



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Mental health for all

There's **more** to me.

**UNMASKING IN THE CLASSROOM:
A TOOLKIT FOR TEACHERS**



CMHA Mental Health Week



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INTRODUCTION

Dear teachers,

Your jobs are so important. Teaching is already a high-stress job, and beyond academics, you are on the frontlines of your students' well-being. You see their struggles, their hidden emotions and mental health difficulties, and the burdens they sometimes carry behind their smiles.

You play a crucial role in supporting your students' mental health, even if you are not an expert. The good news? You don't have to be. With the right tools, you can help unmask the emotions your students may be hiding and create a classroom environment where they feel safe to express themselves. In fact, you are likely already fostering positive mental health even if you don't realize it.

This year, CMHA's Mental Health Week is all about the practice of masking. Masking is when we hide or suppress something about ourselves from others. We may use a mask to hide emotions, personality traits, behaviours, or symptoms.

By recognizing the power of your daily interactions and learning how to integrate simple, supportive practices, you can help students remove the metaphorical masks they wear, or explore the complexities of their masks, allowing them to feel seen, heard, and understood. You can help create an environment where young people better understand and appreciate their shared and different experiences. And as you do, you might just find that unmasking mental health by talking about it openly improves your own teaching experience as well.

From May 5 to 11, 2025, join us in celebrating Mental Health Week by exploring the concept of masking and talking about the masks we wear, stigma and mental health in ways that are supportive and affirming.



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WHAT IS MASKING AND WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

People mask for a lot of different reasons, including social acceptance, economic necessity, fear, or to escape violence and oppression.

When asked how we're doing, many of us respond with the socially acceptable "I'm fine" or "I'm good" even though we might be having a bad day or struggling with something bigger. People with mental health issues often wear that "I'm fine" mask every day. Many people present an idealized image of their life on social media—that's also a form of masking. Over time, constant masking — whatever the reason — can lead to mental and physical health concerns.

A SAFETY PLAN: PROMOTING SAFETY IN OUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MASKING AND MENTAL HEALTH

IMPORTANT: Please do not ask your students to disclose about their mental health.

Students should never be asked to self-disclose any mental health problems or symptoms they are experiencing, even if the goal is to promote learning and self-awareness. Talking about our mental health places us in a vulnerable position, and there can be a greater risk for harm.

As much as teachers try to make the classroom a safe environment, disclosing mental health problems, symptoms of illness, trauma, or a substance use problem can cause stress for the person telling their story, to other students, or to the teacher. It can expose the student in question to bullying or psychological or physical violence from other students.



If a student discloses:

Disclosures may occur during classroom discussions or in discussing course content. Here is a safety plan to assist you when a student discloses about their mental health.

When a student discloses a mental health concern in a classroom setting, it is essential to respond with care, sensitivity, and awareness of confidentiality. There is a fine line between wanting to normalize discussions about mental health and respecting a student's privacy and confidentiality.

By responding with empathy, privacy, and the right level of support, you can help a student feel heard and guide them toward appropriate resources while maintaining a safe and respectful classroom environment.

Here's how you might handle a disclosure:

1. Stay calm and supportive

- Maintain a neutral and compassionate expression.
- Avoid showing shock, concern, or discomfort, as this may make the student regret sharing.
- Use a calm, steady voice.
- Use nonverbal cues to convey quiet reassurance and support, helping to acknowledge a student's feelings while maintaining the flow of the classroom.
 - A simple nod and a calm expression can acknowledge the student's feelings without drawing too much attention.
 - A quick gesture (like a thumbs-up or a reassuring hand over the heart) can show care without inviting further discussion in front of others.

2. If there is a safety risk

If a student indicates thoughts of self-harm, suicide, or harm to others, follow school safety protocols immediately.

3. Maintain privacy and boundaries

Maintaining privacy and boundaries is essential.

- Do not ask probing or detailed questions in a classroom setting.
- If possible, lower your voice or step closer to the student, responding quietly so the conversation remains between you and the student.
- “That sounds really important. Let's talk more after class, okay?”

4. Affirm and acknowledge

Show empathy by acknowledging their feelings.

- “That sounds really important, and I appreciate that you are sharing. Let's talk about this in a place where we can focus and make sure you get the support you need.”
- “I hear that this is something big for you, and I want to make sure we can talk about it properly. Let's connect after class, okay?”



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- “That must be really tough. I want to make sure you have the right support—can we talk more privately later?”

5. Offer support, not solutions

It is not your job to “fix” your student’s problem. Avoid giving personal advice. If appropriate, reassure them that help is available and that they don’t have to go through it alone.

- “I’m not a counselor, but I want to help. Let’s connect you with someone who can support you.”

6. Redirect without dismissing

You can subtly steer the conversation away from personal disclosure:

- “I really appreciate you opening up, and I want to make sure we handle this in the best way possible. Let’s find a time to chat one-on-one.”
- “Thank you for sharing that. Let’s check in after class so we can make sure you get the support you need.”

7. Normalize seeking support

Use the opportunity to normalize talking about mental health and the need for support, without probing about the student’s personal experience. By balancing affirmation with redirection, a teacher can create a safe space while maintaining appropriate classroom boundaries.

- “Lots of people experience challenges like this, and there are people who can help. I want to make sure you have the right support—

let’s talk about this after class and find the best next step together.”

- “You are not alone in this. There are people who can help, and I’d love to connect you with someone who can really support you. Let’s talk after.”

8. Follow up privately

After class, gently approach the student and ask:

- “I wanted to check in about what you mentioned earlier. Would you like to talk more or talk to someone else?”
- “I care about what you shared, and I want to make sure you have the right support. Let’s chat about next steps.”

9. Check in later

Check in with the student privately at a later time. This helps build trust and shows that their well-being matters.

- “I just wanted to check in. How are you doing today?”

10. Follow school protocols and connect to resources

Regardless of the guidance above, always follow your school’s protocols!

- If in keeping with your set protocols, after class, refer the student to the appropriate school support (counselor, social worker, or mental health professional).
- If required by policy, document the disclosure and inform designated staff members while maintaining confidentiality.





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ACTIVITY 1: THE FEELINGS MASK

(For Children Ages 6-12)

OBJECTIVE

Help students understand the difference between what we show on the outside vs. what we feel on the inside.

MATERIALS

Paper plates or cardstock, markers, crayons, glue, craft supplies

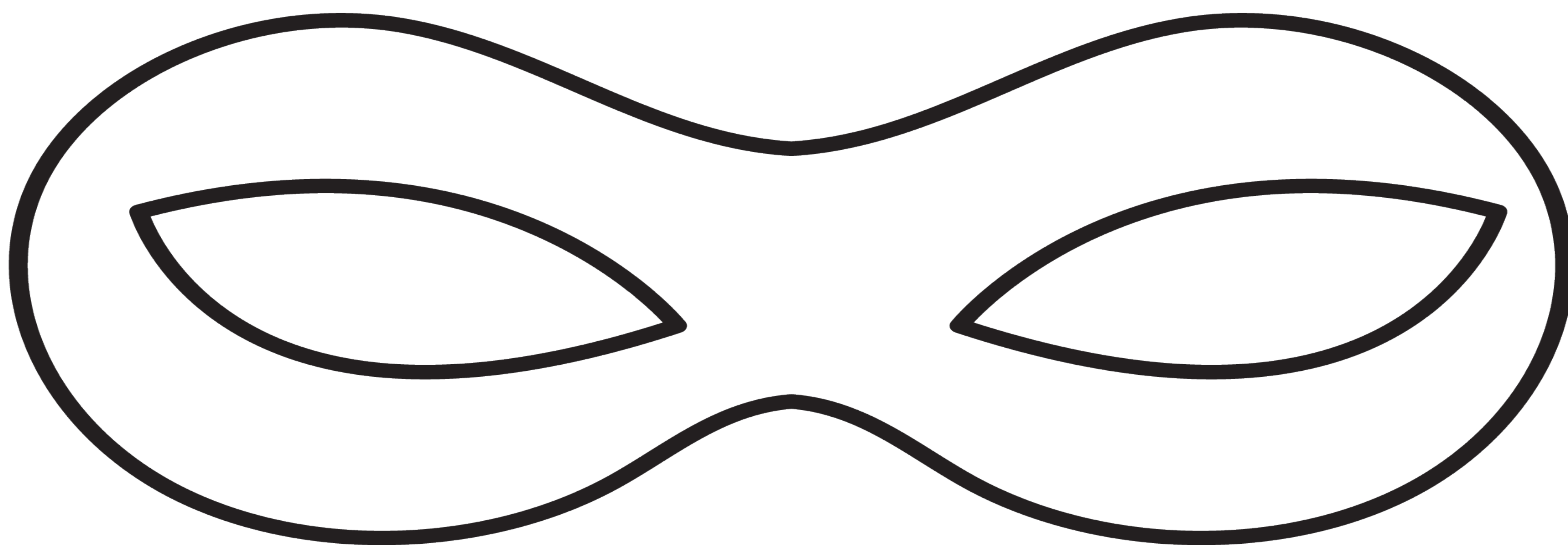
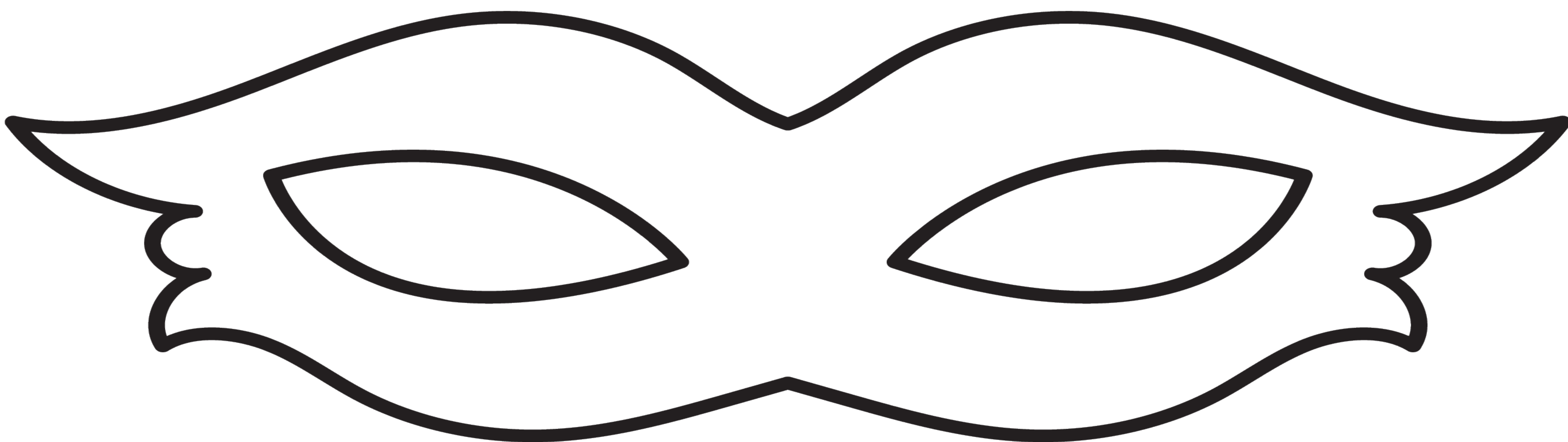
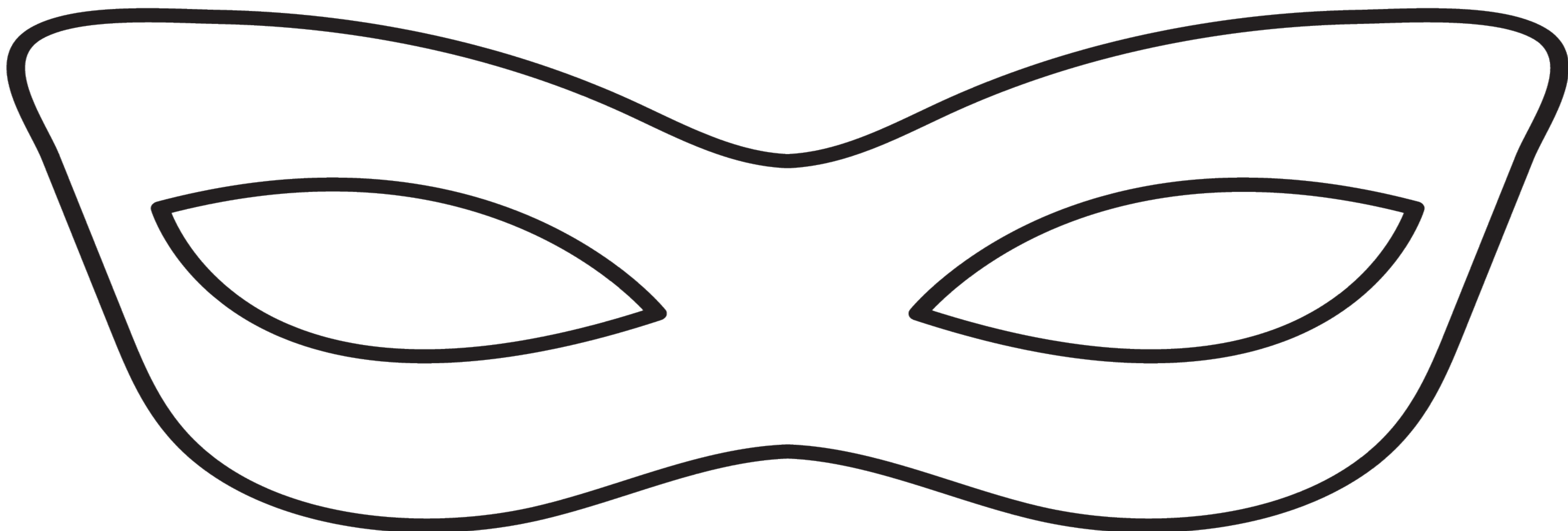
STEPS

- 1** Have students decorate a mask that represents how they are feeling in that moment. Students may either use the template below or draw their own. To use the template, print on cardstock paper and cut out.
- 2** On the back of the mask (or another sheet of paper), have them draw, or use words to describe how they really feel inside.
- 3** Facilitate a discussion:
 - Why do you think people hide their feelings?
 - If someone shows signs that they are struggling or reach out to you, how do you think we can support?
 - Who are safe people to talk to about our feelings?

*Note: It is strongly recommended that you **do not** ask your students to share with the class why they created their mask or what they wrote about their feelings. See above about disclosure in the classroom and how to enhance safety with your students when having conversations about mental health.*



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ACTIVITY 2: WHY DO WE MASK?

(for both younger and older students)

OBJECTIVE

Teach students about systemic barriers that might lead people to mask and prevent them from getting the supports they need.

MATERIALS

Scenario cards (examples below)

STEPS

- 1** Set up the goal of the lesson:
Sometimes, there are bigger reasons that make it harder for people to talk about their feelings or ask for help. These are like rules, expectations, or ideas in society that make it harder for some people to get the support they need. (For older students: these could be called “Systemic barriers.”)
- 2** Read different scenarios to the class or create your own. Here are some scenarios you can use:

Fear and shame of having a mental illness

Aisha has been experiencing symptoms of severe depression. Some mornings, she feels so tired and hopeless that she doesn't want to get out of bed. But she doesn't want others – especially her friends at school – to know this about her, so she posts a lot of happy selfies and reels of herself on social media with hashtags like #gratitude and #livingmybestlife

Too much to handle

Emma loves school, but lately, she feels overwhelmed with homework, activities, and family responsibilities. She's exhausted and feels like she can't keep up. She started harming herself in places on her body that she can cover up so that no one notices.

Feeling left out

Leo doesn't have many friends at school. He eats lunch alone and feels invisible. He wishes someone would invite him to play, but he feels like no one cares about him so he stays quiet.



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Family stress

Jaden's parents argue a lot at home and sometimes their arguments become physical. He feels anxious all the time and has trouble sleeping. He doesn't know who to talk to so he shuts down.

Big changes

Mia and her family moved to a new city. She misses her old school and friends. She feels sad and lonely and maybe that she is going through a depression, but she pretends she's okay so that her parents don't feel bad about uprooting her.

Being bullied

Omar is being teased at school because of his accent. He feels embarrassed and doesn't want to come to school anymore. His mom tells him he has to go, so he tries to speak less at school and make himself invisible so that the other kids don't notice him as much.

Gender-based oppression

Sophia is transgender and uses the pronoun they/them. At school, some of the other kids have been bullying them by commenting on their hair and clothes and making negative comments when they use the all-gender washroom. Sophia tries to put on a brave face to hide the pain this is causing but it's affecting their feelings of self-worth and safety at school.

Not feeling "enough"

James doesn't think he's good at anything. He compares himself to others and feels like he will never be as smart or talented as his classmates, so he has started teasing other kids at school.

(For older students) Grief and loss and substances

Carlos's grandmother, who was very important in his life, has died. He feels very sad and confused. He and his friends start drinking and he finds it numbs some of the pain he is feeling.

It's important to recognize that using substances to numb feelings can mask the deeper emotional pain and prevent someone from finding healthier ways to cope.

Discussion point: How do you think Carlos might be feeling? What are some other ways he could cope with his sadness and confusion that might help him feel better in the long run?





Here are some general conversation starters for reflecting on the above scenarios along with discussion or reflection points:

Mental health is just as important as physical health. Sometimes, people put on a happy face even when they're struggling inside. It's okay to not be okay, and seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness.

- For younger children: Have you ever felt like you were pretending to be happy, even when you didn't feel that way? What do you think you could do if you felt that way?
- For older students: What are some ways we can support each other when we don't feel okay, even if we look fine on the outside?

Social media can often make life seem perfect, but it doesn't always show the full picture. If you're struggling, there are people who want to listen and help.

- For younger children: are you using social media? Have you ever seen a picture or video online and thought someone was always happy?
- For older students: How does social media impact our perception of happiness, and why is it important to remember it's not always a reflection of reality?

Feeling sad or anxious is part of being human, but when those feelings don't go away, it's okay to reach out to get help.

- For younger children: What are some things you can do if you feel sad or worried and need someone to talk to?
- For older students: Why might people hesitate to ask for help when they're feeling overwhelmed? How can we create spaces where it's easier to talk about these feelings?

Life can feel overwhelming when you're balancing school, activities, and family. It's important to know you don't have to go through it alone.

- For younger children: Have you ever felt like there was too much to do?
- For older students: What are some healthy ways to manage stress, and how can we better support each other during tough times?

Stress can feel heavy, and sometimes people cope in unhealthy ways. There are other ways to handle those feelings, like reaching out or taking care of yourself.



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- For younger children: What are some things you like to do when you feel upset or stressed? How can these activities help you feel better?
- For older students: What are some healthy coping or self-care strategies you've heard about or used when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed?

If you or someone you know is struggling with stress or tough emotions, there are resources available. Everyone deserves to feel supported.

- For younger children: Who are some people you can talk to if you're feeling upset or worried?
- For older students: What resources are available to us at school or in our community, and how can we use them when we need help?





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ACTIVITY 3: KINDNESS MATTERS

(for younger children)

OBJECTIVE

By discussing and replacing hurtful or judgmental messages with kind, supportive ones, the activity encourages children to treat others with compassion and respect, regardless of what they may be going through.

ACTIVITY SETUP:

- Hand out sticky notes and markers to each child.
- Ask them to write down or draw something that they have heard people say that makes someone feel bad or unfairly treated.
- Examples could be:
 - “Only weak people ask for help”
 - “It’s not okay to talk about being sad”
 - “Boys don’t cry”
 - “People who need help are different from me”

STEPS

- 1** Ask the children to put their sticky notes on the “Kindness Matters” wall.
- 2** Discuss how each message could make someone feel.
- 3** Ask the children to come up with a kinder, more supportive message to replace each unkind message.
- 4** End with a discussion: *What are some kind things we can do to make sure everyone feels accepted and supported, even if they need help with their feelings or something else?*



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ACTIVITY 4: BREAKING DOWN THE STIGMA WALL

(for older students)

OBJECTIVE

Help students identify and challenge harmful stereotypes about mental health.

MATERIALS

Large poster or sticky notes

STEPS

- 1 On a big sheet of paper, write **“Stigma Wall”** at the top.
- 2 Introduce the concept of stigma.
Suggested definition: Stigma means when someone is treated unfairly or made to feel bad because of something about them, like how they look, where they come from, or how they feel. It’s like if someone was made fun of because they needed help with something, like their feelings or a problem they’re going through. But remember, everyone needs help sometimes, and no one should be treated badly for that.
- 3 Have students write down common myths or hurtful messages about mental health on sticky notes (e.g., “People with mental illness are dangerous,” “Talking about feelings is weak,” “Only adults have mental health problems”).
- 4 One by one, read the messages and encourage discussion to counter these stigmatizing messages. Replace the stigmatizing messages on the wall with the new messages.
- 5 End with a discussion: *How can we help stop stigma in our school and community?*