

Students learn to recognize the signs of mental health problems, limits to their role in helping others and how to promote the dignity of all people by reducing stigma.

Fully Alive: Theme 1, Topic 4

Grade 6

- Understand the connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and how they can interact and influence each other
- Identify people and resources to support mental health and addiction issues and how to access these supports

Students understand how thoughts, feelings and behaviours influence mental health and they can identify resources to support mental health and addiction issues.

Fully Alive: Theme 2, Topic 1

Intermediate: Grade 7–8

Grade 7

- Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between mental health and mental illness
- Identify possible signs of mental health problems

Students learn the difference between mental health and mental illness and how to recognize signs that someone might be struggling with their mental health.

Fully Alive: Theme 2, Topic 4

Grade 8

- Demonstrate an understanding of how incorporating healthy strategies into daily routines can help maintain mental health and resiliency in times of stress
- Demonstrate how solidarity and the option for the poor and vulnerable relate to upholding the dignity of people who struggle with mental health problems

Students learn that healthy routines help to build and maintain mental health in times of stress and they uphold the inherent dignity of all people.

Fully Alive: Theme 1, Topic 4
Fully Alive: Theme 5, Topic 3

Students should learn, in developmentally appropriate ways, that mental health is distinct from mental illness, that it is something all people have and that it is a significant contributor to overall health. Students should learn to explore the connections between thoughts, emotions, and actions and see how they can impact mental health. Students learn to identify when help is needed — for themselves and for others — by learning to recognize signs of stress and by developing understanding of the body and brain’s response to stress. They learn to recognize feelings

“While the world may sometimes make you feel like you are not good enough, not wealthy enough, not attractive enough, or not special enough, Jesus knows you perfectly and loves you without limits....”

and environmental factors contribute to stress and other challenges. Students also learn how and where to get help, and that there are limits to the help they can give to others.

As students learn these fundamental precepts of mental health literacy within the context of the family

life program, they also grow to understand, appreciate and uphold the inherent dignity of all people echoing the understanding, affirmation and hope given to students in the Bishops’ recent pastoral letter:

“While the world may sometimes make you feel like you are not good enough, not wealthy enough, not attractive enough, or not special enough, Jesus knows you perfectly and loves you without limits. He is always at your side, encouraging you and helping you to be the best that you can be as you offer your service to the world as an instrument of peace.”

(Renewing the Promise, page 6)

The search for meaning is a lifelong spiritual and academic quest, part of our human journey to become fully alive, and to understand who god has intends us to be. As companions on this journey, we are called to walk with one another, and to be of service to our families, our larger communities, and the global village. Catholic schools support students in this journey by attentively focussing on building mental health literacy into our programs and reinforcing the important lesson that appropriate care of self is an essential prerequisite that enables and sustains our ability to be present and to be of service to others.

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Ontario Institute for Catholic Education
44 Hunt Street, Suite 2F
Hamilton, Ontario, L8R 3R1
Tel: 905-523-2469
E-mail: office@iceont.ca