

CATHOLIC TEACHERS'  
**MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERIES**

# Understanding Anxiety and Depression

It is important to take your own mental health needs seriously. To support Catholic teachers and help you reflect on your mental health and wellness, the Association developed the **Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series**. In this resource, we delve into the causes and signs of anxiety and depression and how to get help for yourself and others. It is important to take your mental wellness seriously and start to recognize the possible signs of burn out.

## The Critical Relationship Between Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression are commonly diagnosed together. Increased anxiety can lead to feelings of depression, and increased depression can lead to feelings of anxiety, though it is more common for anxiety disorders to come before depression (Kalin, Ned H., **"The Critical Relationship Between Anxiety and Depression,"** *The American Journal of Psychiatry*. (May 2020)) It is important to understand both terms and recognize that without help, experiencing one of these can sometimes lead to experiencing both.

## Understanding Anxiety

(This section adapted from [camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/anxiety-disorders](https://camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/anxiety-disorders))

According to the **Centre for Addition and Mental Health (CAMH)** "Everyone experiences symptoms of anxiety, but they are generally occasional and short-lived, and do not cause problems. But when the cognitive, physical, and behavioural symptoms of anxiety are persistent and severe, and anxiety causes distress in a person's life to the point that it negatively affects his or her ability to work or study, socialize, and manage daily tasks, it may be beyond the normal range.

People with anxiety disorders may feel anxious most of the time or for brief intense episodes, which may occur for no apparent reason or be related to various life experiences. They may have anxious feelings that are so uncomfortable that they avoid daily routines and activities that might cause these feelings. Some people have occasional anxiety attacks so intense that they are terrified or immobilized."

Anxiety can occur for many different reasons at various times in life. It is important to know that you are not alone and that OECTA has many resources to help you, which are listed at the end of this document.

## Features of Anxiety

- Irrational and excessive fear.
- Apprehensive and tense feelings.
- Difficulty managing daily tasks and/or distress related to these tasks.

## Cognitive, Behavioural, and Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

- Anxious thoughts (e.g., “I’m losing control”).
- Anxious predictions (e.g., “I’m going to fumble my words and humiliate myself”).
- Anxious beliefs (e.g., “Only weak people get anxious”).
- Avoidance of feared situations (e.g., driving).
- Avoidance of activities that elicit sensations similar to those experienced when anxious (e.g., exercise).
- Subtle avoidances, such as behaviours that aim to distract the person (e.g., talking more during periods of anxiety).
- Safety behaviours, which include habits to minimize anxiety and feel “safer” (e.g., always having a cell phone on hand to call for help).
- Excessive physical reactions relative to the context (e.g., heart racing and feeling short of breath in response to being at the mall).

## Understanding Depression

Increased anxiety and/or stress is one of the major risk factors for depression.

Most people feel down or sad from time to time. However, for others, these feelings may continue for more than a few weeks. They may also begin to increase in intensity or begin to interfere with a person’s daily activities. If this occurs, it may be an indication of depressive mood disorders. These disorders include bipolar disorder and perinatal depression, but clinical depression, or major depression, is the most common mood disorder. According to the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, depression is a serious medical illness and should be treated as such.

Depression does not discriminate; it can affect anyone of any age, education, and economic or social status. According to [data from 2022](#), more than five million Canadians (18 per cent) aged 15 and older met the diagnostic criteria for a mood, anxiety, or substance use disorder in the previous 12 months.



## Causes of Depression

Life-changing events, such as a death, job loss, marriage breakdown, or a diagnosis related to chronic illnesses, can become a “trigger” for depression. Additionally, if a person has a family history of mental health issues, they are more prone to suffer from depression.

Stressful work environments can also trigger depression, including workplaces where employees experience:

- a high workload with little or no control over their work life;
- lack of social support from colleagues or supervisors; and/or
- perceived unfairness in the acknowledgement of one’s efforts.

## Signs of Depression

The onset of depression may occur suddenly, or it may develop over a long period of time. While depression will affect everyone differently, the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) (CMHA) indicates that a person with depression will start to exhibit any number of the signs listed in the chart below.

PERSONAL CHANGES	WORKPLACE CHANGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uninterested in work, hobbies, or people.</li><li>• Withdraws from family and friends.</li><li>• Feels useless, hopeless, or excessively guilty.</li><li>• Feels agitated, restless, or irritable.</li><li>• Feels overwhelmingly sad or cries easily.</li><li>• Lacks self-esteem.</li><li>• Sleeps or eats more than usual.</li><li>• Abuses drugs or alcohol.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unable to concentrate, plan, or make decisions.</li><li>• Less productive.</li><li>• Frequently late.</li><li>• Using more sick days.</li><li>• More irritable and impatient with students.</li><li>• Unenthusiastic about work.</li><li>• Often tired.</li><li>• Uncooperative or less dependable.</li><li>• Making noticeably more errors at work than usual.</li><li>• Taking safety risks or having accidents.</li></ul>

## The Consequences of Undiagnosed Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression, like other mental illnesses, are largely misunderstood. They can carry stigma and shame. People living with high levels of anxiety and/or depression often do not disclose their condition due to negative attitudes and fear of ostracization. It is important to make every effort possible to destigmatize these medical conditions to ensure that everyone receives the support they need.

According to [CMHA](#), mental illness and substance use disorders are leading causes of disability in Canada. People with mental illness and substance use disorders are more likely to die prematurely than the general population. Mental illness can cut 10 to 20 years from a person's life expectancy. Once depression is recognized, help can make a difference for 80 per cent of people who are affected, allowing them to get back to their regular activities.<sup>3</sup>



## How to Help a Colleague Who is Suffering from Anxiety and/or Depression

Demonstrating consistent respect and care for all colleagues regardless of any medical diagnosis is imperative to addressing their needs and combatting any associated stigma where it might exist. If you suspect a colleague may be suffering from high levels of anxiety or depression, make extra efforts to ensure that they know that they are not alone. Ensure that you try to make the person aware of the valuable contributions they make to their students and the school community.

If this person has your trust, provide them with the opportunity to talk candidly about their thoughts and feelings, but at the same time, recognize that medical advice is best left to conversations between the person and their medical professional. Recognize when someone is disclosing information that is beyond your scope of practice as a teacher or a union leader. Use the trust between you and your colleague to encourage them to seek help from a certified medical professional with expertise in their particular concern.

If you believe that your colleague is at immediate risk of suicide, call the police to do a wellness check.

If you are interested in learning more about intervening when others are having thoughts of suicide, consider taking SafeTalk training that provides professional development and awareness on this issue.

# Get Help for Your Own Anxiety and Depression

If you recognize signs of anxiety or depression within yourself, know that you are not alone. Your colleagues share an understanding of the mutual stress and strains of your job. Sharing your feelings with a colleague, department head, local union release officer, or someone else you trust can be the first step in acknowledging that a problem exists. If you do not feel that you can talk to anyone at work, there are a number of other sources of support including friends, family, your local OECTA unit, OECTA provincial office, your employee assistance program (EAP), and medical professionals.

**Do not speak to an administrator about any health issues without first speaking to the Association. If you are unsure, reach out to your [local OECTA unit office](#).**

## Accommodations and Returning to Work

People who suffer from mental health issues, such as depression, have the right to ask for certain accommodations that will allow them to continue working. If you require an accommodation or are returning to work from a prolonged absence due to mental health issues, you are under no obligation to disclose your mental illness to your employer; however, you will be asked to show documentation from a doctor that outlines any restrictions or limitations that must be addressed in your return-to-work plan. If you require workplace accommodations, your local OECTA release officer will help you arrange the appropriate return-to-work plan with your employer and will ensure that the school board is fulfilling its duty to accommodate you, according to the restrictions and limitations set out by your doctors.

### » Additional Resources available at [catholicteachers.ca](https://catholicteachers.ca)

#### Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series

- [Distinguishing Mental Health from Mental Illness](#)
- [Strategies to Promote Mental Health](#)
- [Resource List - Mental Health and Wellness](#)
- [Understanding Anxiety and Depression](#)
- [Understanding Mental Illness](#)
- [Understanding Stress](#)

#### Catholic Teachers' Safer Spaces Series

- [Safer Spaces? Braver Spaces? - Our Collective Responsibility](#)
- [Understanding Trauma](#)
- [Being a Trauma-informed Release Officer](#)

**If you need help understanding or accessing resources responsive to your mental health and well-being, reach out to your [local OECTA unit office](#).**