

TEACHABLE BOOKS

Student Well-Being: Mental Health and Empathy

By Rebeca Rubio

GRADE LEVEL: Middle (7-10)

THEME: Student Well-Being

SUB-THEMES: Mental Health and Empathy

LEARNING FOCUS

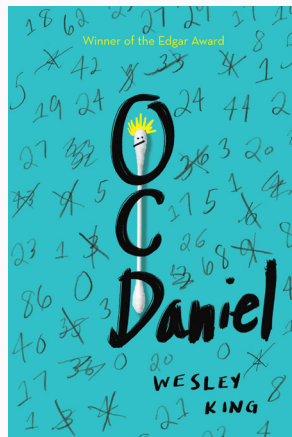
Removing Mental Health Stigma and Developing a Culture of Empathy

The focus of this unit of study is to develop a broader understanding of the impact of mental health on youth and to use literature as a vehicle for deepening our collective empathy.

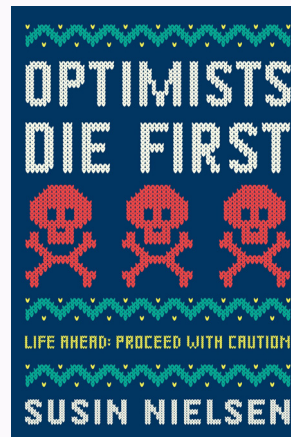
FEATURED BOOKS



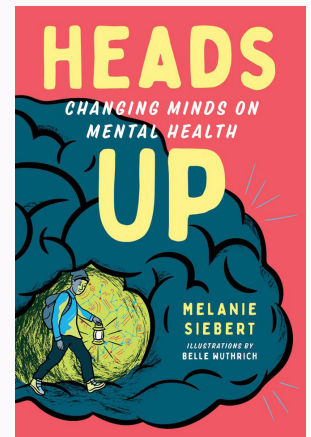
Fire Song by Adam Garnet Jones
(Annick Press, 2018)



OCDaniel by Wesley King
(Paula Wiseman Books, 2016)



Optimists Die First by Susin Nielsen
(Tundra Books, 2017)



Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health by Melanie Siebert,
illustrated by Belle Wuttrich
(Orca Book Publishers, 2020)



LEARNING EXPERIENCE

MINDS ON PROVOCATION

Students will begin by activating prior knowledge and perceptions about mental health issues in current society. This can be done as a carousel, with questions on paper posted around the room and students moving in groups from question to question.

- What is wellness? What are the many aspects of being healthy?
- What words have you heard (positive or negative) that are commonly used to describe mental health? What is the impact of this language?
- What are some stigmas or stereotypes around mental health?
- How can youth with mental health struggles be supported? What helps them? What resources are available online or in your community?
- Generate questions that you have about mental health and wellness.

These posters will remain in the room for the duration of the study, as they will be referenced and added to throughout.

In their same groups, students will then explore a variety of narratives and videos from [Bell Let's Talk](#). Students are invited to select 3-5 narratives/videos and consider the following questions:

- What common experiences, themes or ideas do you see repeating in the narratives?
- What information can you extract from the narratives to answer the questions in the initial brainstorm?
- What new questions can you add to the initial brainstorm?

READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

This book study will be done as literature circles. Inviting students to choose from selected novels allows all members of the class an entry point into the big ideas to be explored. It increases engagement because it allows students to select novels that match their reading level and interests. It also allows for smaller, more intimate discussions about the texts, the themes and the literary elements. The class will work together to develop big ideas and conceptual understandings, and students will do smaller discussions and novel work in their literature circle groups.

Unit Guiding Questions:

- What is well-being?
- How can we overcome stigmas associated with mental health?
- What would be the short- and long-term effects of all of us striving to understand each other? How can we develop and sustain a culture of empathy?
- How can one individual's experience reflect the struggles of the community? How can literature deepen our understanding of others and develop our collective empathy?



Pairing fiction and non-fiction is a good strategy to gain both factual knowledge and personal insight into wellness and mental health struggles.

In their literature circle groups, students will read the chapter “Tell Me What’s Wrong: Common Diagnoses” from *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*. They will discuss the following questions and chart their observations:

- What have you learned about the disorder highlighted in your novel?
- How does this new information challenge or confirm the stereotypes, narratives and hurtful language explored in the *Minds On Provocation*?
- What parallels can you find between this new information and the experiences of the protagonist in your novel?

Next, students will read the chapter “The Road to Wellness: On Surviving and Thriving” from *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*. In their literature circles, they will discuss the following questions and chart their observations:

- What strategies for wellness are presented in this reading?
- Does the protagonist of your novel make use of any of these strategies? Why or why not?
- What role does empathy play in supporting mental health? You may draw from either the novel or the chapters from *Heads Up*.

MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

The focus of this unit of study is to have a broader understanding of the impact of mental health and to use literature as a vehicle for developing and deepening our collective empathy.

Students are now invited to consider the following question: How can you create awareness and understanding of mental health challenges and how can you be an ally to those with mental health struggles?

Students can select from several options to demonstrate their understanding in the following ways:

Advocate: There has been a surge of advocacy to increase mental health awareness, reduce the stigma and provide support (i.e. Bell Let’s Talk, HeadsUpGuys.org, etc.). Create your own public service announcement to educate youth about the importance of wellness and mental health, and to provide local and national resources to support youth struggling with their mental health.

- A print announcement (in paper, poster or digital form).
- A video announcement, perhaps using the [green screen app](#) by Do Ink.
- A social media campaign to educate others of the challenges in dealing with mental health disorders.

Share: Write a reflection of your own personal experiences with mental health struggles in your life. How have your understandings of mental health and wellness shifted through your own experiences and through this study? What insights can you provide to others who also struggle?

Create: Write a short story that develops the themes of wellness, mental health and empathy as seen through the novels and class discussions. You may choose to add a “missing chapter” in the novel, emulating the writer’s style and developing the character’s story and growth.

Write a spoken word poem that develops the themes of wellness and empathy as seen through the novels and class discussions. Resources can be found at [MasterClass](#) and [League of Canadian Poets](#), or from TED Speaker and Poet [Shane Koyczan](#).

Research: Research one of the mental health disorders highlighted in the novels: OCD, depression, trauma, etc. Select reliable sites that provide the medical understandings, but also real-life testimonials. Create a podcast where you share the reality of the disorder as well as the stereotypes that often accompany it. Shed light on the truth. Do you have another idea? Share it with your teacher.

REFLECT AND CONNECT

What have you learned about youth mental health and the power of empathy?

Students will select one of the following quotes and write a short journal entry connecting it to their own experience and this unit of study.

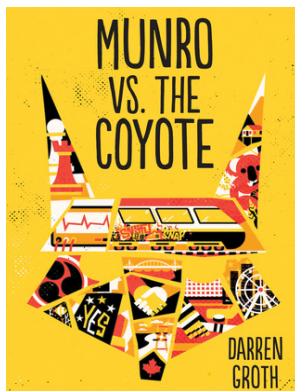
“I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.”
— Maya Angelou

“Empathy is about standing in somebody else’s shoes, feeling with his or her heart, and seeing with his or her eyes.” — Daniel H. Pink

“Empathy has no script. There is no right way or wrong way to do it. It’s simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting and communicating that incredible healing message of ‘You’re not alone.’” — Brené Brown

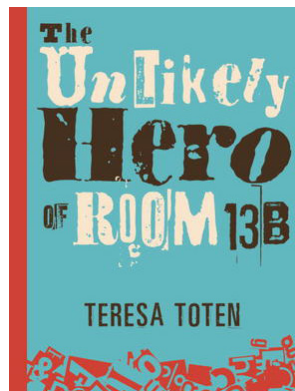
ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS AND BOOK LISTS TO SUPPORT THESE SUB-THEMES

Junior (4-6)

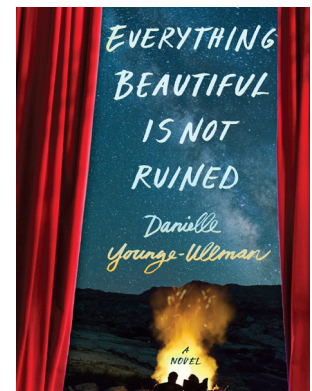


Munro vs. the Coyote by Darren Groth (Orca Book Publishers, 2017)

Middle (7-10)



The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B by Teresa Toten (Doubleday Canada, 2013)

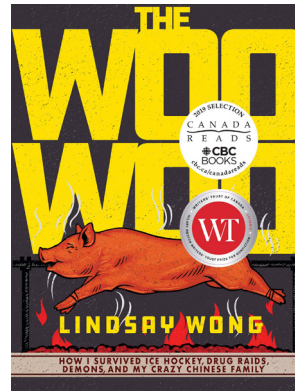


Everything Beautiful Is Not Ruined by Danielle Younge-Ullman (Viking, 2017)

Secondary (11-12)



Calvin by Martine Leavitt
(Groundwood Books, 2015)



The Woo Woo: How I Survived Ice Hockey, Drug Raids, Demons, and My Crazy Chinese Family by Lindsay Wong (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018)

BOOK LISTS

- CBC provides comprehensive lists of YA and adult resources to support mental health. For example: [15 Canadian books to read about mental health](#) and [17 Canadian books to read for World Mental Health Day](#)
- The Canadian Children's Book Centre has curated a [list](#) of books for K-12 on the theme of kindness and empathy.
- 49th Shelf has curated [resources](#) for K-12 on the theme of health and safety.

MORE RESOURCES

- Melanie Siebert, author of *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*, speaks about mental health and finding your voice on [Bibliovideo](#).
- Mental health resources for youth and teachers:
 - [TeenMentalHealth.org](#) is a site that provides understanding, networking and support to teens, their families and their educators.
 - [Anxiety Canada](#) contains resources of simple, step-by-step instructions on how to deal with symptoms related to specific anxiety disorders as well general strategies for anxiety management.