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A Look into the Psychological Wellbeing of Secondary School Students

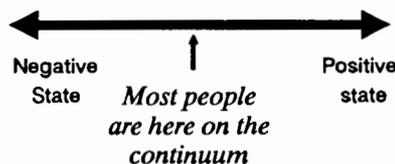
Whether it is adults or students, it cannot be denied that a person's performance is very much related to the individual's psychological wellbeing. We have all experienced times when we were under extra stress, and we may have even noticed that we were less energetic during that period, thus affecting our level of activity in general.



The Concept of Mental Health

A person's psychological wellbeing, or state of mental health, is reflected by a point on a continuum, with extremes at both ends that represent the positive and negative. However, since human beings are affected by circumstances one would expect this point to shift. At times the state of one's mental health could be more on the negative end of the continuum due to adverse circumstances while at other times the state of one's mental health could be more positive. The

simple illustration below clarifies this concept.



Mental health can also be understood in terms of absence of mental illness, as well as one's ability in coping with the stresses encountered in daily life.

A Survey of the Needs and Problems of Secondary Students

In order to establish what are some of the worries, needs and problems of adolescents, a survey was administered using the Adolescent Counselling Inventory (ACI). The ACI was designed and normed by the author in collaboration with another colleague, Dr David Throll. The first survey was administered in 1990 on a sample of approximately 2000 secondary students representing a range of abilities from all ethnic groups. Another survey was done in 1992 on a sample of approximately 700 secondary students from a typical neighbourhood secondary school. The findings from Survey I were very similar to those from Survey II, that is

● the nature of the problems ex-

perienced by the boys were about the same as that experienced by the girls in both surveys

- the intensity of their problems were almost equal for both sexes
- in both samples, the more able students (from Express and Special courses) experienced greater stress in the area of schoolwork and exams
- in both samples, students from the

The nature of the problems experienced by the boys were about the same as that experienced by the girls in both surveys

Normal course appeared to get along better with their classmates (this is probably due to the fact that these students did not view their classmates with such a competitive eye and hence did not perceive them as academic rivals).

More specifically, the anxieties and problems of secondary students are reflected in the statements listed below. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, ability stream or grade level (Sec I to Pre-U III), the majority of students indicated "Always" or "Usually" to the following statements:

1. When I do poorly in class it spoils my day.
2. After tests I worry about my results.
3. I get upset if I don't do well in tests.
4. I don't like making mistakes.
5. I would like to be more confident within myself.
6. I wish I could face problems with more confidence.
7. I would like to have more friends at school.
8. People can let you down.
9. People can put a lot of pressure on you.
10. I don't know enough about jobs.
11. I can't think of any career that I will like.
12. I'm not sure of a bright future in a job.

A closer examination of the above statements will indicate that our students face problems in a number of areas - schoolwork, interpersonal relationships, career and confidence - and this affects their mental health.

Implications and recommendations for the classroom teacher

A number of implications are immediately identifiable:

1. Some time must be spent in class to speak to students about their concerns, as well as to establish rapport with them so that students will approach teachers with their worries or problems. This is best done through the pastoral care programme which has been implemented in most second-

dary schools.

2. The classroom atmosphere can be made less threatening so that students will perceive their classmates as collaborators in the learning and building up of each others' knowledge, rather than as competitors for top marks from whom they should withhold knowledge.



Collaborators

3. There should be recognition for effort, and affirmation of students as unique individuals with their own contribution to society that no other person could replace. Too often rewards and awards are given to top performers, the very few out of the hundreds in every school. If students are made to feel that they count and that their contribution is also part of the overall mosaic of school life and success, then confidence is strengthened as each student realises that he or she is essential in making the school what it is.

4. Students should be counselled that achieving academic excellence is important but just as important is the pursuit of a balanced, adjusted lifestyle, one in which there is time for others, to learn to socialise and to get along with people. In addition students should be made aware of the need to set realistic personal expectations so as not to frustrate themselves or put themselves under excessive stress.

Teachers must spend time in class to speak to students about their concerns, as well as to establish rapport with them so that students will approach teachers with their worries or problems.

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