



## Lesson Plan

<b>Level:</b>	Grade 5 to Grade 8
<b>Duration:</b>	30 minutes or longer. Discussion that arises through exercise can lengthen the time.
<b>Theme Objectives:</b>	<b>MENTAL HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourage students to pay attention to their own mental health and well-being.</li><li>• Encourage a change in students' attitudes and behaviors toward those living with mental health issues or illnesses.</li></ul>

### **PREAMBLE for TEACHERS:**

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*ROBERT BLY's "A little book on the human shadow" makes reference to an invisible sack that everyone carries around. When we are born, we are at our purest and the invisible sack is empty. As we move through life, genetic makeup and environmental triggers can slowly start to shadow our purest selves as the invisible sack grows with negativity, repressed feelings, anger and defeat... The larger the sack grows, the heavier it becomes to carry and the more it drains us of our energies – physical, social, intellectual and emotional. Using the metaphor of the invisible sack, the following lesson plan will serve to heighten awareness of invisible baggage that fellow students may carry around, and how we inadvertently contribute to the filling of that sack through our daily actions.*

### **REQUIREMENTS**

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2 to 3 student volunteers (ensure diversity)

*It's important for the teacher not to appoint students to participate. Volunteering is critical to ensure that students do not feel targeted throughout the exercise.*

- 3 similar-sized cloth grocery bags
- 1 canned good brought in from every student; to be requested by the teacher the day before.
- A few canned goods brought in from the teacher in case extra cans are required.
- At the end of the exercise, all canned goods can be collected and donated to a local food bank.

**STEP 1 In plenary as a classroom – STUDENT VOLUNTEERS:**

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- Ask for three student volunteers to come to the front of the classroom.
- Give each of the three students a cloth shopping bag that they will carry over their shoulder.
- All other seated students become active participants in the exercise and will require their canned good.
- This exercise can also be undertaken in a circle, or weather permitting, outside in the warmth.

**STEP 2 In plenary as a classroom – ASSUMING CHARACTER IDENTITIES:**

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The three student volunteers with the cloth shopping bags take on a fictitious identity: a favorite actor, singer, politician, book character, etc. Let them run freely with their ideas for identity.

- Alternatively, as the teacher you could assign identities to the three volunteers, allowing you to work-in other classroom assignments or lessons (i.e. a book that's being read; research that's being undertaken).
- The three student volunteers take on a role-playing status becoming the fictional character. Ask them to describe their fictional character.

Remember, they don't understand the meaning of the invisible sack yet.

**STEP 3 In plenary as a classroom – DISCUSSION – FICTIONAL CONTEXT:**

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Start off the discussion by asking the student volunteers a question similar to:

- **How would you define a bad day for your character by using one example only?**
  - Students will provide examples that reflect negative feelings that can be easily internalized (i.e. an actor can have a bad day if she breaks out with acne; a singer can have a bad day if he gets laryngitis; an author can have a bad day if she can't meet a deadline). This may bring on a variety of scenarios linked to the characters, and probably some laughter in the process, but let the students run with it.
  - The teacher puts a canned good in all three sacks.

Turning to the seated students, ask them **how each character would deal with the bad day scenario**.

- For every negative solution to the problem, a canned good is added to the character's sack (i.e. get angry or upset; be mean to others; argue or bully someone, etc...)
- For every positive solution, a canned good is removed from the character's sack (i.e. go out for a run, talk it through with someone, etc...)



**STEP 3 In plenary as a classroom – DISCUSSION – REAL CONTEXT:**

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Continuing with the seated students, ask them **what could make those characters have a bad day if they were students at our school.**

- Irrelevant of the character, many issues will surface and reflect what actually occurs within the school community (i.e. being bullied; failing a test; not being able to hand in an assignment; argument with friend; disagreement with parents, etc.)
  - Students who identify a negative emotion, feeling, action, response, place their canned good in a sack.

The process can repeat itself with a focus on the family unit, hopefully leading to discussions on events that affect students. (i.e. divorce or separation, sibling rivalry, being grounded, parents not understanding new trends, or importance of being included, etc.)

**STEP 3 In plenary as a classroom – INSIGHTFUL DISCUSSION:**

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By now, the sacks are probably heavy.

The following question should be addressed to the three volunteer students in their fictional role. **We're all different in some way. How are you different from others and how does it make you feel to be different?**

(For example, because of your celebrity status you may not be able to attend school on a regular basis, therefore that difference could be perceived in a negative or positive light. That is, if you're not in school, you can travel to many different places and meet different people, which is very exciting, but if you're not in school, it's hard to develop closer friendships and participate in school activities.)

Request that students think of a day they came to school with an invisible sack that was full. Ask them to think of how they felt that day and what they did to make themselves feel better. This could take a few moments; doing the exercise with eyes closed will help students return to that moment.

- This could bring on a discussion about being hurt, isolating others, not fitting in, empathy.
  - Discussion can go on as long as teacher wishes and students are engaged. Issues of bullying, teasing, social isolation, whispering, looks, habits, etc. are all issues that can be addressed and discussed within the context of the invisible sack.
    - All positive responses mean the removal of a canned good from one or all of the sacks.



**STEP 4 Wrapping up – CLOSURE:**

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Finish off by telling all students that every day they come to school, everyone carries an invisible sack. Some days that sack is empty or very light, but some days that sack is heavy. Students should learn to recognize that support to others comes in many different ways even if we don't know if the invisible sack is empty or full – acceptance, smiling, including, listening, non-judgment – students can and should be accepting of everyone.

Remind them, that we all sometimes feel “NOT MYSELF TODAY”.....

At the end of the exercise, request that all students write a thoughtful reflection in their journal on “mental health and good relationships”. These entries may serve as a stepping stone to further discussions and/or necessary activities to address stigma, myth and stereotypes.

**STEP 4 Wrapping up – CANNED GOODS:**

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Once the journal exercise is finished, request that all students take their canned goods and place them in the cloth bags. Explain how these canned goods will be donated to the local food bank.

- Finish off the “Not Myself Today” exercise by stating that those in need of food bank assistance are experiencing many of the negative feelings and emotions discussed today. Their problems may not be visible and may be weighing very heavily upon them.
- Remind students to be a friend.

**For additional information and resources:**

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- [“Not Myself Today”](#) Campaign
- [“Kids Have Stress Too! \(KHST\) Can Help! Fact sheet](#), Canadian Mental Health Association
- [“Fast Facts about Mental Illness in Youth”](#), Canadian Mental Association
- [“When Something Wrong. “Ideas for Teachers](#), Canadian Psychiatric Research Foundation
- [“Stigma and Discrimination Around Mental Health Problems – Fact Sheet](#), Canadian Mental Health Association
- For additional information on [“Teen Mental Health”](#)

*This lesson plan was developed by a teacher, a youth client and a parent.*

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