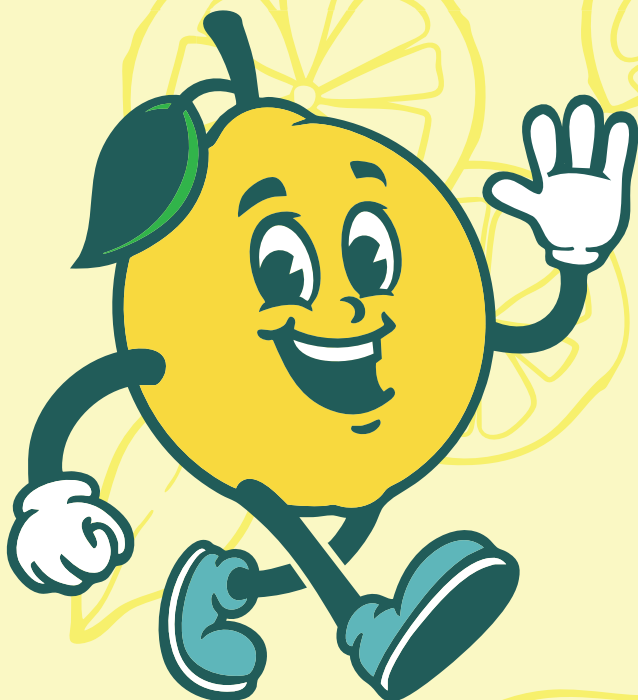
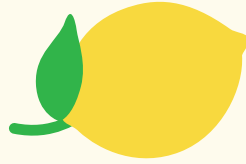


Squeeze the *School Day*

A Month-Long Guide to Prioritizing
Mental Health for Schools





About Momentous Institute

Momentous Institute, founded by Salesmanship Club of Dallas in 1920, is a leading mental health organization that exists to strengthen children, families, and communities. By working alongside and within larger systems, we are cultivating a world of emotionally thriving people reaching their full potential.



About This Guide

Mental health is not a state of being, but a state of action. Having devoted over 100 years to treating the mental health of children and families, we have seen the profound impact that various challenges can have on our mental health and wellbeing. Conversely, strong mental health allows us to manage our emotions, form healthier relationships with others, work towards our goals and contribute to our communities.

This guide is built upon decades of evidence-based research in neuroscience and the leading mental health theories and practices. It is designed to find simple ways to implement these research-backed practices into a school setting.

This guide can be used during Mental Health Awareness Month in May or any time during the year. It can be used by principals, school leadership, existing school committees, parent organizations or any staff member interested in leading the school through this work. In this guide, you'll find a focused month-long effort with action items for each week designed to support the mental health of the adults in the school. In turn, strong adult mental health supports children as well. This guide is interactive and reflective in nature, allowing you to adapt the information and strategies into your unique setting. Ultimately, we hope this guide supports you as you work towards prioritizing and strengthening mental health among your team.

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Bonus Videos

Each week contains one video highlighting the link between the topic and mental health. These videos feature educators and mental health professionals from Momentous Institute. Use these videos to send at the start of each week, highlighting the theme, link to them in a newsletter or online platform, or share them at a team meeting to bring the topic to life. Look for the video icon throughout the guide.



Movement plays a vital role in supporting mental health. Engaging in physical movement stimulates the body's natural stress-relief systems, releasing endorphins that improve mood and reduce anxiety.



WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

When we exercise and move our bodies, the brain releases feel-good neurotransmitters such as endorphins, dopamine and serotonin. Because of this, exercise has been linked to decreased anxiety and depression. In fact, research shows that 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise three days a week can improve mental health outcomes.

SCIENCE OF MOVEMENT

When we engage in movement, our muscles, joints, and cardiovascular system work together to improve overall health. Any type of physical activity, from workouts to walking, triggers the release of endorphins, often referred to as "feel-good" hormones, which reduce stress and enhance mood. Movement also increases blood flow to the brain, boosting cognitive function and improving memory. Regular exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression by balancing neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine. Additionally, movement promotes better sleep, improves energy levels, and strengthens the body's resilience to stress, all of which contribute to improved physical and mental health.



MOVEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Video Link: bit.ly/mental-health-movement

Movement and exercise strengthen the brain-body connection by activating the receptors that send information to the brain from the body. Often when we think about exercising, we think about it in terms of what it can do for our physical health. It is also important to recognize how exercise affects our mental health.

According to neuroscientist Dr. Wendy Suzuki, movement and exercise are a “bubble bath for the brain”. Her research indicates that exercise increases mood, focus, attention and reaction time. Even a single dose of physical activity increases dopamine, noradrenaline, serotonin and endorphins; dopamine and serotonin stay high for up to two hours following physical activity. This single dose of exercise also improves a person’s focus and ability to perform cognitive tasks following the exercise. Regular exercise over time also helps improve mood, boosts motivation to keep working out, promotes a better body image, and enhances memory. Dr. Suzuki says, “Every drop of sweat counts for your brain.”

Example Movement Strategies



WALK MINDFULLY

Encourage everyone to turn a regular movement, such as walking to the work room or picking up students from specials, into a mindful walk. During a mindful walk, you pay attention only to the present moment, focusing on the movement of your body without distractions.



WALK AND TALK

Take a regularly scheduled conversation, meeting or appointment and turn it into a walking session. Need to have a conversation with an admin, counselor or teacher? Walk through the halls or even outdoors to chat, if appropriate.



PLAYGROUND TAKEOVER

Why should the playground only be for kids? Swap an after-school meeting with scheduled fun. Make it as simple as trying to swing across the monkey bars or play a game of soccer or kickball, or go all out and turn it into a staff field day with games and activities.



MOVE IT

Bring in a yoga or other movement coach to lead a workday session. Bonus points if it becomes a recurring offering.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When and where do my teachers and staff have natural opportunities to move during the day?

How can we incorporate movement into existing routines (e.g., meetings, transitions, planning periods)?

What types of movement opportunities would be most beneficial and realistic for our staff?

What should we consider in creating a culture that encourages and normalizes movement without adding extra stress?

BRAINSTORM MOVEMENT STRATEGIES HERE

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REFLECTIONS ON WEEK ONE



Nature offers a calming environment that reduces mental fatigue, enhances focus, and fosters a sense of peace.



WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Spending time in nature provides a connection to the world around us, giving us a break from the demands of daily life and helping restore emotional balance. In essence, nature offers a healing space that supports mental health and emotional resilience.

SCIENCE OF NATURE

Brain science supports the idea that time spent in nature can reduce stress, enhance cognitive function and improve mental health. Studies show that people tend to perform better on tasks that require focus after spending time in nature, and that time in nature can enhance working memory. Exposure to nature also activates the parasympathetic nervous system which counters the body's natural "fight or flight" stress response.



NATURE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Video Link: bit.ly/mental-health-nature

Exposure to green spaces has been linked to improved mood, greater feelings of calm and overall enhanced well-being. Research also shows that being in natural environments can decrease levels of the stress hormone cortisol, lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety. Nature encourages mindfulness, which can improve focus and mental clarity. This is true for any place where a person can interact with nature, whether it's a park, public garden or a backyard.

Limited access to nature? There are still many ways to experience its benefits. You can bring elements of nature into your environment by incorporating plants, natural light, or even nature sounds through recordings. Simply taking time to step outside, even in urban environments, can offer a refreshing change of scenery and a break from the stresses of indoor life. If outdoor access is limited, practicing mindfulness or meditation with nature imagery, such as visualizing peaceful landscapes, can help replicate the calming effects of nature. The key is to find small, meaningful ways to reconnect with the natural world, no matter where you are.

Example Nature Strategies



GROW IT

Provide each team member with a small plant or seed so that they can grow their own flower. This activity brings nature to everyone.



RECESS FOR ALL

Calibrate schedules for a week to allow everyone access to recess time at least once. Even better if teachers and staff can join in on the fun, not just monitor behavior.



OUTDOOR CLASS OR MEETING

Allow teachers to host at least one class outdoors during the week, supporting them with facility or other needs. Or, pick one staff meeting on the calendar and shift it outdoors.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What access to nature is available to our team?

How frequently does our team access nature (go outdoors, have a window view, etc.)?

What opportunities do we have in our facility for our team to access nature?

BRAINSTORM NATURE STRATEGIES HERE

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Food is the fuel of the body, and when we care for our body, we care for our physical and mental health. It's important to remember that food is cultural and communal, and nutrition can vary depending on communities, access and more. But paying attention to nutrition can be an important step in managing mental health.



WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Research shows that eating a well-balanced, nutrient-rich diet can lead to improved mental health. However, our on-the-go lifestyle often impedes our ability to eat nutritious meals. This is especially true for mid-day meals when we are focused on deadlines and work priorities, leaving many people to eat quickly, unhealthily, or skip meals altogether.

SCIENCE OF NUTRITION

There is a lot of science around food, hunger and how nutrients affect our physical and mental health. Let's look at some facts about the brain and the gut.

The body needs six types of nutrients to function: fats, water, minerals, proteins, vitamins, and carbohydrates. The primary source of energy for the brain comes from carbohydrates.

The gut is the body's second largest sensory organ. With a network of nerves that is as large and complex as the brain's, the gut does more than just waste management. When the brain is experiencing a stress response, the gut will reroute resources and energy to the brain causing digestion to slow down and loss of appetite.



NUTRITION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Video Link: bit.ly/mental-health-and-nutrition

Nutrition plays a key role in mental health, as the foods we eat can directly impact our brain and mood. Studies have shown that diets rich in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains and complete proteins can lead to a lower risk of depression than diets consisting of refined foods and sugars. A nutrient-rich diet helps improve brain function and supports the production of chemicals in the brain that affect mood.

A healthy gut is also important, as it produces neurotransmitters like serotonin, which help regulate mood. Eating fiber-rich foods and probiotics can support gut health and, in turn, improve mental well-being. Staying hydrated is also important, as dehydration can lead to fatigue and affect mental clarity. In short, what we eat can greatly influence how we feel physically, mentally and emotionally.

Example Nutrition Strategies



MINDFUL EATING

Provide everyone with a chocolate kiss, encouraging them to use mindful eating skills, such as paying attention to the sound of the wrapper, the smell, the texture, etc.



SNACK BREAK

Provide staff with a nutritious lunch or afternoon snack. This encourages people to nourish their body with nutrient-rich food. Consider whole-grains, fresh fruits or vegetables, cheese, meat and/or healthy dips.



DRINK UP

Provide everyone with a reusable water bottle. This is a sustainable option to encourage hydration.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When or if we provide food at meetings or events, how nutritious are the offerings?

Are nutritious options available nearby? If not, what resources can we provide?

Where do team members eat? What kind of environments do our break rooms provide? Could any changes be made to improve them?

BRAINSTORM NUTRITION STRATEGIES HERE

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REFLECTIONS ON WEEK THREE



When employees feel connected to their colleagues and the organization, they are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and committed to their work. A strong sense of community leads to a shared sense of purpose and pride, which can affect the mental health of students and the overall school culture.



WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Community in the workplace is essential because it fosters a sense of belonging, collaboration, and mutual support, all of which contribute to a positive and productive work environment.

A sense of community also helps shape a positive school culture based on trust, respect, and shared values. This contributes to higher morale and employee retention, and positively impacts children.

SCIENCE OF COMMUNITY

When we spend time with others, our brains release oxytocin. Oxytocin is often called the love hormone because it can make you feel calm and connected. Oxytocin has also been shown to help lower blood pressure and cortisol (the stress hormone).

Socializing helps strengthen neural networks leading to improved memory and cognitive function.

The part of the brain that is responsible for identity building, the medial prefrontal cortex, is activated when people interact with each other. This suggests that people actively define themselves in relation to others.



COMMUNITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Video Link: bit.ly/mental-health-community

Relationships are a critical component of mental health. We spend our lives in relationships with others, and in these relationships, we develop and maintain our mental and emotional wellbeing. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Epidemic of Loneliness report, lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Safe relationships are not just nice to have, they are essential to our mental and physical health. Research studies show that relationships are one factor that affects us across the lifespan, not just for our mental wellbeing but our lifelong physical health as well. Humans are innately social beings and our brains are wired to connect with others. Neuroscience and social research support the idea that safe relationships are one of the most critical components of overall health.

Safe relationships are the buffer that support our ability to regulate our emotions, engage with others in a healthy way, bounce back from challenges and contribute to our communities in a meaningful way.

Example Community Strategies



COMPLIMENT CHAIN

Pair up staff members and encourage them to send a note or short message sharing one thing they appreciate about their assigned colleague.



HALLWAY HIGH FIVES

Pick one day of the week and designate it "Hallway High Five Day". Every time someone passes another in the hallway, encourage them to give a high five.



SELFIE STATION

Encourage people to take photos with others and share them to a shared folder or use a photo printer to create a wall display.



STAFF VS. STUDENTS

Organize a fun game or activity and play adults vs. students. This encourages teamwork and fun.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are we doing to make everyone feel welcomed, included and valued as part of the team?

How do we build community among smaller groups, such as grade-level teachers, admins, front office staff, etc.?

What opportunities are available throughout the school year for team-building activities and cross-department collaboration?

How often are staff given the opportunity to interact with each other? In what settings and under what conditions?

How do we celebrate achievements and contributions?

BRAINSTORM COMMUNITY STRATEGIES HERE

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REFLECTIONS ON THE MONTH, GOALS FOR NEXT YEAR