



## **Engaging Youths in Conversations on Mental Health**

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## **Biography**

Goh Si Rong Michelle has been an educator in Singapore for 12 years. She graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours), specialising in Economics. She spent her first four years teaching Economics at Yishun Junior College, before a three-year stint as a Character and Citizenship Education (Pre-University) officer at the Ministry of Education (MOE) Headquarters Character and Citizenship Education Branch. Her last posting is Subject Head, Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) at Victoria Junior College (VJC), where she has held the position for five years.

As an educator, Michelle is deeply committed to fostering the holistic development of her students, encompassing the cultivation of values, character, and social-emotional well-being. She firmly believes in the power of building strong, meaningful relationships with her students, guiding them to flourish as individuals and empowering them to pursue their aspirations with confidence and a sense of purpose in their lives. Beyond her work in the classroom, Michelle has also been actively involved since 2017 in designing and facilitating numerous professional development workshops in CCE, equipping fellow educators with the tools and strategies to inspire and nurture their students.

In VJC, with the support of many like-minded colleagues, Michelle spearheaded the student peer support structure and initiated numerous initiatives to focus on mental health in students, such as VCares, a mental wellness awareness week, which started in 2023.

## **Executive Summary**

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is integral to our well-being (World Health Organization: WHO, 2019).

There is a growing need to focus on the mental well-being of youth, especially as teachers are beginning to observe increasingly concerning signs of mental health-related

issues in their students in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has significantly impacted young people's emotional and psychological health, and educators are noticing heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges in the classroom. In this context, school climate and culture play critical roles as key contributing factors in fostering and supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of students (Roffey, 2008; Aldridge et al., 2016). A positive school environment not only aids in students' academic growth but also supports their overall development and mental health.

Undeniably, teachers are often seen as the most reliable and consistent source of support for students. They spend considerable time with their students and are in a unique position to notice changes in behaviour and emotional states. Generally, teachers express a strong willingness to support their students in mental health matters. However, many teachers do not always feel equipped or confident enough to address mental health concerns directly, especially since these conversations can be sensitive and complex. Despite their dedication, teachers often struggle with feelings of inadequacy in navigating these important discussions without formal training in counselling.

This project seeks to explore how Junior College teachers, who may not be trained in school counselling, can engage their students in meaningful and supportive conversations about mental health issues and needs. Given the challenges involved in initiating such sensitive topics, the use of conversation cards presents an effective strategy for creating momentum in these discussions. Conversation cards help to reduce stress and cognitive load, allowing for more open, comfortable exchanges (Knowmium, 2020). By developing a simple two-part resource package, which includes a set of conversation cards and accompanying facilitative tips, this project aims to empower teachers to start conversations with their students on mental health with greater confidence and competence. The hope is that these resources will provide the necessary tools for teachers to better support their students and address mental health concerns in a more proactive and informed manner.

## **Relevance of project**

In Singapore schools, the holistic health framework (HHF) is adopted to foster the total well-being of students. This framework's central guiding principle is Total Well-Being, which goes beyond physical health markers like weight and fitness, and encompasses the physical, mental, and social health of students (MOE, n.d.). The HHF emphasises a multifaceted approach to promoting student well-being through three key components. First, it prioritises a supportive school culture and organisation, where each school develops a shared vision for student health and an actionable plan to implement programs and build resources. Second, the HHF incorporates a comprehensive and relevant curriculum, delivering health-promoting programs both during school hours and through extracurricular activities. Finally, it fosters synergistic collaborations and partnerships, enabling stakeholders to contribute their expertise and resources to support schools' health initiatives. Together, these elements create a robust structure for advancing the holistic well-being of students.

While this approach aims to address the comprehensive needs of students, there is growing concern about the mental health of youth in Singapore. In recent years, the country has seen a troubling rise in suicide rates, reaching the highest level in more than two decades. Recent studies and reports highlight several factors contributing to youth suicides, including academic pressure, mental health struggles, social media influence and family and social issues. In 2022, of the 476 suicide deaths in Singapore, 34 were youths aged 10 to 19 (Ong, 2023). Furthermore, a study conducted by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and released in April 2023 revealed that one in three adolescents, aged 10 to 18, reported experiencing internalised mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Seah & Ng, 2023).

The situation has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has worsened the mental health decline among young people. Factors contributing to this include social isolation, disruptions to education and work routines, financial stress, job loss, and the challenges of working or studying from home. In addition, many youths have struggled with

an inability to escape triggers such as family conflict, a lack of motivation or purpose, and the personal and widespread implications of the pandemic (Bell et al., 2023). The pandemic has also brought about achievement stress and future job stress (Menon & Abdullah, 2022).

The intertwining nature of these issues means that most youths find it difficult to separate the personal challenges they face outside of school from their ability to perform academically. These issues are complex, affecting various aspects of their lives and identities, making it difficult for them to fully focus on their studies. There is no question about the positive effects that a supportive school climate and culture can have on students' learning and well-being (Hoy, 1990; Gonder & Hymes, 1994). In response, many teachers have taken active roles in helping students manage socio-emotional and mental health challenges (Wasserman et al., 2015; Department of Health [DoH] & Department of Education [DoE], 2017; Billington, 2018). However, teachers today are expected to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. As the frontliners in providing support for students, teachers can become vulnerable themselves, especially if the school climate is not sufficiently supportive or sensitive to the needs of both students and staff (Rothí et al., 2008). When the school environment does not offer adequate relational support, it can affect the well-being of both educators and students (MacNeil et al., 2009; Riekie et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a pressing need to develop relational practices that support the mental health of young people, without unnecessarily introducing clinical language or practices into the educational environment (Gergen, 2009).

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022) has outlined five key pillars for promoting and protecting mental health in school policies:

- Create an enabling learning environment for positive mental health and well-being
- Guarantee access to early intervention and mental health services and support
- Promote teacher well-being
- Enhance professional development for education professionals

- Ensure meaningful collaboration between school, family and community to build a safe and nurturing learning environment

It is clear that the first and fourth pillars are closely interconnected and this project will be focused on these pillars. Teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills and competencies to create a caring and nurturing environment in schools that supports students' mental well-being. However, many teachers are taking on these responsibilities on an ad hoc basis, and because this work is often not quantified or formally recognised, it tends to remain unseen, unacknowledged, and at times, unappreciated (Billington et al., 2021). Teachers often provide emotional and mental health support without sufficient guidance or professional backing, leaving them to navigate these sensitive issues on their own.

While Singapore has recently updated its Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum to include mental health lessons, more efforts are needed to boost the confidence and competence of teachers, particularly in facilitating difficult conversations surrounding mental health. These discussions, which are often more private and occur outside the classroom, require additional support and resources to help teachers engage with students in a way that is both sensitive and effective. This highlights the need for continuous professional development and stronger institutional support to enable educators to play a more active and informed role in promoting mental health and well-being among youth.

### **Background and Literature Review**

In Singapore, mental health lessons have been introduced as a key component of the refreshed Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum, known as CCE2021. Schools were tasked with implementing these lessons by 2023, marking a significant shift in the focus on student well-being within the education system. These lessons aim to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop healthy mindsets, habits, and strategies to strengthen their mental well-being. Through these lessons, students are also taught to identify signs of distress and mental illness and are guided on how to seek



appropriate help when needed (Ong, 2023). To enable the enactment of the new CCE syllabus, Specialised Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) teachers in Singapore were formally introduced to strengthen the teaching of values, character, and citizenship. While general CCE teaching practices date back to the launch of the CCE curriculum in January 2014, specialised training for CCE teachers became more structured with the establishment of the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education (SCCCE) at the National Institute of Education (NIE). This initiative, linked to the CCE 2021 curriculum, aims to deepen teacher expertise and focus on social-emotional learning, mental health, and the holistic development of students (SingTeach, 2023).

The introduction of mental health modules in CCE2021 builds on the Ministry of Education's (MOE) earlier initiatives to cultivate a resilience mindset among students. These efforts included fostering a culture of peer support through the teaching of Social and Emotional Competencies (SECs) (Rajah, 2020, para 14). By identifying mental health as one of the six content areas in the CCE curriculum, CCE2021 addresses a gap in the earlier CCE2014 syllabus, which lacked a dedicated focus on mental health. This differentiation underscores a strengthened emphasis on mental health education, framing it as a specialised area within the curriculum.

The curriculum emphasises mental health as a personal practice, placing responsibility on students to cultivate their emotional resilience and seek help when necessary. Through these lessons, students are guided to develop practical skills, such as breaking negative thought patterns, managing social-emotional challenges, seeking support when in distress, and regulating their emotions effectively (Chan, 2021a, para 33).

In addition to the CCE lessons, MOE has mandated other school measures to address student well-being. Since September 2021, schools have allocated time at the start of each academic term for teachers to check in on their students' well-being (Wong, 2021). This initiative provides opportunities for educators to build rapport with students and identify any emerging concerns. Furthermore, as of 2022, all schools have implemented peer support

systems. Peer Support Leaders (PSLs), who may volunteer for the role, undergo training to develop critical skills such as active listening, empathetic communication, conflict management, and encouraging positive coping strategies. These PSLs also promote early help-seeking behaviours among their peers. The peer support programs are supported by teachers, school staff, and counsellors, who regularly check in with the PSLs to ensure their own well-being and effectiveness in their roles (MOE, 2021). Additionally, schools and Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) collaborate with the Health Promotion Board and other community organisations to raise awareness of mental health issues. These partnerships aim to create a broader network of support for students and reinforce the importance of mental health literacy.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain in addressing youth mental health comprehensively. One major obstacle is the limited time allocated for CCE lessons. With only two or three CCE periods per week to cover a wide range of topics—including education and career guidance, national education, and sexuality education—mental health education struggles to be a consistent priority or explored in substantial depth. This time constraint hinders opportunities for students to fully internalise and practice the skills necessary for improving mental fitness (Ong, 2023). Merely relying on CCE lessons to enhance mental health literacy among youths has proven to be insufficient, as head knowledge alone is not enough to translate into meaningful behavioural changes.

The responsibility for addressing youth mental health extends beyond the classroom. Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's mental well-being, yet many struggle to recognise signs of mental health issues. The NUS Youth Resilience Study found that only about one in ten parents could identify clinical-level mental health symptoms in their children (Ong, 2023). This gap underscores the need for greater parent education and involvement in mental health initiatives.

Peer support systems also face limitations. While PSLs play an important role in creating a supportive school environment, they are not expected to solve problems but rather

to offer friendship and encouragement (MOE, 2021). This limitation highlights the gap in bridging mental health support for youths, as peer support may not always address deeper mental health concerns. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether school-based peer programs significantly improve overall mental well-being (Lindsay, 2022).

Taken together, these findings indicate that while Singapore has made strides in integrating mental health education and support systems into schools, more comprehensive and targeted efforts are needed to address the growing mental health challenges faced by youths. Strengthening collaboration between educators, parents, and mental health professionals, as well as providing adequate training and resources, will be critical to fostering a more holistic and effective approach to mental well-being. In view of the many stakeholders that are involved in this concerted effort of strengthening mental health literacy in youths, this project will zoom in on the educators.

To shed some light on the realities of how Singapore teachers are engaging with mental health education in schools, a survey was conducted to gather their perspectives (Appendix A). The findings will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

### **Teachers' understanding of mental health**

A dipstick survey conducted with 15 Junior College educators across 6 different schools revealed some insights on the understanding of mental health of teachers. This is important because it undergirds the motivation behind teachers' role in improving youth mental health.

In one of the questions posed, teachers were asked about their understanding of mental health. Teachers generally perceive mental health as a critical component of overall well-being, comparable in importance to physical health. A teacher described mental health as "essential, as important as physical health. It ensures emotional stability and overall psychological well-being." Another teacher highlighted its centrality in an individual's ability to "cope with stress and believe in their capacity to overcome challenges." A common theme was

that mental health encompasses the psychological and emotional dimensions. One teacher stated, "Mental health relates to our emotional, psychological, and social well-being, impacting how we think, feel, and act in our daily lives." Another emphasised, "It encompasses belief in oneself, the ability to face stress, and the resilience to recover from adversity."

When presented with the WHO definition, teachers broadly agreed with it, recognising its comprehensiveness. One teacher mentioned, "Yes, the definition is comprehensive. It emphasises the ability to cope, learn, and contribute, which resonates with my understanding of mental health." Another teacher noted, "It aligns with what I believe—mental health enables individuals to face adversity and maintain balance." However, several nuanced observations emerged, with some reservations and suggestions for expansion. One respondent expressed that while the definition is solid, it "misses out on emphasising the dynamic and evolving nature of mental health." Another pointed out, "Yes, it's a good baseline, but it doesn't fully address the role of community and relational factors in sustaining mental health."

Teachers' perspectives on mental health reveal a shared understanding of its multidimensional nature, encompassing thoughts, feelings, actions, and social interactions. This holistic view aligns closely with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition, which frames mental health as a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with stress, realise their potential, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. While teachers generally agreed with the WHO's definition and appreciated its comprehensiveness, some suggested it could be enriched by emphasising relational and community-based aspects of mental health. This need for nuance highlights the importance of considering cultural and social contexts when addressing mental health in schools. The alignment on core ideas—such as the ability to manage stress, recognise personal strengths, and engage constructively with society—underscores the potential for integrating these shared principles into educational initiatives. However, this contrast between teachers' perspectives and the WHO's formal definition also presents an opportunity to tailor mental health education in ways that resonate more deeply with local experiences and relational dynamics.

## **Teachers' Role in Youth Mental Health**

Teachers are often the first point of contact for students facing mental health challenges, positioning them as crucial frontline supporters in the school ecosystem. Their consistent interactions with students allow them to notice behavioural changes and emotional struggles that may otherwise go unnoticed. However, teachers' perceptions of their role in managing or improving students' mental health reveal a spectrum of perspectives, highlighting both their willingness to help and the challenges they face in fulfilling this responsibility effectively.

In the survey, teachers were asked for their views regarding teachers' role in improving the mental health of students. Results showed that many teachers view themselves as key emotional supporters for their students. They recognise that their role extends beyond academics, encompassing the need to foster a supportive and safe environment where students feel comfortable sharing their struggles. As one teacher expressed, "We are often the first to see changes in behaviour, which gives us the chance to intervene early or connect students with help." Another noted, "Building trust and showing care can sometimes make all the difference in a student's day." This sense of responsibility is driven by the understanding that mental health directly impacts a student's ability to learn and thrive. Teachers often act as the bridge between students and professional support services, helping to identify those in need of further assistance.

Despite their willingness to support students, many teachers acknowledge the challenges they face in addressing mental health issues. A recurring concern is the lack of formal training and expertise in navigating sensitive conversations about mental health. One teacher remarked, "I want to help, but I don't feel equipped to handle serious mental health issues without inadvertently making things worse." Another echoed this sentiment, saying, "It's hard to balance the academic workload with the emotional needs of students, especially when the expectations on teachers are so high." Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health can sometimes create barriers, both for students seeking help and for teachers feeling

confident in initiating discussions. Teachers also highlighted the need for more systemic support, such as clear protocols, additional training, and collaboration with mental health professionals.

Many teachers emphasised that their role in supporting mental health should complement, not replace, the efforts of counsellors, psychologists, and parents. As one respondent noted, “Teachers can observe and offer initial support, but serious issues need professional intervention.” Another pointed out, “Parents play an equally important role, and open communication between teachers and parents is vital to ensure a coordinated approach.” Teachers also expressed the importance of school-wide systems that enable them to work effectively with other stakeholders. Regular check-ins with counsellors, mental health workshops, and collaborative meetings with parents were suggested as ways to enhance their ability to support students holistically.

These insights underscore the dual nature of teachers’ roles in youth mental health: they serve as both observers and initial responders, while relying on a broader support network for professional intervention. The findings highlight the need for ongoing professional development to empower teachers with the skills and confidence to navigate mental health conversations. Moreover, institutional systems and policies must ensure that teachers are not overwhelmed in their dual responsibilities of teaching and supporting emotional well-being. By addressing these gaps, schools can better equip teachers to fulfil their critical role in promoting the mental health of their students.

### **Assessing Youth Mental Health**

Teachers are uniquely positioned to assess the mental health of their students, given their daily interactions and opportunities to observe changes in behaviour over time. Their observations and methods of engagement provide critical insights into the well-being of students and contribute to the broader mental health support ecosystem in schools. However,

this role is complex, requiring both sensitivity and an understanding of the multidimensional nature of mental health.

In the survey, teachers were asked to describe the state of mental health in their students, as well as how they assess the state of mental health of their students. It was noted that teachers often describe the mental health of their students as existing on a spectrum, influenced by academic, social, and external factors. Research supports the idea that school environments and academic pressures significantly affect student mental health. For instance, Lee et al. (2021) found that high stakes testing, and competitive educational systems can lead to heightened anxiety and stress among students. Teachers, who are closest to these dynamics, are frequently the first to notice signs of struggle. Subtle behavioural changes such as withdrawal, declining academic performance, or shifts in social interactions often serve as red flags. As one teacher explained, "When a student suddenly becomes quieter or stops turning in homework, it's usually a sign that something is going on." This aligns with findings by Suldo and Shaffer (2008), who highlight the importance of teacher vigilance in identifying early signs of mental health challenges through observable changes in behaviour.

External factors also play a significant role. Teachers have noted that family issues, peer conflicts, and societal pressures, compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated mental health challenges. The American Psychological Association (2021) reports that social isolation and disrupted routines during the pandemic have had profound psychological impacts on adolescents, making it even more critical for teachers to be attuned to these influences.

Teachers typically use a combination of observation and communication to assess students' mental health. Behavioural observation remains a primary method, with teachers identifying patterns such as frequent absences, inattentiveness, or emotional outbursts. This approach is supported by Roeser et al. (2000), who emphasise the importance of teacher awareness in detecting stress-related behaviours in students.

Direct communication is another vital tool. Teachers often engage students in informal check-ins or one-on-one conversations to understand their emotional states better. However, not all students feel comfortable opening up, which underscores the importance of creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment. According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), teachers who cultivate emotionally supportive classrooms can enhance students' trust and willingness to share their struggles.

In some cases, teachers rely on school-based tools, such as well-being surveys or counsellor referrals, to complement their observations. These methods align with the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework, which advocates for integrating teacher observations with standardised tools to ensure comprehensive mental health assessments (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). However, the effectiveness of these approaches often depends on the resources available within the school and the extent of collaboration among educators, counsellors, and parents.

Despite their efforts, teachers face several challenges in assessing students' mental health. Many lack formal training in mental health, leading to uncertainty in interpreting behaviours or initiating sensitive conversations. As one teacher noted, "I want to help, but I don't feel equipped to handle serious mental health issues without inadvertently making things worse." This sentiment reflects broader findings in the literature; teachers often feel underprepared to manage the mental health needs of their students (Reinke et al., 2011). Additionally, stigma around mental health can create barriers to open communication. Students may hesitate to share their struggles due to fear of judgment, while teachers may find it challenging to broach the topic without reinforcing negative perceptions. Mendenhall et al. (2014) argue that targeted professional development can help teachers address these challenges by equipping them with culturally sensitive and evidence-based strategies.

The dual approach of observation and communication underscores the need for systemic support and professional development to empower teachers in their role as assessors of mental health. Investing in teacher training programs that focus on mental health



literacy, trauma-informed practices, and emotional regulation strategies can enhance teachers' confidence and effectiveness. Additionally, integrating standardised tools and protocols, as recommended by the MTSS framework, can provide teachers with the resources needed to assess mental health comprehensively and collaboratively.

By addressing these gaps, schools can create an environment where teachers are not only better equipped to assess youth mental health but also supported in their own well-being. As Jennings and Greenberg (2009) note, fostering teacher well-being is integral to promoting positive outcomes for students. Strengthening these practices will enable schools to meet the complex and evolving mental health needs of their students effectively.

### **Facilitating meaningful conversations on mental health**

In facilitating sensitive conversations, the project looks at the perceived confidence and competence levels of teachers. In the survey, teachers were asked to rate themselves, on a scale of 1 to 5, regarding how confident or competent they are to engage in conversations with their students surrounding issues on mental health. Teachers' self-assessed confidence and competence scores reveal an intriguing disparity. On average, the confidence score was 3.53 out of 5, while the competence score lagged slightly behind at 3.13 out of 5. This indicates that teachers generally feel more confident than competent in addressing mental health conversations. This gap can likely be attributed to the distinct nature of confidence and competence in practice. Confidence reflects a teacher's belief in their ability to approach mental health discussions, possibly bolstered by their experience managing classroom dynamics and supporting students in various capacities. One teacher noted, *"I feel confident in talking to my students because I know them well and can sense when something is off, but I often find it hard to say the right thing when they share serious issues."* On the other hand, competence refers to the actual skills and knowledge required to facilitate meaningful and sensitive conversations, which may feel less developed due to a lack of formal training in mental health counselling or specific conversational techniques. Another teacher reflected,

*“While I want to help my students, I feel like I don’t have enough training to handle these conversations properly, especially if they get emotional or complex.”*

Although it might be expected that more teaching experience would translate to easier or more effective conversations about mental health, the data did not indicate a significant correlation between years of teaching and higher ratings of confidence or competence. Teachers with extensive experience did not consistently rate themselves as more confident or competent than their less experienced counterparts. This suggests that factors other than teaching tenure—such as access to relevant training, personal interest, or exposure to mental health issues—may play a more crucial role in shaping teachers' ability to engage in these conversations. For instance, some newer teachers might have undergone recent professional development that included mental health training, equipping them with more up-to-date knowledge and tools to handle such conversations. Conversely, seasoned teachers, while potentially confident in general classroom management, may feel that their skills in mental health dialogue are outdated or insufficient, particularly if they have not received training specific to this area. One respondent noted, *“Even though I’ve been teaching for over 15 years, I’ve never had formal training on mental health. I rely more on instinct and experience, which doesn’t always feel adequate.”* Additionally, the level of confidence and competence might also depend on the types of students the teachers have worked with and the frequency of exposure to mental health-related issues in their teaching careers. Teachers in schools or communities with a higher prevalence of mental health challenges may feel more prepared simply because they have more practical experience addressing such situations. However, others in less demanding environments may feel less equipped to handle these conversations when they arise unexpectedly.

This lack of a clear relationship between teaching experience and perceived ability to manage mental health conversations highlights the need for targeted training and resources for teachers across all levels of experience. By providing structured guidance, such as

workshops or tools like conversation cards, schools can ensure that all teachers, regardless of tenure, feel equally empowered to support their students' mental health effectively.

To address these challenges, teachers were asked in the survey if they would use tools like conversation cards. Teachers expressed openness to these cards as they can act as structured prompts, helping to guide conversations and reduce the cognitive load associated with navigating complex topics. Many teachers highlighted the potential benefits of such resources. One respondent shared, *"I think conversation cards could be really useful because they provide a starting point. Sometimes it's hard to know how to begin such a heavy topic."* Another noted, *"I would be more confident if I had a framework to follow, and the cards sound like they can provide that structure."*

However, some teachers raised concerns about the implementation of these tools. One respondent cautioned, *"The cards could be useful, but only if they are adaptable to the different personalities and needs of my students. A one-size-fits-all approach might not work."* This highlights the need for resources that are flexible and can cater to diverse student populations.

Bridging the gap between confidence and competence requires structured support. Professional development programs focused on mental health literacy, along with tools like conversation cards, could empower teachers with the requisite skills to enhance both their confidence and competence. By providing practical frameworks, these resources can make it easier for teachers to navigate challenging discussions and foster a more supportive classroom environment.

This disparity underscores the importance of equipping teachers with both the self-belief and practical tools necessary to foster open and supportive mental health conversations with their students. As one teacher aptly summarised, *"We want to help, but we need the right tools and training to do it well."*

## **Conversation Cards and Facilitative Tips**

Counselling is a relational process built on empathy, trust, and acceptance. The counsellor facilitates the conversation, enabling the client to express feelings, explore options, and make decisions independently. The process avoids giving direct advice but instead supports clients in clarifying their thoughts and choices (Resource Sharing Project, 2020). However, not all teachers are trained in basic counselling skills in Singapore.

To support teachers in navigating meaningful conversations about mental health, a two-part resource has been developed: Conversation Cards and Facilitative Tips for Teachers. These tools aim to bridge the gap between confidence and competence, offering structured, practical guidance to make such discussions less daunting and more effective.

By providing a clear framework, these resources help alleviate the uncertainty many teachers face when approaching sensitive topics. Mental health conversations can be challenging due to the diverse needs of students, the complexity of mental health issues, and the emotional weight such discussions often carry. Teachers may feel confident in their ability to connect with students but unsure about how to facilitate these conversations in a way that is both impactful and appropriate. These resources are designed to address such gaps by equipping teachers with strategies to engage students thoughtfully while maintaining a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere.

### **Conversation Cards**

The conversation cards are divided into thematic categories, each tailored to specific aspects of student life and mental well-being. They serve as a starting point, offering a range of prompts that guide discussions from building rapport for first time conversations to discussing mental health issues, exploring relationships, impact of technology, transitions, and trauma. This approach allows teachers to select questions that best suit a student's unique situation, making it easier to initiate deep conversations. Each category begins with icebreaker questions and progresses to deeper reflective questions. By blending light-hearted questions

with deeper inquiries, the cards help ease both teachers and students into meaningful dialogue. This structure not only reduces the cognitive load on teachers but also ensures that conversations remain focused and productive. The categories include:

1. Building Connections: These icebreaker prompts are designed to foster trust and rapport. For example:

- *“What is one thing you are really into right now?”*
- *“If you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?”*

2. Mental Health: These cards address stress, emotions, and help-seeking behaviours, ranging from lighter prompts to deeper reflective questions:

- Icebreakers: *“What colour would you use to describe your mood today? Why?”*
- Deepening Conversations: *“How do you know when you are starting to feel stressed or overwhelmed?”*

3. Relationships, Technology, Transitions, and Trauma: These themes explore critical challenges faced by youth, such as navigating friendships, managing social media influence, handling transitions, and coping with grief or trauma.

- Example: *“How do you think social media affects how people communicate in real life?”*
- Example: *“What is a difficult conversation you wish you could have with someone close to you, and what holds you back?”*

The cards encourage thoughtful dialogue by blending approachable topics with more profound inquiries, giving students a voice while helping teachers guide the discussion effectively. One teacher who reviewed the cards shared, *“These questions make it much easier to start conversations. They feel natural and give me a starting point.”*

## Facilitative Tips for Teachers

The facilitative tips provide practical strategies to enhance the quality of these conversations. Teachers are guided on how to create a safe and respectful environment, manage emotional responses, and encourage student reflection. These tips empower teachers to respond confidently to complex emotions and foster deeper engagement. For instance, they outline techniques such as paraphrasing and summarising to validate student feelings, as well as methods for diffusing tension during emotional moments. To complement the conversation cards, the facilitative tips provide a framework for effectively managing these discussions. Key strategies include:

### 1. Setting the Stage:

- Establish structured time for the conversation.
- Agree on ground rules to create a safe and respectful space.

### 2. Knowing Yourself:

- Reflect on personal biases and beliefs.
- Suspend judgment to create an open environment.

### 3. Facilitating Actively:

- Use techniques such as summarising, paraphrasing, clarifying, and probing to ensure understanding and engagement. For instance:
  - *“Let me make sure I understand. You’re saying... Is that correct?”*

### 4. Managing Emotional Moments:

- Stay calm, validate emotions, and give space when necessary.
- For example: *“It’s okay to feel this way. Take your time; we can continue when you’re ready.”*

- Provide grounding techniques or comfort gestures like offering water or tissues.

#### 5. Reflecting on the Process:

- Encourage students to reflect after the session to reinforce their learning and growth.
- Teachers are also encouraged to evaluate their facilitation to continuously improve their approach.

These resources directly address common challenges teachers face, such as uncertainty about how to start sensitive conversations or manage emotional responses. By using the conversation cards and facilitative tips, teachers can feel more equipped to guide discussions with empathy and purpose. As one teacher highlighted, *“Having a structured approach makes me feel more prepared and reduces the anxiety of saying the wrong thing.”* Another teacher shared, *“The cards are a great way to prompt conversations without feeling forced, and the tips help me handle tough moments with confidence.”*

Together, the conversation cards and facilitative tips offer an approachable yet robust framework that empowers teachers to navigate mental health discussions with greater ease and effectiveness. These resources not only enhance teachers' competence but also reinforce their confidence, enabling them to play a more active and supportive role in promoting student well-being. As a result, they pave the way for more open, empathetic, and impactful mental health conversations in the classroom.

#### **Limitations of study**

The study is based on a survey of 15 Junior College educators across six schools. While this provides valuable insights, the sample size may not fully capture the diversity of teacher experiences and perspectives across Singapore. Moreover, the analysis heavily relies on teachers' self-assessments of their confidence and competence. These subjective

measures may be influenced by personal bias, with some teachers potentially overestimating or underestimating their abilities. The study provides a snapshot of teachers' current capabilities and experiences but does not track changes over time or measure the long-term impact of interventions or tools like the conversation cards or facilitative tips.

Additionally, there is no data collected on how students perceive these mental health conversations or how effective they find the proposed resources like conversation cards. Without student feedback, it is difficult to evaluate the practical impact or acceptability of these tools from the intended beneficiaries. Lastly, while the study highlights the potential of the conversation cards and facilitative tips, it does not address the systemic barriers to widespread adoption, such as time constraints in teachers' schedules, variability in school resources, or differing levels of administrative support. These barriers could hinder the implementation and scalability of the proposed solutions.

### **Discussion of Future Directions**

While the cards explore five common themes among youths, there is significant potential to expand the topics for more targeted conversations. For instance, future iterations could include cards addressing mental health topics specific to underrepresented groups, such as students from low-income families, LGBTQ+ youth navigating identity and acceptance, or neurodiverse students and those with special learning needs. Including more inclusive prompts would not only foster greater empathy but also create a space to amplify diverse voices and experiences.

The facilitative guide could also be enhanced by incorporating situational scenarios and case studies based on real or simulated situations that teachers might encounter. Examples include handling a student who is reluctant to share feelings or managing conversations where emotions run high. By providing step-by-step facilitation techniques tailored to these scenarios, the guide could help teachers feel more confident and prepared to navigate such challenges effectively.



Additionally, a dedicated self-care section for teachers would be a valuable addition. Facilitating emotionally intense conversations requires emotional resilience, and practical self-care tips can support this. For example, guidance on setting emotional boundaries while maintaining empathy, or strategies for post-conversation reflection and recovery, could help teachers sustain their well-being as they guide these important discussions.

Lastly, in terms of implementation, to refine and improve the effectiveness of the conversation cards and facilitative tips, it is crucial to establish a feedback loop involving the teachers who use these tools. Ways to do this can include the use of surveys or focus group discussions, both with teachers and students, to gather feedback regarding the ease of use, impact of the resources as well as suggestions to improve the resources. Including both teacher and student perspectives creates a comprehensive understanding of the tools' impact. Based on feedback, there is a need to periodically update the conversation cards to include new themes, adapt existing questions, or clarify the facilitative tips. Iterative refinement can lead to a more tailored and widely accepted resource.

Transitioning the conversation cards and facilitative tips into digital or interactive formats can significantly enhance their accessibility, adaptability, and engagement. Developing a user-friendly mobile app or online platform where teachers can access digital versions of the conversation cards categorised by themes allows for updated versions of the cards to be used especially if there are revised iterations. Technology will also allow novel functions such as a feature to shuffle cards or select specific themes for discussions. In terms of scalability, digital formats also make it easier to roll out the resources across multiple schools and nationwide.

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## **Appendix A: Teachers' survey on engaging youth in conversations on mental health**

What is your name and school that you are teaching at?

Short answer text

What subject(s) do you teach? \*

Short answer text

How many years have you been teaching? \*

Short answer text

Are you currently a form teacher? \*

☐ Yes

☐ No

Mental Health in Students



The following questions will gather your perspectives on mental health in your students.

What do you understand about mental health? \*

Long answer text

According to World Health Organisation, mental health can be defined as “Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” \*

Does this definition resonate with your own definition of mental health? Why or why not?

Long answer text

How will you describe the state of mental health in your students? \*

Long answer text

How do you assess the state of mental health of your students? \*

Long answer text

Do you think teachers play a role in managing or improving the mental health of students? Why or why not? \*

Long answer text

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning least confident and 5 meaning most confident, how confident are you to engage in conversations with your students surrounding issues on mental health? \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Elaborate on your above rating. \*

Long answer text

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning least competent and 5 meaning most competent, how competent will you rate yourself in being able to engage in meaningful conversations with your students on issues surrounding mental health? \*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Elaborate on your above rating. \*

Long answer text

If there are resources that can help you to kickstart conversations with your students, such as that of a conversation kit, will you be interested to use them? Why or why not? \*

Long answer text



## **Appendix B: Conversation Cards Themes and Prompts**

### **1. Building Connections**

Aim: To know more about each other. Useful for first time conversations.

- What is one thing you are really into right now? A show, a game, a hobby?
- If you could learn any new skill, what would it be and why?
- What is something that made you smile this week?
- Who is someone you really look up to? What do you admire about him or her?
- What is your favourite way to unwind after a busy day?
- What does a perfect day look like for you?
- What is a goal you are working on right now, big or small?
- Have you tried something new recently? How did it go?
- What is one thing you are looking forward to in the coming months?
- What do you wish more people knew about you?
- What are you curious about lately?
- What is the most adventurous thing you have ever done?
- What has been the highlight of your week?
- If you can choose to go back in time, which moment will you go to and why?
- If you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?
- If you could be someone else for a day, who would it be and what would you do?
- What is one thing that never fails to make you laugh or feel happy?
- What is the best piece of advice you have ever received, and who gave it to you?
- What is the most memorable thing you have seen or read about today?
- Tell me about a moment in your life where you felt proud of yourself.

### **2. Technology**

Aim: To explore the impact of media & social media, cyberbullying

#### **Ice Breakers**

- What is one app on your phone that you cannot live without, and why?
- What is the most interesting or useful thing you have learnt online?
- Who is your favourite social media creator or influencer, and what do you like about their content?
- How many hours a day do you spend online? Is it more or less than you will like?
- What is the most memorable meme or trend you have come across this year?
- How do you think life would be different if social media did not exist? What would you miss, and what might you be glad to live without?

#### **Deepening Conversations**

- How do you feel when someone texts you too much or does not text you back?
- How do you decide what to post online, and do you feel it reflects the real you?
- Do you feel pressured to keep up with online trends? How do you manage this?
- How does seeing other people's posts or stories affect your mood or self-esteem?
- Do you think it's easier or harder to make friends in the age of social media? Why?
- Have you ever felt inferior because of what you see online? How do you handle that?

- How would you feel if a friend shared something online that was meant to stay private?
- How do you feel about influencers or ads on social media? Do they impact your choices?
- What's your view on cyberbullying? Do you think it is a common issue among youths today?
- Have you ever experienced or witnessed cyberbullying? How did you respond?
- What do you think schools could do more to help prevent or address cyberbullying?
- How would you help a friend if they were being bullied or harassed online?
- How do you think social media affects how people communicate in real life? Has it changed the way you interact with friends and family?
- How can social media impact mental health, both positively and negatively?
- How comfortable do you feel about sharing personal information online? What boundaries do you set to protect your privacy?

### 3. Relationships

Aim: To uncover friendship / family issues / conflicts and feelings

#### Ice Breakers

- What is the best quality you look for in a friend?
- Which qualities are especially difficult to find in a friend?
- What is a fun memory that you have with your closest friends or family?
- How would your friends describe you in three words?
- What is something small but thoughtful a friend or family member has done for you recently?
- What is a song that reminds you of your friends or family? Why?

#### Deepening Conversations

- What are some ways your friends have helped you during tough times?
- Talk about a time when you helped a friend who was feeling down. What worked, and what did not?
- What is one way you can show a friend or family member that you care about him or her?
- How do you know when you can trust someone?
- What is a common way you and your friends handle disagreements or misunderstandings?
- How comfortable do you feel talking to your family about your personal life?
- Is it easier to confide in friends, family, or someone else? Why do you think that is?
- How do you handle it when a friend or family member disappoints you?
- What is something you wish your family understood better about you?
- Have you ever lost a friendship? What did you learn from that experience?
- How do you feel about making new friends, especially with people who are different from you?
- What role does forgiveness play in your relationships, and do you find it easy or difficult to forgive?

- Have you ever felt pressured by friends or family to be someone you are not? How do you handle it?
- How do you manage conflicts in your family, and what strategies have you found helpful?
- What is a difficult conversation you wish you could have with someone close to you, and what holds you back?
- How do you navigate boundaries with friends or family members when they do not fully understand your needs?

#### 4. **Mental Health**

Aim: To focus on stress, mood, feelings, help-seeking

##### Ice Breakers

- Do you prefer quiet time alone or spending time with friends when you need a pick-me-up?
- What is a small activity or routine that helps you feel more relaxed?
- What is the best advice you have ever received about handling stress?
- What colour will you use to describe your mood today? Why?
- Who is someone you can count on to make you laugh when you are feeling down?
- If you had a free day just to relax, what would you do?

##### Deepening Conversations

- How do you calm yourself down when feeling angry?
- What are some common stressors in your life, and how do you manage them?
- What strategies do you use when you feel stressed? How did you learn them?
- How can the things you have learned about mental health help you in the future?
- How do you know when you are starting to feel stressed or overwhelmed?
- What is something you wish people knew about your feelings or emotions?
- Do you find it easy or hard to open up about your feelings? Why so?
- Have you ever felt pressured to hide how you are feeling? How do you manage that?
- How comfortable do you feel reaching out for help when you need it?
- Who is someone in your life who really listens when you need to talk? How do they help?
- How do you respond to feelings of sadness or frustration? Do you express them or keep them inside?
- How do you think mental health and well-being are viewed in your community or family?
- What would you tell a friend who was struggling but was not sure how to ask for help?
- In what ways do you feel mental health affects your ability to focus on school or other activities?
- What is a personal boundary you have set to protect your mental health, and how do you keep it?
- What do you think it would look like for people to be more supportive of mental health challenges?

## 5. Transitions

Aim: To explore coping mechanisms, support structures, aspirations

### Ice Breakers

- What is one thing you are excited about in this next stage of life?
- Who is someone you have kept / would like to keep in touch with as you move on to a new place?
- What is one thing about your current school that you will miss?
- Who or what has helped you the most to prepare for this next stage of life?
- If you could choose a theme song for this new chapter in your life, what would it be?
- What is a new activity or hobby you would like to try in this next stage of life?

### Deepening Conversations

- Can you describe a time when you overcame a difficult situation?
- What are you most looking forward to in the next few years?
- Think of a time when you had to make a tough decision. What steps did you take, and how did you choose the best option?
- How do you usually cope with change? Do you embrace it, or do you take time to adjust?
- How do you think your routines will change in this new chapter of life?
- What is a challenge you think you might face, and how would you like to handle it?
- How do you feel about leaving behind familiar places or routines?
- What is one thing you would like to focus on or improve in this next stage?
- How do you feel about meeting new people? What are you hoping for in new friendships?
- How do you handle feelings of uncertainty when starting something new?
- What kind of support or encouragement do you find most helpful when you're adjusting to change?
- How do you think you will stay connected to your family and friends during this new stage of life?
- What are some values or personal goals you want to carry forward with you as you transition?
- How has your perspective on friendships, family, or school changed as you have grown?
- What is something you are hoping to accomplish or become as you start this new journey?

## 6. Trauma

Aim: To explore reactions to traumatic events, grief, help-seeking

### Ice Breakers

- Who or what helps you feel safe when things get overwhelming?
- What are some small things you do to feel better on a tough day?
- What is a memory or thought that brings you comfort when you are feeling low?
- How do you remind yourself of positive moments when you are having a hard time?

- Is there a quote, song, or story that gives you strength during difficult times?
- What is something someone has done to cheer you up when you were feeling down?

### Deepening Conversations

- Who can you talk to about a traumatic event?
- What's one thing you wish people understood better about what you are going through?
- How do you feel about talking openly about tough experiences? Does it feel easier with certain people?
- What is a small step you have taken to cope with a difficult experience, and did it help?
- How do you feel when others ask if you are okay? Do you find it helpful or overwhelming?
- What are some things you wish you could tell yourself during hard times?
- What is something you have learnt about yourself through tough experiences?
- How do you take care of your mental health on days when things feel really hard?
- Who has been a helpful presence in your life, offering support when you needed it?
- Is there a way you prefer people to approach you when you're feeling down or hurt?
- How do you cope with feelings of loss, and is there anything that gives you peace?
- What role does forgiveness (of yourself or others) play in moving forward from difficult times?
- What does asking for help mean to you, and do you find it easy or difficult to do?
- How has experiencing hardship changed the way you view yourself or others around you?
- What's one belief or value that has helped you stay strong through difficult times?
- How do you handle feelings of guilt or regret, and what do you wish people understood about that?

## **Appendix C: Facilitative Tips**

### 1. Setting the stage

- Set structured time
- Agree on ground rules

### 2. Know yourself

- Reflect on personal beliefs
- Reminder to suspend judgment

### 3. Facilitate actively

- Watch body language
- Be present
- Summarise, Paraphrase, Clarify, Probe (**Annex A**)

### 4. Be prepared for tense or emotional moments

- Know how to diffuse emotions (**Annex B**)
- Be comfortable with silence or tears
- Give space

### 5. Reflect

- Get student to reflect after session
- Teacher to also reflect on how the session went

## Annex A – Facilitative Questions

### 1. Summarise

- **Purpose:** To restate the main points the student has shared, ensuring understanding and allowing the student to feel heard.
- **Prompters:**
  - "So, what I'm hearing is that you're feeling... Is that right?"
  - "To sum up, it sounds like you're saying... Does that capture it accurately?"
  - "Let me make sure I understand. You're mentioning... Is there anything else you want to add?"

### 2. Paraphrase

- **Purpose:** To rephrase what the student said in the teacher's own words, showing comprehension and encouraging the student to continue.
- **Prompters:**
  - "It sounds like you're saying that... Is that correct?"
  - "If I understand correctly, you feel that... Is that what you mean?"
  - "So, in other words, you're thinking that... Would you say that's accurate?"

### 3. Clarify

- **Purpose:** To ask questions that help gain a clearer understanding of the student's perspective or emotions.
- **Prompters:**
  - "Could you tell me a bit more about...?"
  - "When you say [specific word or phrase], what do you mean by that?"
  - "Can you explain what you mean by... so I can understand better?"

### 4. Probe

- **Purpose:** To encourage deeper reflection and provide an opportunity for the student to explore their thoughts or feelings further.
- **Prompters:**
  - "What do you think might have led you to feel that way?"
  - "How do you think this situation has affected you?"
  - "What do you think would help you manage this situation?"
  - "Could you give me an example of what that experience was like for you?"

## Annex B – Diffusing strong emotions

### **1. Stay calm and composed**

- Keep a calm demeanour to create a stable, safe environment for the student.

### **2. Acknowledge their feelings**

- Validate their emotions by saying things like, "It's okay to feel this way," or "I can see this is really important to you."

### **3. Provide physical space (if needed)**

- Offer the student some space, physically or metaphorically, if they seem overwhelmed. Don't crowd them and let them know they can take a moment.

### **4. Use a gentle, soothing tone**

- Lower your voice and speak softly to help the student feel more at ease.

### **5. Offer a pause in the conversation**

- Allow the student to pause and collect themselves by saying, "Take your time. We can continue whenever you are ready."

### **6. Encourage deep breathing**

- Gently guide the student to take a few deep breaths with you, which can help calm strong emotions.

### **7. Provide a tissue or water**

- Offer tissues or water as a simple, compassionate gesture that shows understanding and care.

### **8. Avoid over-analysing the situation**

- Don't push for explanations of why they feel a certain way; let the student share as much or as little as they want.

### **9. Normalise emotional expression**

- Reassure the student that emotions are natural, saying something like, "Many people feel this way sometimes."

### **10. Be mindful of body language**

- Use open, non-threatening body language. Avoid crossing your arms or looking distracted, which can seem dismissive.

### **11. Avoid judgemental responses**

- Avoid phrases that might minimise their experience, like "It's not that bad." Instead, show empathy. Try saying "I can't imagine exactly what you're going through, but I'm here to listen if you'd like to share more", or "It sounds like this is really hard for you. I'm here to support you however you need."

### **12. Ask open-ended questions (when appropriate)**



- When the student is ready, ask open-ended questions to encourage them to share more, like "Would you like to talk more about what is on your mind?"

### **13. Offer words of comfort**

- Use comforting phrases like, "I'm here for you," or "You're not alone in this."

### **14. Encourage small steps in sharing**

- Gently ask, "Is there a part of this you feel okay talking about?" to ease them into expressing their feelings.

### **15. Guide them to grounding techniques**

- Suggest focusing on physical sensations (like touching a desk) to help them feel grounded.

### **16. Validate their strength in being vulnerable**

- Affirm the courage it takes to express emotions, saying something like, "It takes strength to share these feelings."

### **17. Remind them they are in a safe space**

- Reassure the student that the space is safe for expressing themselves and that you are there to listen.

### **18. Focus on listening more than talking**

- Actively listen without interrupting or offering solutions unless they seek advice.

### **19. Suggest writing or drawing their feelings**

- Offer them paper to jot down thoughts or draw if speaking feels too difficult at the moment.

### **20. Let them know it is okay to not have all the answers**

- Reassure them that it's okay to feel confused or unsure, as emotions are often complex.

### **21. Follow up later**

- Check in with the student afterward to see how they are feeling and if they need additional support.