

Mental health resources for educators in Vietnam

Cat Pham

According to UNICEF, around 15–30% of youth in Vietnam experience mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and academic stress. These problems not only affect academic achievements, they also impact students' overall development. For example, a study in Hanoi reported that 21.4% of female students and 7.9% of male students have seriously thought of suicide in the past 12 months (Le et al., 2016). In this context, mental health literacy for teachers and students is the key to creating a healthy school environment, where all students have opportunities to grow mentally and physically.

What is mental health and why should educators care?

Mental health is not as simple as not having a mental illness, it is the ability to balance emotions, thoughts and behaviours in everyday life. However, in Vietnam, mental health is still misunderstood, and people who are living with mental health difficulties often face judgement and discrimination from other people. This makes it harder for students and families to find support, making young people feel like they have to face academic stress, school bullying and family conflict all on their own. Just like physical health, mental health is also important for students' well-being and development.

As teachers interact with students everyday, they play an important role in students' mental health care. If equipped with tools to identify early signs of mental health difficulties, teachers would be able to support or guide their students on how to find professional help. Additionally, mental health literacy can be very important for teachers to learn how to take care of their own mental health, reduce stress and increase resiliency to pressure from their teaching job.

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The Ministry of Education and Training has created policies to support students' mental health since 2005. This has created opportunities for research and innovations in mental health support for students and teachers in Vietnam such as:

RECAP-VN

RECAP-VN is the first school-based mental health program to be tested in Vietnam. Teachers play an important role by using effective classroom management techniques, emphasizing positive reinforcement and creating a supportive environment. This program, developed in Hanoi and Danang, has shown significant improvements in students' social skills and mental well-being. RECAP-VN also focuses on increasing mental health literacy for teachers to ensure sustainability and effectiveness in addressing mental health gaps in Vietnam.

ACES ProS

ACES ProS is an initiative to support students' mental health based on RECAP-VN. Based on problem-solving therapy, the program equips adolescents with adaptive problem-solving and emotional regulation skills to address common mental health challenges during this critical developmental period. ACES ProS has demonstrated effectiveness in promoting student self-efficacy and resilience, demonstrating that an evidence-based approach can address the mental health needs of Vietnamese adolescents.

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Happy House

Happy House is a school-based mental health program that has been adapted to the Vietnamese context from Australia's Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP). The program is delivered in groups, with activities informed by cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT), and aims to build resilience and coping efficacy to promote positive mental health in adolescents. Studies with 1,084 grade 10 students in Hanoi showed potential for Happy House to reduce adolescent mental health problems and improve school mental health in Vietnam.

Mental Health First Aid for Educators

Mental Health First Aid for Educators, developed by Mental Health Aid 4All, aims to provide mental health first aid knowledge and skills to educators, helping them to support themselves, their students and their colleagues when they encounter mental health problems. This project won the EAN Community Grant in 2023. In 2024, this project hosted three free workshops for 90 educators at three universities in Hanoi and Danang.

EduWell Vietnam

A project sponsored by the ASEAN Social Impact Program at Fulbright University Vietnam and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), EduWell Vietnam equips school mental health care staff with self-care knowledge and strategies to improve mental health. The project hosts a series of workshops on self-care, active listening, developing safety plans for emergency situations and how to refer students to appropriate professional mental health support.

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Through participating in these workshops, mental health care staff are also given the opportunity to expand their networks within the industry, share experiences, learn from each other and improve their professional skills in the long term.

Conclusion and recommendation

Mental health for adolescents in Vietnam is increasingly becoming an urgent issue, requiring attention from not just family but school and society. Programs like RECAP-VN, ACES ProS, Happy House, Mental Health First Aid for Educators and EduWell Vietnam have made encouraging strides in raising awareness and supporting school mental health. However, to achieve sustainable results, there needs to be more collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including education managers, teachers, parents and students.

Recommendation

- **Integration of mental health education into the curriculum**

Schools should integrate mental health content into their official curriculum, through classes or extracurricular activities. This will help students gain a clear understanding of how important mental health is and equip them with self-care skills.

- **Training and capacity building for educators**

Educators should be trained on how to identify and support students with mental health challenges. Programs like Mental Health First Aid for Educators need to be upscaled to other provinces, ensuring accessibility for educators at all levels.

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- **Create school-based mental health support systems**

Each school needs at least one professional mental health staff member. At the same time, schools need to provide easy and non-stigmatizing methods for students to access mental health services.

- **Increase awareness and reduce stigma**

Community media campaigns need to focus on reducing the stigma around mental health and encouraging students and families to seek support when needed.

- **Support research and international collaboration**

Continue to fund and support research on youth mental health and, at the same time, collaborate and learn from other nations' experiences to develop culturally appropriate programs in Vietnam.

Investing in school mental health is an investment into the foundation to build a generation of confident and strong young people who are ready to face any challenges in the future.

