

## Using an Anti-Oppressive Approach to Teaching Health Tips for Educators

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### Do

- Create a safer space i.e. include signs of welcoming and acceptance, flexible seating, etc. and clear expectations.
- Examine your assumptions and biases.
- Be strengths-based: see value in every youth.
- Build up your discomfort tolerance.
- Find a way to connect with youth.
- Provide options for engagement.
- Share the space and time with group.
- Challenge discriminatory comments not youth.
- Use an inclusive nonjudgmental approach.
- Check in with students who are unresponsive/experiencing difficulties.
- Respond in a timely manner to disclosures.
- Have humility and compassion when mistakes are made for the youth and yourself. Learn and grow together.
- Use suitable humor and relevant references.
- Ask open ended questions.
- Validate all feelings.
- Solicit feedback from colleagues/reputable resources when needed.
- Teach skills-based health education.
- Ask for confidential feedback. Explicitly explain confidentiality policies.
- Provide local and internet resources.
- Recognize your positionality relative to Land.

### Don't

- Dive into a topic without a solid intro.
- Ignore your personal issues, trauma and stress and how it affects your teaching.
- Think you can do it all alone.
- Stop updating yourself on health info and current trends.
- Share your personal values regarding health behaviors.
- Disregard certain topics e.g. sexual health.
- Overlook the cultural diversity in the room.
- Debate values and beliefs.
- Overshare but do share.
- Teach abstinence without harm reduction.
- Teach facts without social power and ethics.
- Ignore discriminatory comments/jokes.
- Force participation.
- Be rigid and judgmental in your approach.
- Embarrass a youth in front of others or be mean and punitive.
- Not address a problematic response/situation at a future date if not addressed at that time.
- Ignore disclosures.
- Give no avenue for questions/feedback.
- Expect all youth to listen in a similar fashion i.e. same body language, demeanor etc.
- Only use one teaching strategy i.e. lecturing.
- Value content over connection.

## Using an Anti-Oppressive Approach to Teaching Health

### Anti-Oppressive Approach in Education

- Is equity centered. i.e. aims to create a more just equitable society. See [Legos and the 4 I's of Oppression - YouTube](#) to understand the layers of oppression.
- Involves equalizing power imbalances and is reciprocal and relational meaning that flattening hierarchy and building relationships is essential.
- Creates safer spaces includes addressing problematic comments, microaggressions and support all youth. “We all have the right to a safe environment and can live by our own values. This means that we don’t have to right to hurt or harass others based on our values and beliefs.”
- Requires an active approach acknowledging that a neutral approach (i.e. doing or saying nothing) can be oppressive.
- Includes trauma informed and healing centered engagement practices. See [Guide-toTrauma-Informed-Sex-Education.pdf \(traumainformedoregon.org\)](#) and [Our Process - Flourish Agenda](#) for more info.
- Considers the hidden curriculum, the unspoken lessons, messages, norms, values, and perspectives that youth learn through their school experiences.
- Is aware of the importance of representation and makes sure it is reflected in materials.
- Acknowledges that humans while having much in common, are as diverse as the universe.
- Understands the importance of skill development in health. See [The Ultimate Guide for Teaching Health - Project School Wellness](#) for more info.

### Educator

- Uses a calm, regulated, friendly approach.
- Has an unconditional positive regard for youth. [Nothing’s Going to Change My Mind: How Unconditional Positive Regard Transforms Classrooms \(cultofpedagogy.com\)](#) for more info.
- Critically examines their positionality. Continuously reflects on their background relative to their social identities, experiences and how they have shaped their perception, values and beliefs. See [Successful instructors understand their own biases and beliefs \(opinion\) \(insidehighered.com\)](#) for more info.
- Notices the distance between the values they strive for and where they are in practice.
- Builds up their discomfort tolerance. [Top 10 Ways to Tolerate Distress - Mindfulness Muse](#) for more info.
- Educates themselves on promising practices in youth health education. [Our Approach \(teentalk.ca\)](#)
- Works in teams to get information and feedback from colleagues teaching similar topics.

## Set Up

- Chairs arranged in a Circle for Check-In Time and for lesson if possible.
- Snack/granola bar is a nice bonus.
- Inclusive coloring pages and markers are offered before and after Check-In Time. (Some youth need to keep their hands occupied to focus so even fidget toys.)
- Today's topic is written on the board.
- The local and internet resources and next topic are both written in the left corner of the board.
- If it is protocol to do so, let families/caregivers know you will be covering topics under health such as emotional wellbeing, healthy relationships, consent, communication skills, sexuality etc.

## Check-In<sup>i</sup> Time

- **Note to Educators:** Checking in: by virtue of its nature, the sharing of power, time and space, embodies an anti-oppressive, decolonizing approach and builds relationship. When checking in, youth should be provided with a choice of speaking or writing down their responses and even one on one with teacher at certain times. As a whole group, it is important to give each youth the space and wait patiently while the speaker collects their thoughts. As the educator is also required to check in, it is essential to model appropriate boundaries and authenticity. Authenticity is our expression of emotions, reactions, thoughts and ideas that are consistent with our internal experience.<sup>ii</sup> Youth need to see adults sharing feelings, difficulties, and most importantly how they are dealing with them in appropriate ways. Appropriate in terms of when difficult life circumstances are shared by educators, they are shared generally, without great detail, and the focus is on coping and what gets us through. As a result, youth may feel more connected to the adult and may empathize with what other youth may be going through. Most importantly, it will help them find their own authentic selves.<sup>iii</sup> Finally, if a youth shares a concerning issue, such as self-harm, distress, abuse, violence, suicidal thoughts, etc. the educator should follow up one-on-one, to assess the situation (check in with guidance/admin if needed), provide resources and appropriate support.

## Introduction to Check-In Time

- Welcome everyone.
- Take the time needed to set up the lesson and for youth to settle.
- Introduce the options for engagement. Encourage youth to check-in out loud but include other options such as writing their check-in down, or even in some situations check in one-on-one with teacher after everyone else has had a turn. Remind the youth that as their peer is sharing, their job is to hold space and be supportive by listening.
- Use some object that can be passed around and signifies whose turn it is to speak.

### Check-In Questions (Written on the Board)

- **What is your name?**
- **What are your pronouns? (optional)**
- **How are you feeling?**
- **What is something that happened?**
- **One topic related question.**
- **Resource:**

### Lesson Introduction

- Introduce the topic.
- Validate there is no right or wrong way to feel. These are personal topics and they are more than just information as we each have our own experiences.
- Remind them the topics are going to be taken seriously and you may have more factual knowledge but they are experts of their lives and experiences.
- Allow for autonomy by providing options of engagement. Explain there are different ways to participate and if they are uninterested or uncomfortable they are free to disengage without distracting their peers.
- Mention the additional resources that are posted on the board.
- **Note to Educators:** There are many ways for youth to participate. Don't force active participation in front of group but rather provide options and use various teaching strategies such as small group work, in pairs, individual activities etc. to engage youth. In addition, there are situations (i.e. loss, personally affected, family beliefs etc.) where a youth may not be able to participate in the class and a space should be provided for them elsewhere.

### Lesson Tips

- Prioritize becoming an “askable adult.” [Askable-Adults-Summary-of-best-practices.pdf \(nsvrc.org\)](https://www.nsvrc.org/askable-adults-summary-of-best-practices.pdf)
- Ask open ended questions.
- Prioritize connection over content. Find ways to relate to students.
- Recognize and hold multiple truths when applicable. Model how to hold space when someone is sharing about their lived experience (especially if it contradicts or challenges what's being presented).
- Acknowledge when you don't know something and make mistakes.
- Use appropriate humor and relevant references. Ask Youth to teach us something about what's going on their world/age groups.
- Be flexible with what comes up in the room.
- Encourage and make space for discussions that challenge the way cultural norms exist around the topic.
- Notice who may be having difficulty with the topic and if possible check on them discretely and follow up after the class.

## Wrap Up

- Hand out a confidential feedback form (no names required) where youth can include their opinion/questions they don't feel comfortable asking directly.
- Explain the confidentiality policies explicitly i.e. mention unless there's a safety concern, info will not be shared.
- Answer the youths' questions the following session nonjudgmentally, generalizing the questions that may identify a student. (Do not answer personal questions about your health behaviors or personalize the questions.) Refer to reputable resources when you need more information.
- Integrate feedback given in the future valuing the knowledge shared.

## Supportive Statements<sup>iv</sup>

*Youth sharing negative experiences:*

- "I'm glad you told me. It sounds like it was a very scary situation."
- "What helps/helped you deal with difficult situations?"
- "How can I help you now?"
- "Who are people you can talk to or places you can go?"

*Youth disclosing abuse:*

- "I'm sorry that happened, it's not your fault. It takes courage to share this with me."
- (a current situation) "We need to talk to..., to make sure you're safe."

*Youth sharing concerns related to puberty:*

- "Puberty can be a lot. It is common to feel \_\_\_\_\_. Many youth have a lot feelings then."
- "Everyone goes through puberty in their own time."
- "Let's explore what else can help you with these feelings."

*Youth sharing about their sexual orientation or gender identity:*

- "Thanks for sharing, how do you feel about it?"
- "I'm hear to listen. Is there anything you need or I can help you with?"
- (*For gender identity*) "How do you feel in/about your body?"

*A youth tells you they are pregnant:*

- Have you taken a pregnancy test? (*If not, then*) You can get a test at \_\_\_\_\_"
- (*If they have confirmed that they are pregnant*) "How do you feel about being pregnant?" (*Seek out and provide resources on all pregnancy options. Refer to teenclinic.ca.*)
- "If you have supportive people in your life, who are they?"

*Dealing with a youth who is activated:*

- "I'm here for you. What is going on for you right now?"
- "I'm here to listen."

*Youth looking depressed/stressed:*

- “You don’t look like yourself. How are you doing? How can I support you?”
- “I want to make sure you are safe. Are having thoughts of hurting yourself?”
- “I’m really worried about you. What’s going on?”

*Youth grieving after a suicide:*

- “It is not your fault and you are not alone.”
- “It can help to talk to \_\_\_\_\_ about how you are feeling when you are ready.”
- “They were in so much pain, they forgot they could get help from \_\_\_\_\_.”
- “I’m so sorry, when I’m sad, I \_\_\_\_\_. How are you taking care of yourself?”
- “What are some good memories you had with \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Key messages for youth about suicide:*

- “If someone is talking about suicide, don’t keep it a secret. Tell an adult you trust. Know this is bigger than the both of you.”
- “I’m glad they said something, it means they are asking for help.”
- “Take care of yourself when you are supporting others.”
- “You should speak up if you are worried someone is going to hurt themselves. It is better to “tell on them” and help them get better than to keep it a secret.”

*If you don’t feel comfortable/competent dealing with a specific situation:*

- “I don’t feel like I am the best person to help you, but I am glad you came to me. I will help you get the support you deserve.”
- “I think I have someone in mind (guidance counsellor etc.) that could help you more, but thank you for confiding in me.”

*If you are occupied and don’t have time:*

- “Now’s not a good time but I really want to hear what’s going on. Can we talk at \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “I’m just in the middle of something and I want to give you my full attention, how about we talk at \_\_\_\_\_?”

**Remember, supporting others is hard work!**

**Make sure to take care of yourself.**

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<sup>i</sup>Contributed by Mr. Kubas and Ms. Moustarzak, Educators, Elmwood High School, November, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup>6 Rules for Being Transparent with Teens: Authentic Relationships Lead to Engagement | Edutopia February, 2022.

<sup>iii</sup>6 Rules for Being Transparent with Teens: Authentic Relationships Lead to Engagement | Edutopia February, 2022.

<sup>iv</sup>Adapted from Teentalk.ca, July 2024.