



## Lesson Plan

<b>Level:</b>	Grade 9 to Grade 12
<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 Individually or in small groups:**

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- Ask students straight up what they think about mental illness. Ask them to think about mental illness in terms of what they've heard through media, gossip, and what they know through fact and experience. Give them a few minutes to think about it and to jot their thoughts down on a piece of paper before proceeding to the plenary portion of the exercise.

**STEP 2 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 3 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 student 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.

Since the students have been sensitized to the issue of mental illness through their personal reflection, you may find that the students may describe their character within the context of mental health.

**STEP 4 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?**
  - Student volunteers will respond within the context of the character's life. (i.e. from the actor's perspective; or the comic book hero's perspective; the perspective the character they assumed.)
  - 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.
- For every positive solution, a canned good is removed from the character's sack.



Ask them how each character would deal with the same bad day scenario if that character suffered from depression.

(i.e. Would the character turn to destructive behaviors such as addiction, eating disorders, being angry and bullying others – all behaviors that contribute to the character feeling isolated and misunderstood?)

### **STEP 5 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**. What are some of the issues they would have to deal with?

- 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 a friend; disagreement with parents, etc.)
  - Students who identify a negative emotion, feeling, action, response, place their canned good in a sack.

Ask the seated students to determine **what negative emotions, feelings, actions, would bring on additional burden to a student within the context of mental illness**.

(i.e. not being able to discuss it openly; not having the support of friends; not having the support of parents; feeling different and disconnected; being isolated, etc.) Every negative emotion, feeling, action means the addition of a canned good the sack.

Continuing with the seated students, ask them what they could do to reverse those negative emotions from their fellow students, even if they aren't a close friend.

- This could bring on a discussion of selective friendships; isolating others; not fitting in; empathy; ...
  - All positive responses mean the removal of a canned good from one or all of the sack.

Discussion can go on as long as teacher wishes and students are engaged.

### **STEP 5 Wrapping up – INSIGHTFUL DISCUSSION:**

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Finish off by telling the students that every day they come to school, everyone carries an invisible sack. Some days that invisible sack is empty or very light, but some days that invisible sack is heavy. Students should learn to recognize that support to others comes in many different ways – acceptance, smiling, including, listening, non-judgment ...

Acknowledging is the first step to eliminating stigma and stereotypes.



**STEP 6 Wrapping up – CLOSURE:**

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In small groups:

Remember the first thing you asked students to do? You requested they think about mental illness.

- Set ground rules for small group discussions of 3-4 students: No judgment, no laughing, no snickering, no interrupting – mindfulness is critical for fruitful group discussions.
- Request that the small groups of 3-4 students discuss mental illness in a different light – one with an open heart and an open mind, in a spirit of sharing.
- Request that students think of a day they came to school with an invisible sack that was full. Did they want people to notice they were burdened? If not, why? Did anyone do anything to help lessen that burden? This could be cause for disclosure, discussion, engagement, and supportive understanding.

**STEP 7 Wrapping up – CANNED GOODS:**

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Once the small group discussions are 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](#)
- [Teenmentalhealth.org](http://Teenmentalhealth.org)
- [“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
- [“Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide”](#), Understanding Mental Health and Mental Illness

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

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