

Mental Health and Well-Being Belongs to Us

Our Students...Living, Learning and Leading

Mental Health & Well-Being



NOVEMBER 2015

Issue #13

Breathing Room: Breathing Buddies

"Breathing Buddies" is the 4th ripple in Breathing Room's trauma and mental health informed body based mindfulness program. In the first ripple, educators learn to build the capacity to meet their own needs using mindfulness, thereby taking care of themselves. Secondly, they are taught safe ways to implement mindfulness programming in their classrooms and schools which are tailored to meet their students' and school's needs. Thirdly, students are encouraged to meet *their* own needs by cultivating a self-motivated practice and lastly, there is "Breathing Buddies" where students take a leadership position and learn how to bring mental health and trauma smart practices, safely, to their peers.

(by: Dani Harris, Teacher at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Collegiate Institute)

"Mindfulness is very important for students because it helps enhance the mind when under stress. It also opens another [opportunity] for guidance and intuition in one's life and can also help with decision making. When I lead [my fellow Laurier students] in the practices, it takes so much courage and bravery and it helps with leadership. It's good to set an example for other students."

(by: Tyler, Grade 10 Student at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Collegiate Institute)



"I started to learn mindfulness in Grade 9; my English teacher taught us how to check in with ourselves and how to assess a situation without bias and just be curious to the moment. As soon as I started to take her advice, I started to see the results. Since I am in the I.B. Program, I am constantly under a lot of stress but by using mindfulness, I have learned to calm my body down and learned how to deal with anxiety. I also saw a change in my work habits and change in my grades. I got more organized in both my thoughts and my actions. I learned how to be more attentive and resourceful. These effects were the same for my classmates. What surprised me the most was when my normally aggressive and hyper friend began to calm down and relax.



I decided that I also wanted to learn how to teach others and before long I was given the opportunity. Before a test or before a stressful day, my friends and I would practice mindfulness, so that as soon as we got in the examination hall, or went up for a presentation we were not nervous but confident in our abilities.

Finally, I think that it is important for students to teach others as it will create a ripple effect. Those that have problems, stress, or even just a bad day will learn how to deal with it and be resilient. They will learn how to take something that is negative and find something deep inside that is positive and through that way of thinking it will change their day from originally a bad one to a much better one."

(by: Biravien, Grade 11 Student at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Collegiate Institute)

Mental Health and Me

My name is Khadeem and I am in Grade 5. Mental Health and Well-Being is about how you feel about yourself and your feelings. Sometimes I feel happy and sometimes I feel sad. Things that make me happy are when I play with my friends and my pets. Things that make me sad are when someone is saying rude things to me and my friends, and when I get emotionally hurt. When I feel sad or worried, I cry and sometimes I go to the office or try to run away. Going to my friends' and grandmother's house, that's when I feel better. I like to meet with my social worker. We play games and she cheers me up a lot.

(by: Khadeem, Grade 5 Student – Valleyfield Junior Public School)

To support and assist our staff, students and parents in dealing with the recent tragic world events, please read the message from Director Quan on page 6.

MindFest

Through the use of interactive workshops, information booths, and guest speakers, MindFest strives to raise awareness and start the conversation regarding the heavily stigmatized topic of mental health. On October 7, 2015, Mr. Ahmad and Ms. Storey brought along a group of students to attend Mindfest at the University of Toronto. Once we arrived at Hart House, we were greeted by many university students and volunteers helping out with the event. There was a large selection of activities and events going on throughout the day—such as yoga and an improvisation workshop, but my group of friends ultimately decided on staying at the information booths section. The booths gave out a lot of different brochures and pamphlets about many issues that affect not only youth but everyone in our society. The information ranged from ways to manage stress, to mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder and depression. In addition to the vast amount of information, there were also booths set up specifically to encourage youth to speak up about mental health and to provide us with resources in order to reach out and help others who may be suffering in silence.

There were also many activities that encouraged individuals to work together as a team (such as the giant *Jenga* game) as well as activities that were simple yet uplifting such as writing notes of positivity and hope. Mindfest used engaging methods to interest students in learning about mental health. Through this, students were able to freely immerse themselves in topics such as self-help, support groups, or to just educate themselves on mental health without feeling uncomfortable since it was a symposium that welcomed everyone. One of the amazing things about Mindfest is that it creates a communal atmosphere as there is no limit to asking questions and learning! I think that Mindfest is a beneficial experience to students because it allows them to explore the topic of mental health, without feeling awkward or uncomfortable. Overall, my experience at Mindfest was very memorable and positive as I learned about many topics regarding mental health, found new ways to cope with stress, and received information on ways that an individual can reach out for help. Mindfest encourages everyone to talk about mental health and break down the stereotypes and stigmas associated with mental illness. Mindfest debunks these stereotypes, allowing many struggling with mental illness to realize that they are not defined by their mental illness as well as allowing other individuals to become more educated on mental health and well-being. (by: Victoria Y. and Angelina C., Students at Alberta Campbell Collegiate Institute)

Take Your Kids to Work – 2015

Children of TDSB staff who participated in Take Your Kids to Work on November 4, 2015 were asked what do you do to promote your mental health and well-being and what programs or initiatives are going on at your school that promote positive mental health and well-being? This is what they had to say:

“There is a club at my school where students can interact with students who have autism. This provides everyone in the club with the chance to meet and make new friends that will last throughout our school years...we can watch over them and maintain the friendship” Dylan S., Grade 9 Student, Thornlea Secondary School – York Region District School Board

“Gym class – we run for 22 minutes straight, there is a weight room and we do aerobics...we stay fit” Hasita M., Grade 9 Student, Mississauga Secondary School – Peel District School Board

“At our school, the students in the drama program work with other students in the school who need assistance. This gives us the opportunity to meet new friends who we would have otherwise not met or interacted with.” Faiza F., Grade 9 Student, Father Michael Gates – Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board

Remember to view:

- The “Foundations of Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being” online training module on KEY to Learn. This module has been loaded onto everyone’s Learning Profile - click on the “MyLearning” tab to get started.
- The Anxiety Awareness Module with your staff. This module can be found on the Professional Support Services webpage under training modules or by clicking the following link:
<http://tdsbweb/site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=10486&menuid=42888&pageid=36043>

A Community of Sisterhood Building Mentally & Emotionally Healthier and Happier Girls!

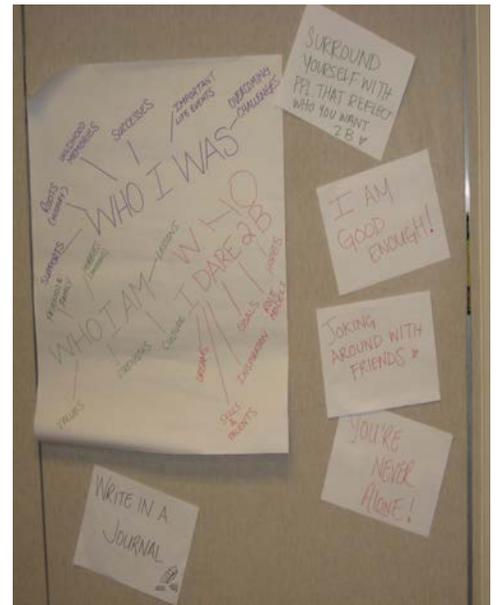
When I was in Grade 8, I participated in Sister 2 Sister. When I was in Grade 10, I started volunteering with Sister 2 Sister and 5 years later, I am now one of the lead organizers of this project. Sister 2 Sister is a program run by womyn for girls in Regent Park and surrounding communities. For the past 8 years, Sister 2 Sister has provided events for the Grade 8 girls and their parents/ guardians to help them with the transition into adolescence. We know that it can be a stressful and exciting time in their lives and having the support of Sister 2 Sister really helps families get prepared for this new chapter. Each event in the project includes inspirational speakers, talented performers and very interesting workshops....all about girls' issues.

Being a part of Sister 2 Sister as a participant and volunteer got me to appreciate and celebrate being a girl, which is something I didn't think of before. Being a girl is great but can be stressful at times, because we have a lot of pressure coming at us from society, culture and family. Sister 2 Sister helped me and other girls build confidence in ourselves, recognize our self-worth, focus on our potential and create bigger hopes and dreams for ourselves. Sister 2 Sister continues to be a main branch of support in my life even as a young adult because I am always embraced by a community of sisterhood that empowers me to be who I am in a society that pressures young womyn to meet unattainable expectations of what it means to be a womyn.

Over the years, I've noticed Sister 2 Sister has provided Grade 8 girls with an opportunity to build a community of sisterhood where they could find strength and support in each other, which definitely helps with reducing isolation. This helps a lot when we are having a hard time emotionally and need a shoulder to cry on. Not only do girls from the 9 schools get to know each other, but we get to know the community workers in Regent Park and within TDSB because those workers help run the project every year. Most of the speakers and performers in the project are womyn and girls who have overcome challenges in their own lives, which gives us the courage to persevere through our own difficulties and hope that our individual stories one day inspire other womyn to persevere, endure and become motivational leaders of their own.

One of the events Sister 2 Sister offers is an all-day conference with over 20 different workshops for the girls to attend. The topics all have to do with girls' issues such as creating healthy lifestyles, building healthy relationships and embracing a positive self-image. The workshops also equip the girls with the tools and knowledge needed to build healthier coping skills for when they are having stress and troubles. One of the most important things I've gained from Sister 2 Sister as a participant, which I continue to see as a volunteer, is the platform to explore future career options and network with professional womyn in a half-day event called "Womyn Around the World of Work". As a girl raised in the Regent Park community, hearing the journey of professional womyn really inspired me to think about my own capacity, and wonder what journey I may share one day proudly as a womyn from my community.

Not only does Sister 2 Sister work with Grade 8 girls, it runs workshops for the parents/guardians of the girls. It provides a space for the adults to learn about what their daughters are going through and teaches parents how to support their daughters better, which is so important during the teenage years. Healthy family relationships really help girls be mentally and emotionally healthier and happier. As an alumni and a volunteer of the program, I have had the honour and pleasure to benefit from and experience both the participant's perspective and the parental one, which only made me value all the work of Sister 2 Sister even more.



Mural created by participants at the Sister 2 Sister conference on February 27, 2015

In closing, Sister 2 Sister is more than just a project for Grade 8 girls. It's a community project that brings together adults who care about girls and really want to help girls become their best selves. Sister 2 Sister equips Grade 8 girls with the tools they need to get through difficult times which is so important in promoting their mental health and wellness. Relationships are built, confidence is increased, awareness about girls' issues is raised, isolation is reduced, skills are developed and best of all, being a girl is honoured and celebrated! We hope that Sister 2 Sister connects as many young girls together as possible, for the heart of this project lies in kindling the will of hope in every girl. (by: Zeeniyah Z., Jarvis Collegiate Institute Graduate – 2nd Year Student at Ryerson University)



How Taking a Leadership Role in Promoting Mental Health & Well-Being Changed Me

Grade 9 is a time of transition and tremendous change, and if you are Parth S. you live for the challenges that these changes bring. Last year in his first year of high school at Victoria Park C.I. he joined the Youth Mental Health and Addictions Champions (YMHAC) Project at his school; a pilot project in various schools across the province, in collaboration with multiple school boards, public health units and the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario. Parth was encouraged to join the project by a teacher who noticed his budding interest in mindful practice. The group, which now goes by the name "VP Matters", was made up of students from all grades.

After joining 8 other TDSB secondary schools for a joint mental health and well-being training session last December, Parth became interested in the promotion of mental wellness and took a leadership role with the YMHAC group at his school. So much so, that he along with fellow Grade 9 student Tyler, helped TDSB and Toronto Public Health staff facilitate a similar mental health and well-being training for 12 other TDSB secondary schools in February this year. Nerves are not something that typically bother Parth, he actually embraces the feeling. However, he reflects on this experience stating, "I wasn't really nervous presenting the material because I have found mindfulness for example, to help reduce my everyday stress. But, presenting to students that were older than me was kind of worrisome. I wasn't sure if they would listen to me." After completing the morning session and getting some positive feedback, Parth was delighted to know that his age and status as a Grade 9 student didn't diminish the impact he had as a leader with his older peers. Parth was "pumped" after this experience and primed to take on further leadership opportunities at his school this year. "It affected my life in how I presented anything, not just the mental health and wellness stuff."

With a year of experience under their belts, Parth and his Grade 10 peers have continued to promote mental wellness at their school, by having monthly themes, activities such as a walk to raise awareness for mental health, positive message cards for teachers and students, and this year "VP Matters" has created the 'mindfulness mentors' initiative. In collaboration with their guidance teacher Ms. Ullah, Parth, Tyler and Anusha (this year's "VP Matters" core leaders), they plan to work with Grade 9 students to introduce them to mindful practices, help them

reduce anxiety and stress especially around exams, and be available to, as he says, "help them through their wellness journey in high school."

When asked what advice Parth would give other emerging leaders, he says, "take initiative at your school with whatever is interesting to you. Be optimistic, especially when you face a problem. Look at it and see how it can benefit you, and view it as a way to grow and change for the better, and that mentality may even help you to solve the problem." (An interview with Parth S., Grade 10 Student – Victoria Park Collegiate Institute, by Saleem Haniff, Social Worker Mental Health & Well-Being – System Support)

Knowing Myself and How My Brain Works Lead to Good Mental Health

When I went to the first day of resource support in Grade 7, I was scared. I didn't know anyone there and it was my first time attending a separate class. It was not exciting at first because I didn't know what I was going to be doing at resource support - it could be hard or easy. After attending for a while, I began to change how I felt about the class. It helped my mental health because I was learning about how to make my brain grow and how I can be smarter.

In class 77, we have been learning about autobiographies and also about neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is how your brain grows and how you can increase your intelligence. Your brain is like a muscle – it grows when you work hard and you overcome something that you struggled with. When you overcome the challenge, your brain creates a new root and if you keep using the pathway it becomes bigger. Learning about neuroplasticity is good for your mental health and wellbeing because you know how your brain grows and how you can learn and understand how to make your intelligence increase.

We have also been writing autobiographies. In our autobiographies, we've been writing about a challenging phase in our life and how we overcame it. Doing this work has helped us to write proper paragraphs and also learn about what an autobiography is and how to write one properly. This helped my mental health and wellbeing because I could learn new words and how to write an autobiography.

In the end, I was happy because going to my support class helped me a lot. I could do the work that I was given and I learned new words that I never knew before like neuroplasticity. It impacted me in a good way because I got to know more people and I got the help I needed which made it easier for me to do well in school. (by Nafin R. Student at Humber Summit Middle School)

We have gone public!

You can now access the Mental Health and Well-Being Belongs to Us Newsletters on the TDSB's public website. To view the newsletters please visit: www.tdsb.on.ca/mentalhealth and click "Newsletter".

Message from TDSB Director of Education on Events in Paris and Beirut

Monday, November 16, 2015

From Paris to Beirut, we have once again witnessed the evil that still exists in the world. As the number of people who have lost their lives as a result of attacks over recent days continues to climb, the collective thoughts of everyone at the Toronto District School Board are with those overseas and here at home who have been affected by these acts of terrorism.

We realize that children may experience a wide range of reactions and emotions. It is with that in mind that our Professional Support Services staff have prepared the following tips that can help during this difficult time:

1. Bring up the topic at a time and place where a discussion can occur. If there are distractions, a shortage of time or if either you or your child are too tired or busy, it is likely the conversation will be interrupted.
2. Begin by listening. Let your child tell you what they believe they know, how they learned it and how they are feeling. Don't rush to correct or reassure. Allow them to finish their thoughts. Open-ended questions are better than specific ones. It is better to ask, "How are you feeling about what happened?" than "Are you scared because of what happened?" You can be a bit more specific if general questions fail.
3. Respond to what your child tells you. Their concerns may be specific or general, concrete or abstract, closely related to the events or related very little. Address what they are concerned about. Don't overload children with information or solutions. Talk to them with ideas they can handle at their age. If you help them with their concerns today they will likely share more in the future.
4. It is normal for people to try to make sense of things when a serious loss occurs. Allow your child to share his or her ideas and speculations. Help them to separate what they know from what they are guessing about.
5. Limit exposure to media coverage as it can become overwhelming.
6. Be aware that new stresses may open old wounds. When a child is confronted with a crisis, losses and upsets from the past may be remembered. The child may or may not wish to talk about these old issues.
7. Talk about specific things you can do to make your child feel secure.
8. While tragic events can be extremely upsetting, it can be helpful to remind children that this type of event is very rare.
9. Children deal with stress in many different ways and at different paces. While children may not wish to talk today, they may wish to talk in weeks or days to come. Follow up discussions may be helpful.

Parents, students and staff are encouraged to contact their school principal for more information about additional supports through our Professional Support Services department.

Donna Quan

Director of Education

Mental Health and Well-Being Core Leadership Team

Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff, Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support

Rose D'Alimonte, Chief of Social Work/Attendance – Area D

Marcia Powers-Dunlop, Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services

Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care

Leslie Fox, Executive Assistant – Student Support Services and Care