

Classroom Ground Rules when Teaching about Mental Health Issues

When teaching about topics such as mental health, it is important to think carefully about the possibility of personal disclosures from pupils who, as a result of the lesson, may develop the skills, language, knowledge and understanding needed to make a disclosure about their own mental health or emotional wellbeing. Whilst this is not to be discouraged, it is very important that if pupils make personal disclosures to school staff, they do so in a suitable, one-to-one setting. It is not appropriate, therefore, to encourage pupils to talk about sensitive personal matters in the classroom.

It is vital therefore, that before teaching about issues like mental health and emotional wellbeing, clear 'ground-rules' are established or reinforced and the concepts of confidentiality and anonymity covered at the start of the lesson. Ground rules need to be consistently adhered to, regularly revisited and, if necessary, renegotiated and reinforced. The teacher should lead the way by modelling the ground rules in their own communications with the class.

Where time allows, ground-rules are most effective when they have been negotiated and agreed with the pupils, rather than imposed by the teacher. Below are some areas to introduce if they do not arise naturally.



Openness

An important part of breaking down the stigma that surrounds mental health issues is to encourage an ethos of openness but within specific boundaries. These should be governed by your school's safeguarding policy. Mental health should not be a taboo topic and it should be openly and honestly discussed within the classroom setting which should feel like a safe and supportive environment for discussions on mental health that are positive and affirming whilst giving pupils the opportunity to share their concerns. However, it needs to be agreed with pupils that lesson time is not the appropriate setting to directly discuss their own personal or private lives or that of others.

General situations can be used as examples but names and identifying descriptions should be omitted.

Keep the conversation in the room

Pupils need to feel safe discussing general issues related to mental health within the lesson without fear that these discussions will be repeated by teachers or pupils beyond this setting. Pupils should feel confident exploring their misconceptions or questions about mental health within this safe setting. It is important, however, to make it clear that if you become concerned that a child may be at risk then you will need to follow the school's safeguarding policy.

Non-judgmental approach

When we tackle issues surrounding mental health and emotional wellbeing, we often find that pupils have a lot of prior beliefs, misunderstandings and inappropriate attitudes towards the topics concerned. It's important that these can be explored within the classroom environment without fear of being judged or ridiculed. Discuss with pupils the idea that it is okay, and often healthy, to disagree with another person's point of view but it is never okay to judge, make fun of or put down other pupils. Where pupils disagree with another's point of view, they should challenge the belief and not the person.

Right to pass

Whilst participation in the lesson is important, every pupil has the right to choose not to answer a question, or not to participate in an activity. Pupils may choose to pass on participation if a topic touches upon personal issues which they should not disclose within a classroom setting, or if the topic of the activity or discussion makes them feel

uncomfortable in any way. They could be invited to discuss such concerns with the teacher individually. Teachers can prepare the class by letting them know the nature of the topic beforehand and offering pupils the opportunity to let the teacher know either anonymously or directly if they have any concerns about themselves or a friend. This will enable you to ensure that your teaching is as inclusive as possible and is matched to the pupils' needs.

If you are aware of pupils in your class who are likely to find the topic of the lesson particularly sensitive, perhaps due to their own pre-existing mental health condition, or that of a family member, then the lesson content should be discussed with them beforehand. It may be appropriate to give the pupil the right to withdraw from the lesson. They should not be expected to justify their absence to their peers. If the lesson is missed, then consideration should be taken as to how to follow up the missed lesson with the pupil in question so that they are able to benefit from the learning without being made to feel uncomfortable in front of their peers.

Make no assumptions

In addition not to judging the viewpoints of others, pupils must also take care not to make assumptions about the values, attitudes, life experiences, faith values, cultural values or feelings of their peers.

Listen to others

Every pupil in the class has the right to feel listened to and they should respect the right of their peers to feel listened to as well. You might choose to revisit what active listening to others means. It is okay to challenge the viewpoint of another pupil, but we should always listen to their point of view, in full, before making assumptions or formulating a response.

Use of language

Pupils should be reminded to take care in their use of language within (and beyond) lessons about mental health. They should not be using offensive that is inaccurate or offensive. There are many words surrounding mental health which have negative connotations or may be misunderstood by pupils. It can be valuable to explore these words and understand exactly why they are inappropriate and should not be used either within the setting of a lesson, nor within day to day life. You might, for example, consider with pupils how they

would feel if such words were applied to them. Such words include ‘nutter’ and ‘loony bin’ or the use of ‘mental’ or ‘crazy’ in a derogatory fashion.

“We will use the correct terms for the things we will be discussing rather than the slang terms as some people can find them offensive. If we are not sure what the correct term is - we will ask our teacher.”

Ask questions

It is important to foster an open environment where pupils feel safe asking questions and exploring their preconceptions about a topic. Pupils should understand that no question will be considered stupid, and when they are in doubt about an issue or topic, they should ask. It’s also important that pupils realise it is never appropriate to ask a question in order to deliberately try to embarrass somebody else or to encourage pupils to laugh at someone.

Making an anonymous question box available to pupils can be an effective way of enabling pupils to ask questions they may feel uncomfortable posing in a classroom setting. You can make this available prior to, during or after the lesson. You will need to allow yourself time to go through and filter the questions. Inviting questions prior to the lesson can be a good way to help you direct the lesson during its development based on the current needs and understanding of your class and can also give a good indicator of where safeguarding issues or pastoral issues may exist which are in need of follow up.

Seeking help and advice

Whilst it’s important that pupils do not make personal disclosures during the course of the lesson, the appropriate means for seeking support and advice needs to be clearly signposted in the lesson. This will mean being familiar with, and sharing appropriate parts of, the school’s safeguarding, or other relevant, policies. You should also share details of relevant websites and helplines where pupils can seek confidential advice and support. Pupils should be encouraged to support their friends in seeking help where they think it is needed to. Whilst clarifying that during a lesson is not the appropriate moment to seek support, ensure pupils understand the importance of sharing their concerns with a trusted adult if they have any concerns over their own mental health or emotional wellbeing, or that of another child. This is the quickest and best way to ensure that support is received where it is needed. Pupils should be reassured that they will always be taken seriously, will never be judged and will always be listened to if they choose to make a disclosure at school.

As lessons on mental health may result in pupils having questions they need to explore with you outside of the class setting, where possible, it is helpful if you’re able to remain

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available to pupils immediately after class. Or signpost a time when you might be available for further discussion.

Ending the lesson

It is worth considering how best to finish a lesson of this nature which can be emotionally exhausting for both pupils and teacher. Building in an activity which is lighthearted at the end of the lesson can be a good way to change the class atmosphere so that pupils are ready for their next lesson.