

## Member Mental Health

In any given year, one in five Canadians experiences a mental health or addiction problem. By the time Canadians reach 40 years of age, one in two have, or have had, a mental illness (Canadian Mental Health Association).

Mental health is a complex issue. The term “mental health” refers to a broad spectrum of disorders that affect mood, thinking and behaviour. Working in education can be fulfilling but isn’t without its challenges and sometimes comes at a personal cost. ETFO members are particularly vulnerable to illness arising out of excessive mental stress in our workplaces.

“Mental health means striking a balance in all aspects of your life: social, physical, spiritual, economic, and mental. Reaching a balance is a learning process. At times, you may tip the balance too much in one direction and have to find your footing again. Your personal balance will be unique, and your challenge will be to stay mentally healthy by keeping that balance.” (Canadian Mental Health Association)

Being in a state of optimal well-being is something to strive for. We are more resilient and can cope with typical day-to-day stressors when in a state of well-being. While it may seem obvious, many strategies that support our well-being are common sense approaches to staying balanced and ready to deal with what life sends our way. The *Take 5 steps to wellbeing toolkit* work of the New Economic Foundations/Belfast Strategic Partnership in Ireland and the work of Ontario’s School Mental Health ASSIST have provided ideas that may resonate with you in supporting your own well-being:

### Relationships

Humans are social beings and we build relationships that are the foundation of our lives. We need to make sure we spend time developing and nurturing them. Strong relationships, whether they are with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, or in your local community, are fundamental to us as individuals. Strong social connections are one of the most powerful influences on our mood. Reach out and stay in touch with your social networks. Staying connected can help put things in perspective and offer you support when you need it.

### Take Care of Your Physical Self

The positive effects of being physically active have been demonstrated in research. Moving increases your energy, enhances your immune system, reduces insomnia, stimulates brain growth, and even acts as an anti-depressant. For some, having regular workouts at the gym is the answer. For others, walking, running, cycling, gardening, or dancing does the trick. Find activities that you enjoy and work them into your everyday routine. Your body and mind will thank you for it. If you aren’t active yet, aim for baby steps to increase your activity level. Find a friend and do double duty by spending some time together in an active way. A brisk walk while connecting with others can do wonders on both the relationship and physical front!

Nutrition and rest play an important role in your well-being. We all need to refuel and feed our bodies. Getting enough rest assists you in dealing with stress. If you aren't feeling well, listen to your body and do what you need in order to heal it.

### **Be Mindful**

Take time for slow, deliberate breathing. Stop and notice what is around you. Experience your world through a conscious journey of your senses. There are many resources to help you be more mindful and present. Some simple techniques include setting aside time for self-reflection, writing in a journal, be open to inspiration, unplug from your smart phone and consciously decrease stress in your life.

### **Learn**

ETFO members are typically lifelong learners. We are often focused on learning more about our education craft. Consider trying something new, take a course in something non-education related, fix something with your hands. Exercise a different part of your brain.

### **Help Others**

ETFO members give a lot to others. Think beyond your work. Are there ways you can do something nice for a friend, a stranger, or your community? Giving makes us feel good and helps make connections to our broader world.

The concept of work-life balance is one we should all strive for. While you can be proactive and take steps to enhance your well-being in your personal life, your union can assist you when your professional life is weighing heavily on you.

If mental health issues are affecting your ability to cope at school or threatening the continued employment of a colleague, it is critical you/they receive assistance as soon as possible. This can be a challenge where there are limited resources, where members do not have access to employee assistance programmes or where a member's sick leave is exhausted. Professional Relations Services staff is available to assist with your queries.

### **What Are My Rights?**

Employees have a right to privacy, dignity, and a healthy and safe work environment. Those in crisis may not always be aware that they are experiencing mental illness or that they have a mental health disability or addiction. The law protects all discrimination and harassment in the area of mental health disabilities and addictions.

Where a workplace accommodation is required, employees must provide medical documentation outlining restrictions and limitations. While typically the person with the disability will ask for accommodations in the workplace - where the employer thinks someone has a mental health disability or addiction and needs help, they are under an obligation to accommodate that person. The union can assist in this process. ETFO will ensure that your rights are protected and work to address any difficulties experienced as a result of mental health illness.

## What To Do If You Are Concerned About a Colleague?

There are times you notice a colleague is struggling at work and wonder how to support them. Don't assume that your co-worker is suffering from mental illness. Many people experience illnesses differently. Let your colleague decide how much they are willing to share. If they share they are struggling, encourage them to seek professional assistance through their medical practitioner. You can also:

- Ask how you can help and respect your co-workers wishes.
- Continue to include your co-worker in the workplace's usual activities.
- Depending on your relationship, you can still keep in touch with a co-worker who takes time off. When a co-worker returns to work after time off due to a mental illness, make them feel welcome and appreciated. Saying nothing because you're worried about saying the wrong thing can make your co-worker feel worse.
- Advocate for healthy workplaces. Many wellness strategies are low-cost or no-cost, but they can still improve everyone's well-being and build inclusive spaces. Visit the Canadian Mental Health Associations Mental Health Works resource at [mentalhealthworks.ca](https://mentalhealthworks.ca) for ideas and strategies.”  
(Canadian Mental Health Association)

**Contact staff in Professional Relations Services at the ETFO provincial office for confidential advice at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836.**

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