



## TEACHING THROUGH BOOKS

# MENTAL HEALTH

BY DEREK ACORN, RENÉE SHAH SINGH, AND JONELLE ST. AUBYN

## LEARNING FOCUS

Stigma around mental health continues to prevent those who are trying to cope from getting the help that they need. In addition, there are many barriers to accessing services that deal with mental health issues. Identifying mental health issues and having knowledge of resources and supports can help address this serious and growing problem among young people today.

**Identity:** How does reading this text help us to understand the importance of good mental health? How does it help us build our vocabulary in order to share our feelings with others without stigma and/or shame?

**Skills:** How does reading this text help us recognize and communicate effectively about our mental health concerns in ourselves and others around us?

**Intellectualism:** How does reading this text help us learn how to positively manage mental health issues in ourselves and/or support others around us who might need help?

**Criticality:** How does this text help us to develop a shared vocabulary and strategy to communicate about mental health issues and identify the disparities that exist when accessing mental health services? How does this text help us unpack power dynamics in regards to getting mental health support?

**Joy:** How do these texts help us find joy and healthy, long-term, and sustainable strategies for dealing with mental health issues?

**THEME:** Diversity

**SUB-THEME:**

Mental Health

**GRADE LEVELS:**

Elementary (K-3)

Middle School (4-8)

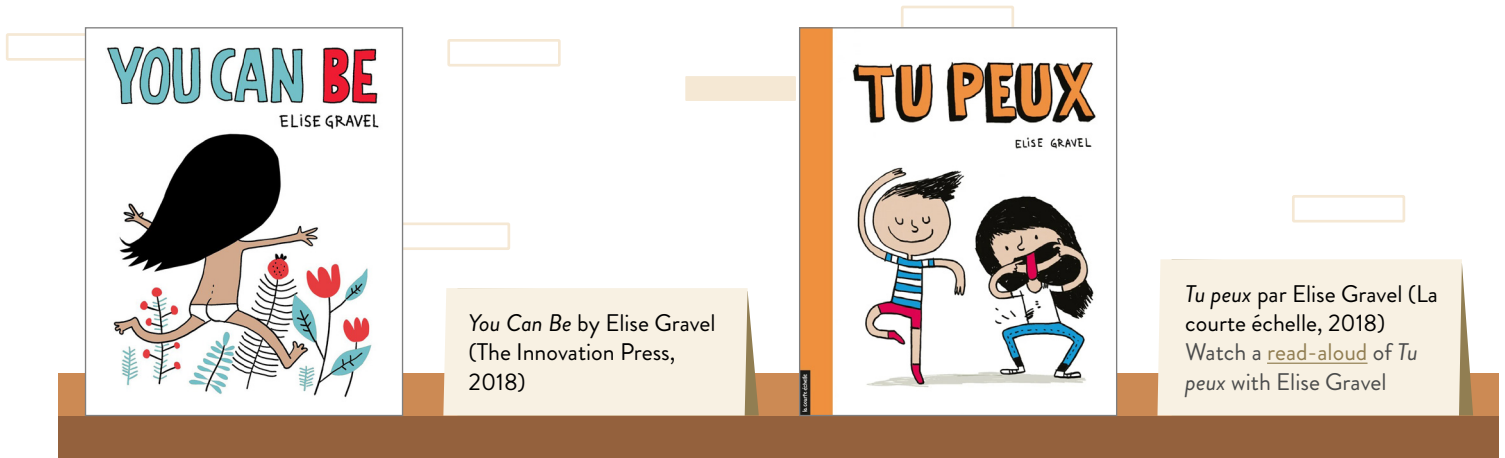
High School (9-12)



# MENTAL HEALTH | ELEMENTARY LEVEL

BY RENÉE SHAH SINGH (SUITABLE FOR FRENCH IMMERSION)

## FEATURED BOOK (BILINGUAL EDITIONS)



## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

### MINDS ON PROVOCATION

Using a human-shaped outline, students will write the different things that a person can be (this will be written on the outside of the outline) and the various emotions the person could be feeling (this would be written on the inside of the outline). These words could be in English or in French. This could be done on: chart paper, a [Padlet](#), or over the document camera.

## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

Read through the French and/or the English version of the featured book together. Have students act out some of the words or ideas that may be unfamiliar. Translate these word(s) for the students and have them practice using each one in a sentence. After reading the story, ask students if there are any emotions or actions they would like to add.

Students will create a [tableau](#). They will pick an action or emotion from the book and act it out. Other students will take turns trying to guess what the student in “tableau” is trying to portray. The goal is to have students become more comfortable with the shared vocabulary.





## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

Students can complete any or all of the activities below. They can use the [resources \(French version\)](#) provided by Elise Gravel to learn about her drawing style.

1. Students make [paper fortune tellers](#) with a different emotion/action on each separate section. Students can then play with others in the class and act out the emotion/action that is revealed through their fortune teller.
2. In a [four square note](#), students come up with their own “Je peux...” sentences using their new vocabulary.
3. Students create a list of words they would like to use to describe themselves but that they don’t know how to say in French. They must find out the French translations for these words. Students can: ask a friend, ask an adult, or find the word online. These words can be added to a visual dictionary that the students make.
4. Students can create playing cards with the various emotions/actions. They would need to make two of each. Students can then play a matching game, Go Fish, or another game together to practice the new vocabulary.

## REFLECT AND CONNECT

Play the [music video](#) for “Les émotions” by Alain Le Lait to connect to the abilities and emotions showcased in the book.

**Community Circle Discussion:** We all have dreams, we all have many abilities, and we all have feelings. After reading the featured book and reflecting on your own abilities and feelings, as well as listening to the abilities and feelings of classmates, how do you feel about who you are and what you can do? Knowing that we share so many feelings, how can you be a friend to a classmate? Share a time when your ability was encouraged and praised by a family, friend, or teacher. How did you feel?

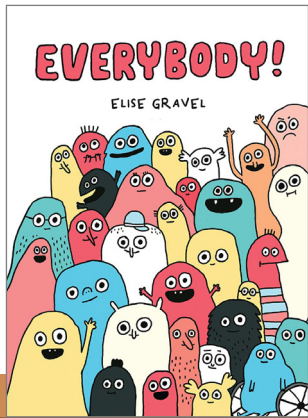
Each student will create an outline of themselves. Ask them: “What words can you use to describe yourself—who you are, or how you feel?” Encourage students to use the new vocabulary.

To aid students in building vocabulary, the new words can become part of a word wall or personal dictionary that can be referred back to when needed.

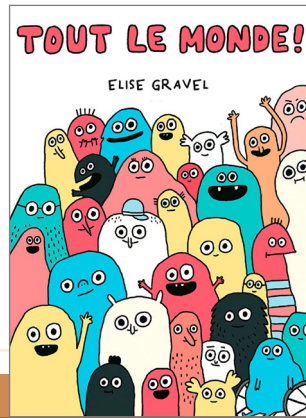




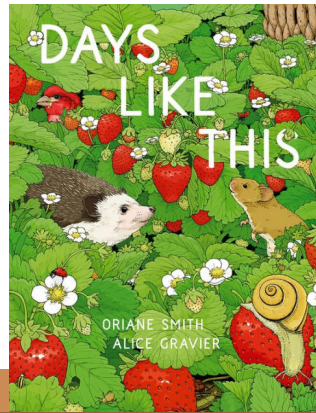
## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME (BILINGUAL EDITIONS)



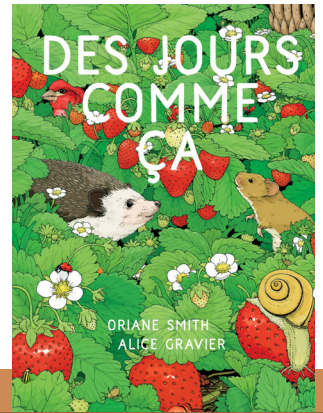
*Everybody!* by Elise Gravel  
(North Winds Press, 2021)



*Tout le monde!* par Elise Gravel  
(Éditions Scholastic, 2021)



*Days Like This* by Oriane Smith,  
illustrated by Alice Gravier (Milky  
Way Picture Books, 2022)



*Des jours comme ça* par Oriane Smith,  
illustré par Alice Gravier (Comme  
des géants, 2022)



# MENTAL HEALTH | MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

BY DEREK ACORN

## FEATURED BOOK



*Small in the City* by Sydney Smith  
(Groundwood Books, 2019)  
Also available in FR: *Perdu dans la ville* par Sydney Smith (Comme des géants, 2020)

## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

### MINDS ON PROVOCATION

The teacher will begin by noting that being present in the moment, noticing our surroundings, finding safe spaces, and taking joy in small things all contribute to our mental health. Have students consider the following questions:

- What brings you joy?
- How do you take time to notice your surroundings?
- What are your favourite places?
- What sights, sounds, smells, and feelings make you feel comfortable?

Record answers on chart paper or whiteboard, or use digital tools such as [Mentimeter](#) or [word clouds](#) to create a visual representation of student responses.

Display the cover of *Small in the City* using a book camera, or use a photo and project a large version of the cover. Discuss the following:

- What do you notice?
- What do you wonder?
- What could the title mean?
- How do you think this book might relate to being present, noticing our surroundings, finding safe spaces, or taking joy in small things?





## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

Before reading the book, discuss strategies for reading a picture book. You may want to focus on:

- The style of the text (short sentences, adjective use, etc.)
- Use of images to tell the story
- Cohesion of text and image

Read the picture book to the class. During the first reading, have students simply listen and observe the images closely. Take time to discuss anything students notice in the text or images. Use of a book camera or other means of enlarging the book is preferable.

After the first reading, ask the class:

- Who is the character in the story giving advice to?
- Have you ever been lost? What did it feel like?
- Do you think being lost would be scary for a pet?

As you read the second time, have students note any examples they observe of being present, noticing our surroundings, finding safe spaces, or taking joy in small things. After reading, have students share their notes with the class. Create a list of their examples.

Choose several images from the book. After the second reading, organize students into small groups and distribute one image to each group. Have the groups analyze their image by noting what they see, what they think they might smell, hear, or feel, and what small joys they might find in that image. Each group can share their image and ideas.

## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

Choose one, or all, of the following activities:

- Have students create an illustrated map that leads from school to their home. Students should label and annotate any joyful places, safe places, or important landmarks. For an added connection, use the art style from the book.
- Take a walk in the community and have students note what they see, hear, smell, and feel. Emphasize being present in the moment and taking in our surroundings. Using the key words they noted during the walk, students will create a *Small in the City* art piece that reflects their experience. For an added connection, use the art style from the book.
- Alternatively, have students take photos during the community walk of small joys that they observe. Have them write their own *Small in the City* guide for community members using their photos.



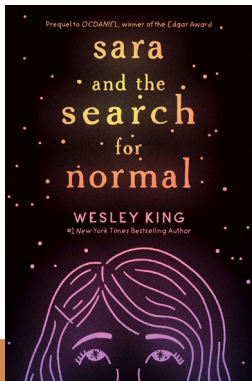


## REFLECT AND CONNECT

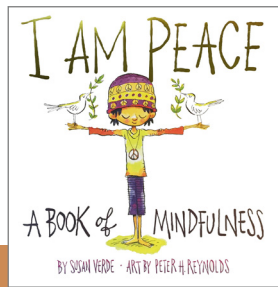
What have you learned about the connection between mental health and being present in the moment, noticing our surroundings, finding spaces, and taking joy in small things?

Students will write a journal entry detailing their response to this question, and how they can incorporate those ideas into their daily lives to maintain their mental health.

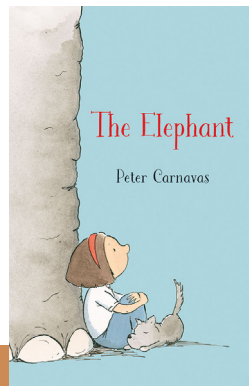
## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME



*Sara and the Search for Normal*  
by Wesley King (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2020)



*I Am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness* by Susan Verde, illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2017)  
Also available in FR: *La méditation c'est pour moi : un livre sur la pleine conscience* par Susan Verde, illustré par Peter H. Reynolds (Éditions Scholastic, 2018)



*The Elephant* by Peter Carnavas (Pajama Press, 2020)



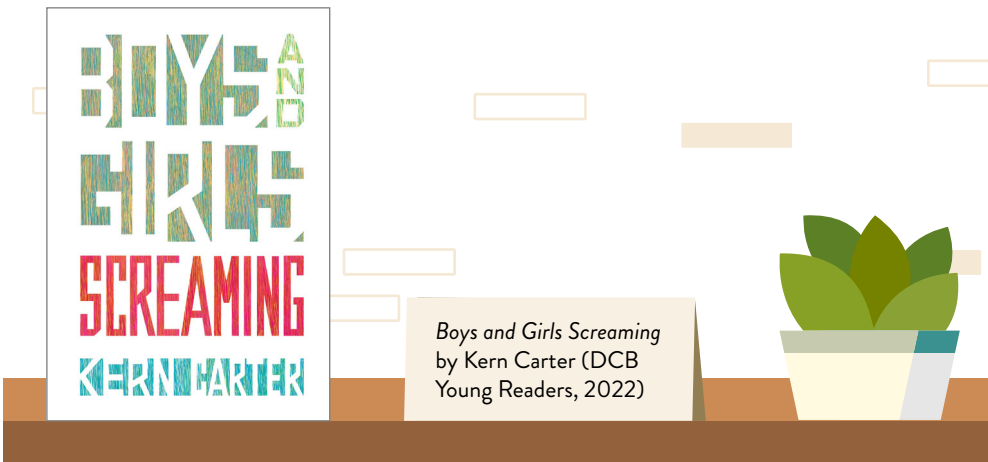
*What If? From Worries to Wonder* by Doretta Groenendyk (Acorn Press, 2020)



# MENTAL HEALTH | HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

BY JONELLE ST. AUBYN

## FEATURED BOOK



## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

**Important Note:** Discussions about mental health issues may be challenging for some students. Please ensure that the proper supports are in place before starting this lesson.

### MINDS ON PROVOCATION

In small groups of 2-3, students will read the article [Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics](#). Then they will answer the following questions based on the article and their own thoughts and beliefs:

1. Why do you believe so many young people suffer from mental health issues?
2. Why are the treatment rates so low for youth? For example, do you think they are not seeking help or do you think that services are not available for youth?
3. Why are wait times to get assistance in places like Ontario so long?
4. What are some notable gender issues when it comes to teenagers and mental health? Why do you think these differences exist?
5. What are the benefits of investing in a mental health strategy for young people?

As students move toward reading the book, they should continue to think about these questions in relation to the characters in the novel.







## READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

**Part 1:** In this novel, the characters attempt to deal with their mental health issues as a group, without the assistance of adults or professional help. Students should identify the positive and negative consequences of the characters trying to handle these issues on their own.

**Part 2:** Every character in the novel has their own struggles that might impact their ability to seek and obtain assistance in dealing with their mental health issues. Students should make a chart listing each of the characters and, based on the Minds On Provocation activity, identify potential barriers the characters have to accessing mental health services, along with advantages for them to seek help.

## MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

The Mental Health Commission of Canada has identified [six strategic directions](#) that need to be taken in order to address mental health issues in youth across Canada. (View [The Mental Health Strategy for Canada: A Youth Perspective](#) for more details.)

Based on what they have read in the book about the mental health issues that the characters had to deal with, students will critically analyze whether or not they feel that this strategy is a good one. Students should identify what they like about the current strategy and what they feel is missing or is not adequately addressed. For example, students could look at whether factors such as gender or socio-economic status are considered, or whether religious, ethnic, cultural, or LGBTQ2S+ identities are taken into account.

Either individually or within small groups, students will choose one of the six strategic directions and develop an action plan on what they think should be done to ensure that the direction is properly met. If they felt that things were missing in the current strategy, students can add to or modify their chosen direction in order for it to have a more meaningful impact on youth dealing with mental health issues. Each mental health strategic direction should be geared toward teens, and take into account the information learned in both the Minds On Provocation activity and the novel.

## REFLECT AND CONNECT

The presentation of the action plan can be done in one of the following formats:

- Short film
- Podcast
- Slide deck
- TED Talk

The presentation needs to be informative and engaging. Students should also be sure to include connections to local and community organizations that will help meet the needs

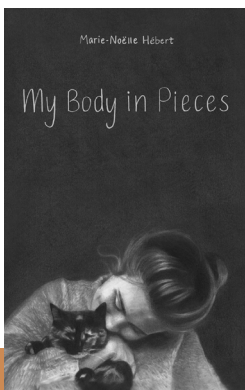




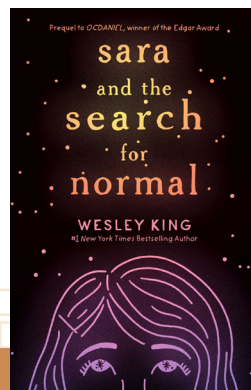
of the directives. They can even supply a list of contacts, websites, phone numbers, etc. for students who need mental health support, as well as for parents who want to get mental health support for their child.

After the presentations are complete, students should reflect on what they have learned that can be used to help themselves or someone else dealing with a mental health issue. This reflection can be based on their own research or what they learned from watching another student's presentation. The reflection can be done in the form of a journal entry using [Blogger](#), or they can record themselves using [Flip](#) to share privately with their teacher. Teachers may also choose to use an [exit ticket](#) to determine the impact this lesson has had on their students.

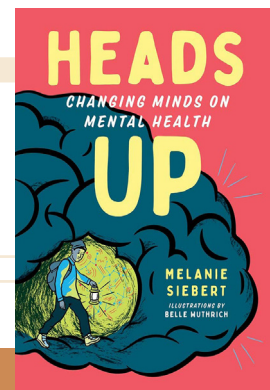
## ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME



*My Body in Pieces* by  
Marie-Noëlle Hébert  
(Groundwood Books, 2021)  
Also available in FR:  
*La grosse laide* par Marie-  
Noëlle Hébert (Éditions  
XYZ, 2019)



*Sara and the Search for Normal* by  
Wesley King (Simon & Schuster  
Books for Young Readers, 2020)



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



## MORE RESOURCES FOR ALL GRADE LEVELS

- [Canada is experiencing a youth mental health crisis](#): This news segment explores reasons why the youth mental health crisis is so dire in Canada.
- [Child and Youth Mental Health](#): A variety of resources to learn more about youth mental health, along with handouts for parents on how to support their children dealing with mental health issues.
- [J'aime Aider](#): French PDF book by Elise Gravel about being helpful, with different action words to build vocabulary.
- [Mental Health Literacy](#): Find information and resources for teens, parents, and educators on this website.
- [This teen wants his mental health ideas to become Canadian law](#): CBC Kids article about a teenager's ideas for mental health in Canada.
- [Youth Mental Health Crisis](#): This video helps parents/caregivers and children to understand the challenges regarding mental health that are specific to young people.

