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Interpersonal Skills – Key Competences for Mental Health Promotion

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Kirjoittajat

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Mental health challenges of children and adolescent cause serious concern across Europe and beyond. Successful communication is essential for promoting mental health. This article describes good tips for professionals on communicating about mental health.

Mental health challenges are among leading causes of disability. They cause serious concern across Europe and beyond. The economic impact of mental health problems in Europe is over 600 billion euros, in addition to immeasurable individual and familiar suffering. About 14% of children and adolescent suffer from mental health conditions and the prevalence of these conditions have increased dramatically within the latest ten years. Mental health challenges not only cause suffering but also increase risks of low academic performance, early school dropout, lack of vocational development, work disability, premature retirement, and exclusion of the society. These only as few examples of several additional disadvantages closely related to mental health challenges. (OECD 2018; WHO 2021a; WHO 2021b.)

Effective communication – essential for successful mental health promotion, intervention, and rehabilitation

Effective communication is critical for good mental health. It allows individuals to express their feelings, thoughts and needs in a safe and non-judgmental environment. It helps to build trust, promote empathy, understanding, and facilitate healthy relationships. Good communication skills can reduce stress, prevent conflict, and improve coping in challenging situations. In addition, effective communication with mental health professionals facilitates early intervention, diagnosis, care, and rehabilitation of mental health problems in and early

stage. This leads to less personal suffering, risk of additional problems, better outcomes, and recovery. (Sharma & Gupta 2023.)



Kuva: Jussi Vierimaa, Turku.

Communication of mental health issues competence, sensitivity and empathy

When communicating about mental health concerns, it is essential to be sensitive, non-judgmental, and empathetic. These are the General tips for communicating about mental health.

Be aware of your own emotions. Before communicating about mental health concerns, it's important to be mindful of your own emotions and biases. This can help ensure that the conversation remains respectful and non-judgmental.

Choose the right time and place. Select a private and quiet place where the person feels safe and comfortable to discuss their mental health concerns. Avoid discussing mental health issues in public or during stressful times.

Listen actively. Active listening is crucial in effective communication about mental health. This involves paying attention, clarifying, and responding to the person's concerns in a non-judgmental and empathetic manner.

Use non-stigmatizing language. Use language that is respectful, non-judgmental, and free of stereotypes and stigma when discussing mental health concerns. Avoid using language that is dismissive or negative, such as "crazy" or insane.

Encourage self-expression. Encourage the person to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences related to their mental health. This can help build trust and foster a supportive and safe environment for the conversation.

Offer support. Provide emotional support, encouragement, and validation to the person. Offer practical suggestions and resources, such as professional help or support groups, if needed conversation.

Follow up. After the conversation, follow up to check in on the person's mental health and offer continued support.

Communication with children and families

When communicating with young children and their parents, one needs to consider individual characteristics of the child, siblings, parents, and additional family members. One's most important to consider as age, developmental stage, culture, religion, personality, and have competence to adjust verbal and nonverbal communication accordingly. To reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, it is important to use language that is respectful, accurate, and non-judgmental. Some general tips to consider when communicating with children and families (Moran & Gutman 2021).

When communicating verbally with children, it is important to use simple and clear language that is appropriate for their age and comprehension level. Using a friendly tone, making eye contact, and asking open-ended questions can also help establish rapport and encourage open communication. When communicating with parents, it is crucial to listen actively, show empathy, and use language that is respectful and professional.

Nonverbal cues, such as body language, gestures, and facial expressions, can greatly impact the success of communication. When communicating with children, it is important to use nonverbal cues that are positive and supportive, such as smiling and nodding, to help them feel valued and heard. When communicating with parents, it is crucial to use nonverbal cues that are professional, such as maintaining eye contact, nodding, and avoiding distracting behaviour.

Communication in multiprofessional teams

As part of a team, effective communication skills greatly enhance collaboration and cooperation. There are some general tips to consider when communicating in multiprofessional groups or teams (Penson et al., 2006).

When working with a team, it is important to use clear and concise language that promotes understanding and reduces misunderstandings. Regular team meetings, open discussion, and active listening can also help facilitate effective communication and collaboration.

Nonverbal cues, such as body language and gestures, can greatly impact the dynamics of a team. Maintaining positive body language, such as smiling and nodding, and avoiding distracting behaviours, such as checking phones, can help create a positive and productive team environment.

Communicating in conflict situations

Communication related to sensitive, individual, challenging issues, such as mental health, may cause misunderstanding, hurt, shame, unpleasant feeling and reactions, even ethically conflicting situations. Conflict resolution involves finding a mutually acceptable solution to a disagreement or dispute between two or more parties. Here are key steps to resolve challenging or conflicting situations professionally and constructively (Alheneidi et al., 2021; Zhen et al. 2023.):

Identify the source of conflict. Identifying the root cause of the conflict can help guide the resolution process. This may involve exploring underlying interests, needs, and values.

Encourage open communication. Encourage both parties to openly express their perspectives, feelings, and needs in a non-judgmental and respectful manner.

Seek common ground. Try to find common ground between the parties, such as shared goals or values, and focus on finding a solution that addresses everyone's needs and interests.

Brainstorm solutions: Generate a list of potential solutions and evaluate their feasibility, benefits, and drawbacks. Consider options that are creative, mutually acceptable, and benefit both parties.

Choose a solution: Choose the solution that best addresses everyone's needs and interests and ensure that both parties agree to the solution.

Implement the solution. Put the solution into action and monitor the outcome to ensure that it is effective and sustainable.

Evaluate the outcome. Evaluate the outcome and make necessary adjustments. Consider the impact of the solution on both parties and the relationship.



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Develop your skills – Well@School online course

Mental health promotion competences need continuous education. Social workers, nurses, teachers, psychologist, and others working with children and youth, relatively often face challenges related to mental health of children and youth. Competences need to be regularly updated to ensure evidence-based, appropriate, ethically justified, and effective mental health promotion, including early intervention, care, and rehabilitation. (Lahti M. et al. 2023; Ekornes, 2017; O'Reilly, 2018).

The Well@School course is an open access, online course (5 ECTS) that has been developed for professionals working at schools (eg. teachers, school health professionals, social workers, psychologists, and other professionals). The content of the course is based on school professionals' perceptions on their learning needs regarding mental health promotion in school environments (Lahti, M. et al. 2023). The course can also be used by other actors working with children and adolescents between ages of 12 and 15. The Well@School course aims at developing and updating school professionals and beyond competences in mental health promotion of school aged children. (Well@School course, Well@School project 2021.)

The Well@School course is EQ level 6 and consists of five (5) parts, enabling independent, free learning, without specific time or place restrictions. The parts of the course are: 1) Mental health and its determinants, 2) Mental health challenges, 3) Interpersonal skills to support the mental health of children, 4) The mental health promotive school community and 5) Digital methods to promote mental health.

The course contains several different types of learning materials and tasks. After successfully completing all mandatory tasks, one can print out a certificate of the course. The course has been developed in the Well@School project by a multi professional team of experts representing several countries across Europe, Finland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Greece and Bulgaria. (Sakellari et al. 2022; Lahti et al. 2023; Well@School project 2021).

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WELL@SCHOOL

This article relates to the **Well@School project** co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The project promotes key competences related to mental health promotion at schools. The project has developed an open-access online course, for professionals working at schools and beyond.

For more information: <https://wellatschool.turkuamk.fi/>

