



**Project  
AWARE  
Ohio**

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**ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION**

# **Mental Health First Aid Kits**

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**How to Build a First Aid Kit with Tools  
and Supports for Mental Health and  
Behavioral Health Concerns**

## **Mental Health First Aid Kits**

Just as a medical first aid kit contains tools to cope with accidents, emergencies and unforeseen events, a mental health first aid kit offers tools and support for students and adults who need help coping with mental and behavioral health concerns. Some schools have used toolkits to help students who are experiencing traumatic stress.<sup>1</sup> Project Aware Ohio offers this guidance on some useful practices, including mindfulness meditation and stress management, as well as conversation starters school personnel can use to guide those with mental health struggles through the coping process.

## **Mental Health in Schools**

The American Psychological Association's 2018 *Stress in America* report<sup>2</sup> suggests the youngest generation of Americans is experiencing more stress than previous generations and is more likely to report poor mental health. Half of the respondents of a recent survey felt they do not cope with stress effectively and could have used more emotional support for mental health issues during the past year. Mental illness is very common in our students. On average, one in six students is coping with some form of mental illness.<sup>3</sup>

Stress and mental illness have a direct impact on students' physical and mental health, hampering their well-being and abilities to succeed in the classroom. There are many methods we can use to bolster students' mental health and well-being in general. These include schoolwide initiatives<sup>4</sup> and school climate.<sup>5</sup> But some students' circumstances may require more individual attention and support.

Many strategies can help moderate the effects of stress or other emotional struggles. Key methods for bolstering resilience in students are modeling effective coping strategies and creating safe environments where students' emotional needs can be met and supported.<sup>6</sup> For example, some evidence-based coping strategies are seeking support, problem-solving and relaxation.<sup>7</sup> One strategy that especially shows the ability to decrease negative mental health symptoms and bolster well-being is mindfulness training.<sup>8</sup> Researchers have found that even a brief mindfulness activity, such as meditation aimed at drawing a student's awareness to the present moment without judgment or evaluation, consistently decreases negative emotions.

## **Purpose of a Mental Health First Aid Kit**

A mental health first aid kit provides tools school personnel can use to help children and adults use positive coping strategies to buffer stress, negative emotions and other mental health problems.

Many tools in the kit focus on methods for practicing mindfulness. Researchers have found that consistent use of mindfulness decreases stress, emotional arousal and depression symptoms and bolsters emotional well-being, self-compassion and even engagement in school.<sup>9</sup> Distractions

and grounding exercises<sup>10</sup> also may help provide short-term relief from physical symptoms resulting from anxiety or unwanted emotions. On the other hand, “conversation cubes,” which prompt children to talk about their feelings, and stress management tips help reframe negative emotions and build an arsenal of coping skills for the future.

### **Who Can Build and Use A Mental Health First Aid Kit?**

Anyone with an interest in helping bolster children’s or adults’ mental health can build a mental health first aid kit. Like medical first aid kits, mental health kits offer tools people of all skill and knowledge levels can use. Individuals who are trained to help in mental health crises, such as counselors, as well as teachers, school nurses or PTA members can use toolkit items to help distract children from distressing emotions. They can facilitate the mindfulness exercises included in the toolkit to help children reduce negative emotions and focus on the present moment, and they can employ conversation cubes and other prompts to provide social support to children who need it.

### **What Goes in a Toolkit and How is it Used?**

Resources in a mental health first aid kit include those that help guide children and adults through mindfulness meditation or grounding exercises, which help them root themselves in the present. The toolkit also can include balls and fidget toys that can distract the individual and engage his or her senses during emotional experiences. It can include cards and guides containing tips on stress management, as well as unique, creative ways to take a break when one is needed. Finally, the kit includes information on crisis resources to be used in the case of a mental health emergency.

The goal of a mental health first aid kit is to provide tools and resources for a variety of mental health struggles that children and adults might face in their daily lives. For instance, a child who is anxious and upset could use the fidget and puzzle toys as a distraction from negative emotions. Once that child is calm, school personnel could use conversation cubes to build rapport and offer social support, creating a basis for an adult to help the child talk through his or her emotions. Afterward, the adult could help the child develop strategies to use when the child feels himself or herself getting upset or overwhelmed. At this point, the adult could help the child through a short mindfulness exercise to relax and refocus on the present. Like medical first aid kits, mental health first aid kits can help children and adults cope with a variety of unexpected circumstances, regardless of their previous experience and knowledge of mental health and coping strategies.

Here are ideas for what can be included in a mental health first aid kit to address different scenarios:

<b>Mental/Behavioral Health Concern</b>	<b>Strategy to Help</b>	<b>Item Suggestion(s)</b>
Overwhelming emotions	Distraction	Fidget toys, stress balls and puzzle toys
	Relieving physiological response	Grounding exercises, guides for deep breathing, essential oils
	Social support	Conversation cubes
	Increasing mindfulness	Mindful writing prompts, grounding exercises
Stress	Tips for handling and reducing stress	Stress management cards
	Taking a break	50 ways to take a break printout
	Increasing mindfulness	Mindful writing prompts, grounding exercises
Bullying	Provide social support	Conversation cubes
	Normalize the idea that bullying is not okay	Anti-bullying stickers
Mental or behavioral health crisis	Contact local crisis lines and other resources to handle	Contact information for crisis lines and local resources

## Web-based Resources

Individuals also can take advantage of web-based resources for guidance on how to incorporate mindfulness and stress reduction in schools and help students and adults cope with mental health struggles. The following resources can be used in tandem with the toolkit items or individually.

Stop, Breathe & Think - <http://www.stopbreathethink.org/meditations/mindful-breathing>

Mindfulness for Teens - <http://mindfulnessforteens.com/resources/>

Learning to Breathe - <https://learning2breathe.org/>

Association for Mindfulness in Education - <http://www.mindfuleducation.org/>

Mindful Schools- <https://www.mindfulschools.org/>

Healthychildren.org from the American Academy of Pediatrics -  
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/For-Teens-Creating-Your-Personal-Stress-Management-Plan.aspx>

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