

How do I handle sensitive issues and what are my responsibilities?

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*"Reading, Talking and Thinking About Mental Well-Being"*

*"How do I handle sensitive issues and what are my responsibilities?"*

*Linda Millar, Teacher's Resource Author, Well Aware Series:* When looking at addressing the subject of mental health with students you may be asking, "What exactly is my role as a classroom teacher? How do I know when I need to get some help? And what do I do when sensitive issues come up in the classroom?" Clearly, this is a question for the experts so let's see what Dr. Pat Carney has to say.

*Dr. Patrick Carney, Author of Well Aware: Developing Resilient, Active, and Flourishing Students:* In terms of the teacher's role with different levels of mental health and distress, teachers in a wonderful role in that relationship with children just like parents are. So you have a child that's kind of nervous about getting on the bus, well, you encourage them to do so and the more that they sort of face their fears by gently nudging them, you know, pushing that envelope a little bit and bit by bit getting a child used to something. That's what the teachers, we expect them to do. We don't want a referral for every child with an anxiety indicator, right? Many children don't like to stand up and answer questions. So the whole school experience should be children having opportunities to speak publicly, to put their hand up, and the more the teachers smiles and the more the child is asked questions that the child can answer, you know, they overcome anxieties. Now, if you get to a point, though, that a child has a lot of difficulties and the difficulties are causing a fair bit of distress and avoidance of important things, it may be time to make a referral, the teacher may need to talk to the school team and consider the resources they have in the building.

*Linda Millar:* Once again, you know your students best but don't hesitate to call upon your school support team if you have questions.

The Well Aware series deals primarily with everyday stresses that our children experience but some of the texts do approach more sensitive issues such as dementia, bipolar disorder, suicide, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. It's important to note that the intention is never to teach students to diagnose mental illness. That is something that only qualified medical personnel can do. Instead, the goal is to provide support to you and your students, to teach vocabulary and social-emotional skills necessary so that if they ever encounter a mental health issue of this nature, they will know how to respond, how to reply, and how to think about it.

When the text includes a character with a specific illness, the focus is not on the illness but on helping students to learn how to cope, to be resilient, and to flourish in spite of the challenges they may encounter.

*Christine Bejjany, Principal, W.I. Dick Middle School:* I think, as educators, we're constantly looking for appropriate ways to address mental health issues and trying to find those authentic common areas that we can talk about. It's sometimes really challenging. As an opportunity was presented here for us to use the resources over the last couple of

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days in our school, the Well Aware series has been really helpful in that it has allowed our students to have a common resource that they could look at, a story, a series of information to look at to know about what's happening in other people's lives and to give a common topic so that students can talk about their own feelings and the stresses and the concerns that they have but put into a context that is not as personalized for them.

As educators, I think sometimes we struggle with knowing how do we broach these topics and this series has provided us with an opportunity to look at a way to get in, to have real conversations with students about real-life issues.

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