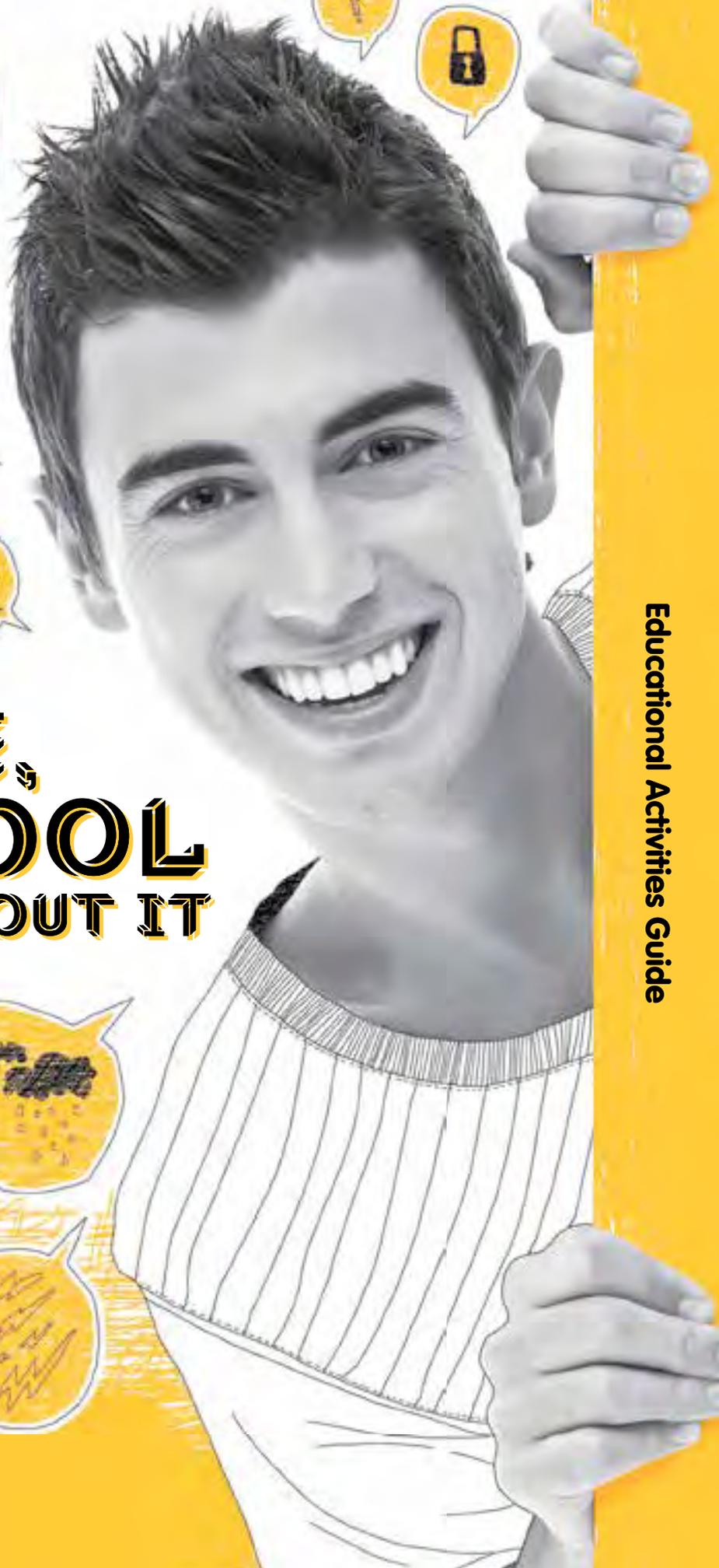




# MY LIFE, IT'S COOL TO TALK ABOUT IT



Educational Activities Guide

**Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec  
and Library and Archives Canada cataloguing  
in publication**

BAZINET, CATHY, 1974-

[Ma vie, c'est cool d'en parler. English]

My life, it's cool to talk about it:  
educational activities guide

Translation of : Ma vie, c'est cool d'en parler.

ISBN 978-2-921948-32-6

1. Students - Mental health - Study and teaching (Secondary) -  
Activity programs. I. Demers, Anik, 1974- . II. Jacques,  
Lucille, 1958- . III. Canadian Mental Health Association.  
Montreal Branch. IV. Title. V. Titre : Ma vie, c'est cool d'en  
parler. English.

LB3430.B3913 2013 371.7'13 C2013-941464-9

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**DISTRIBUTION**

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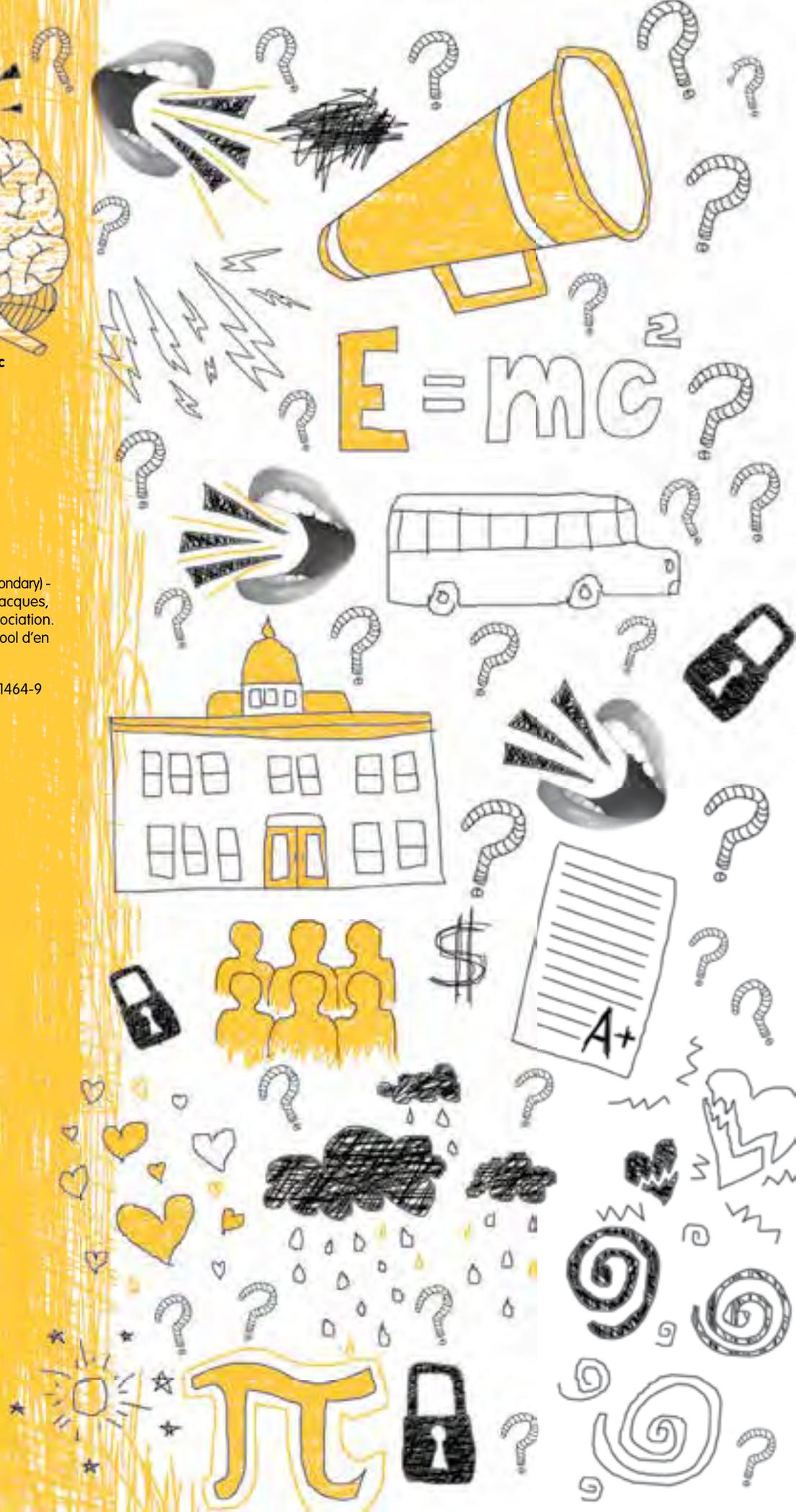
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Website: [www.acsmmontreal.qc.ca](http://www.acsmmontreal.qc.ca)

**ISBN 978-2-921948-32-6**

Legal deposit, 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester 2013  
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec  
National Library of Canada

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# FOREWORD

► **M** *My life, it's cool to talk about it* is a pedagogical tool specifically designed to equip teenagers aged 12 to 18 years to better manage their mental health and maintain good personal balance. Intended for teachers and psychosocial service providers, the guide proposes educational activities that encourage development of personal and social skills such as **self-esteem, stress management** and **problem solving**. The activities also enable students to better understand the notion of mental health and to adopt healthy lifestyle habits.

Moreover, this educational material fosters harmonious interpersonal relationships and encourages students to address problems, break down their isolation pattern and ask for help.

## A unique campaign

*My life, it's cool to talk about it* uses a **flexible modular approach that is easy to implement**; activities range in duration and can be carried out in class, during lunchtime or on special theme days.

The campaign's various components can be **coupled with a broader intervention program** or one that is already implemented in your school.



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# MENTAL HEALTH, IT'S COOL TO TALK ABOUT IT!

**M**ental health involves a balance in all aspects of life, which enhances the ability to enjoy life and deal with challenges that arise. This includes learning better in school, working more productively, forming and maintaining positive relationships with other people, contributing to the community, and performing practical routine tasks relating to personal care, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, recreation and spiritual needs.

Talking about mental health with young people helps them make connections between daily choices and overall well-being. Teaching teenagers to recognize components of a good mental health helps them develop healthy lifestyles and therefore, become equipped to deal with the challenges they will face throughout their lives.

Having good mental health means also being able to think clearly and realistically about yourself and others. Therefore, it can be understood to mean how a person thinks, acts and feels when faced with life situations<sup>1</sup>.

## Adolescence: A period of transformation and metamorphosis

The process of identity construction is not simple; it requires a large amount of information with which teenagers must learn to cope. In this regard, the influence of family as well as social, educational, cultural and environmental influences exercise a certain amount of pressure on young people, who will tend to question them. Some adults can be bothered by behaviours of teenagers, who are often only experiencing emotions specific to their transitory state. It is important to understand that when faced with difficulties, young people are not just being lazy or acting out of ill will, as some adults are quick to assume. They may just be finding it difficult to make the transition between adolescence and the adult world. This is why it is important to show empathy and understanding, and to avoid giving in to the temptation of blaming them for their apparent lack of realism, energy or motivation.

<sup>1</sup> Adosanté.org. *Santé mentale*, [http://www.adosante.org/Sante\_mentale/03.shtml], [page accessed on 23 January 2012].

## When to sound the alarm

Everyone experiences feelings of isolation, solitude or emotional distress at one time or another. These reactions are usually normal and last only a short while. The same applies to teenagers. Most of them go through adolescence without encountering major upheavals and start their adult lives feeling calm and satisfied. However, for some youth, the duration and intensity of feelings of insecurity or distress can seriously impair their academic, social, emotional or cognitive functioning, as well as their capacity to appreciate life. They have many ways of expressing themselves when something is not right: dropping out of school, using drugs and running away, as well as depression, eating disorders and suicidal behaviours are a few examples.

Overall, we should be concerned in the following circumstances: when an teenager no longer wants

to see his or her friends, especially the ones the teen is usually with all the time; finds everyone stupid, starting with himself or herself; loses interest in things that were once a passion; or has poorer grades in school.

Physical health can also be an important indicator. Too much or not enough sleep, constant fatigue or an eating disorder are telling signs of distress. Sudden hyperactivity and exaggerated or forced euphoria can also camouflage an underlying state of anxiety. Such symptoms should not necessarily be diagnosed as a mental illness, but rather seen as concrete signs of distress. However, when any of these symptoms significantly changes an teenager's behaviour, mood, emotions, thought patterns and perceptions, it may be justified to think of these as early signs of mental health problems.

## Protective and risk factors

Protective and risk factors each enable detection of positive influences that can enhance mental health or, conversely, contribute to poor mental health.

### Protective Factors

- Self-confidence, self-esteem, social skills
- Psychosocial skills (problem solving, critical thinking skills, communication, empathy, dealing with emotions)
- Stress management
- Harmonious relationships with family and friends, good parental skills
- Positive interpersonal relationships (being part of a positive peer group), solid social and support networks
- Development of personal potential, self-actualization
- Positive school environment
- Appropriate child development, good personal resources
- Physical activity
- Early intervention, mental health education

### Risk factors

- Use of psychoactive substances (drugs and/or alcohol)
- Stress, illness
- Violence, abuse, conflict
- Major life events (e.g. loss of a loved one, breakup, separation/divorce of parents, repeated failures, assault, multiple foster placements)
- Racism, sexism, homophobia
- Early independence or pseudo-independence
- Family breakup, family problems
- Family history of mental illness
- Absence of intergenerational communication
- Absence of significant others
- Social isolation
- Poverty, income insecurity, unemployment
- Chemical imbalance in the brain

# LEADING A WORKSHOP

## Planning ahead

- 1 Understand the specific concepts** raised in the workshop; prepare for students' reactions and potential questions.
- 2 Identify obstacles** related to workshop facilitation (e.g. student passivity, lack of motivation) and **adapt workshop contents** to the various cultural, regional and ethnic characteristics of the students. For instance, you can change the first names of the characters in the activities so students can relate to them.
- 3 Plan learning activities** to complement the ones proposed in the program *My life, it's cool to talk about it* to help students grasp the contents in a playful way.
- 4 Be aware of your own perceptions of mental health:** Be mindful of what touches you, of your fears and insecurities related to the theme of mental health; you will then be better able to understand students' reactions and, consequently, to support them as they learn the basic concepts and coping strategies proposed in the workshops.

## During the workshops

**Don't hesitate to rephrase** or explain a concept several ways, and to use expressions more familiar to students.

**Use neutral objects, people or activities:** Using a neutral object, person or activity allows introduction of a theme without the facilitator or students feeling directly involved, while still initiating an open discussion on the topic. For instance, consider a film (the behaviours or thoughts of one of the characters can be discussed), an art-related activity (students can be asked to draw an emotion or make a poster that promotes mental health), or a fictitious individual (students can be asked for their opinion on the behaviours or attitudes of this person).

**Share:** Students might appreciate the facilitator sharing personal stories with them; this can help normalize the thoughts, emotions, perceptions and behaviours they have in situations they experience. For example, the facilitator could talk about how she or he felt when beginning high school.

**Validate students' understanding:** Encourage students to talk about the concepts using their own words. By expressing their own perceptions, they can then more easily make connections between the activities and their own experiences, and thus benefit even more from the methods and strategies proposed.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

