

One in six 10-19-year olds have suffered from a mental illness, worldwide. Youth mental health concerns have become an increasingly imperative issue with research indicating that educating students should be a number one priority. While everyday our understanding of mental health issues is expanding, this is only highlighting the importance of addressing this vital matter in schools, as is illustrated below.

With more research being conducted each day, schools are more informed about mental health issues and the ways to deal with the health of their students. Many health workers believe that breaking down stigma and misconceptions about mental illness should start in schools. This is the best place to learn how behaviour towards others can cause serious self-worth issues. According to *Beyond Blue*, over 75% of mental health problems occur before the age of 25. In *'The Importance of Mental Health Awareness in Schools'*, Nancy Barile discussed signs of mental illness in students. She observed that one of her female students stopped submitting work, started coming to school late and in the same clothes as the day before. After recognising that her student was in trouble, she and the wellbeing team assisted the student with. It was determined the student suffered depression (experienced by 1 in 7 youths). Nancy explained, 'If it wasn't for the training, I had in mental health awareness, I'm not sure I would have seen the signs'. This highlights the importance of working towards an environment where students can recognise mental health issues and to ensure students feel safe to ask for help. Crucially, schools must have staff like Nancy who are able to support students in need.

On-site school psychologists can help students with their mental health. Schools strive to be safe, supportive and inclusive communities. They provide programs and opportunities to improve a student's sense of belonging and self-awareness, managing relationships and problem-solving. Since 2018, every Victorian government school should be able to access a mental health professional. Every school in Victoria has access to at least one on-site school psychologist able to respond to student wellbeing and mental health issues.

In a short interview, a wellbeing staff member at Northcote High School, Katherine Brissett, was asked about mental health of today's high school students. When asked if she believed mental health issues increasing among young people, Brissett responded, 'Yes I do. I think this is partly because we as a community are getting better at talking about mental health, and that there is less stigma about mental health than there used to be'. Ms Brissett then went on to explain that just because there is less stigma that does not mean there is none. When asked "*do you feel that the wellbeing team at Northcote High School is utilised to its full potential?*" Brissett responded, 'The NHS team is very strategic in its use of resources – which means we always work together to make sure our students get the support they need.' This alone is showing that wellbeing teams feel like changes are being made and that having a support system for school students is just as important as having academic support.

Schools have also addressed mental health by integrating the topic into their curriculum. In levels 7 and 8 of the Victorian school curriculum (VCAA) under the health and physical education section, there is a focus on the communication and interaction aspect of health and well-being. This then goes into more depth about investigating the benefits of relationships and examining the impact on

their own and others' health and well-being. Between levels 1 and 6 there is a heavy focus on making others feel a sense of belonging. There is a focal point on maintaining a good relationship with family and friends, and how to handle different emotional responses. Students throughout levels 1-10 are taught about resilience, the ability to cope and thrive in the face of negative events, challenges or adversity. They learn to recognise and regulate their emotions, develop empathy for others and understand relationships, establish and build a framework for positive relationships and so much more. By educating students about mental health and their own wellbeing from a young age, children are more likely to be able to handle tougher times. Schools also take a whole-school approach to mental health education, which can include incorporating programs such as Respectful Relationships and approaches to the prevention of bullying. Northcote High School has a connect program, designed to provide students with an environment and resources that support learning, social skills and academic success. It's a short class held once a day, giving students time to breathe, as well as a teacher who they can ask questions. This teacher normally doesn't teach them in another class and is someone who they can come to if they're in need of help. These tutors are the first point of contact for students, parents and teachers regarding students' wellbeing. Tutors are available to counsel and assist students with their goals and any issues and encourage them to become active learners and confident participants in the school and wider community.

Whilst steps such as having on site psychologists and integrating mental health into the curriculum has made positive changes, there are other measures that should be put in place as well. Katherine Brissett's was asked what could be done to improve the education of mental health. Her response was that "normalising conversations about mental health would be a great start. If we were able to speak about mental health the same way we speak about physical health, I think people would be much more open". Ms Brissett's response is very similar to other teachers and mental health workers. An article by Banyan Mental Health discussed that mental health conversations will debunk myths and help remove mental health stigma. It mentions that by promoting treatment may reduce suicide attempts. A survey of 40 Northcote High School students supported this; most indicated that mental health conversations should be normalised. Responses included: 'normalising it (mental health) removes any stigma around mental illness and allows people to heal in a safer and more accepting environment', 'it (mental health) shouldn't be a taboo or awkward because it's a part of life' and 'it would make treatment more accessible to people who wouldn't normally talk about any issues'. All agreed that it should be normalised, but many were uncomfortable about getting help. Only 8 out of 40 students would feel comfortable talking to a student wellbeing's staff member about their mental health. Recurring reasons for this response included students feeling as if their information wouldn't be kept private, that it would be shared with other teachers, parents and even students, as well as them being worried that they would be judged or just that it would be weird. So, whilst research shows that having on school psychologists has made a positive difference, there is still a long way to go. Studies show that by openly talking about mental health and choosing empowerment over shame, people are more likely to ask for help, therefore get the treatment they need.

Thus, while awareness of mental health issues is increasing, as well as the body of research to help us understand it better, improving the way we address mental health issues is vital. Both mental health professionals and the literature reviewed suggested that the school environment was one of the best places to address this, and the VCAA curriculum also encourages this. Because today's youth spend most of their day at school, mental health awareness and education is very important. There are too many silent sufferers and students should know they're not alone.