

Mental Wellness Strategy

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Message from the President

Nova Scotia Community College is committed to fostering an environment that supports the mental wellness of all members of our college community.

In Here & Now—our refreshed strategic plan—we made a commitment to develop and implement an inclusive and comprehensive mental wellness strategy. We heard from members of our college community that mental wellness must be a priority—in our classrooms, across our campuses, in our policies and through our actions. We believe that this mental wellness strategy will help us live our shared vision, mission and values. We also believe that the empowerment realized through our strategic priorities is critically connected to health and wellbeing.

The NSCC community extends across Nova Scotia and brings people together in the spirit of learning. We know the strength of NSCC lies in the vibrancy and diversity of our college community. We all have different life experiences and circumstances, and the mental wellness strategy acknowledges that different approaches are necessary to address the unique needs of our community.

This work has already begun—NSCC has supported and encouraged the delivery of initiatives such as the Working Mind and Inquiring Minds, as well as the availability of programs and resources such as Mental Health First Aid, Transitions and other mental health research projects, and mental health literacy training

opportunities for employees and students. We are also working with a number of partners and proudly serve on the Atlantic Association of Universities' Working Group on Mental Health. This work builds on the nationally recognized Okanagan Charter, which has been instrumental in our planning.

We are committed to supporting each other by building understanding, capacity and vital connections within and outside of the college community. We will leverage our values of accessibility, diversity and inclusion to guide our work. We will embrace the opportunities in front of us and we will build on our current initiatives, resources and programs. NSCC will strive to review, renew and develop systems and processes to help our employees and students actively engage in a culture of mental wellness.

We have a responsibility to take care of ourselves and each other. Our work is to find and use the emotional energy and clarity we need to manage our learning, lives, and career choices. Building on Here and Now, we know the time is right to build a supportive learning and working environment to deliver on our promise of a province that is fueled by optimism and hope.



Don Bureaux

Background and Considerations

INTRODUCTION

At NSCC, we know the health and well-being of our students and employees is vital to our success and the future of our province. The mission of NSCC is to build Nova Scotia's economy and quality of life through education and innovation. We know that quality of life is enhanced when we are able to achieve and maintain mental wellness and may be diminished when there are factors impeding our mental wellness. This strategy is intended to promote, create and sustain mental wellness across our community while upholding our values of accessibility, diversity, inclusion, employee success, student success, safety, public accountability, sustainability and innovation.

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their own community.”

The learning experiences and wellbeing of students is significantly impacted by interrelated physical, cultural, spiritual, political, socio-economic, and organizational contextual factors (Silverman, Underhile, & Keeling, 2008). NSCC is committed to providing space for students and employees to develop skills and promote learning. To do that well, we must adopt a college-wide Mental Wellness Strategy that not only responds to individual concerns but also makes mental wellness a priority in all that we do. To achieve our objectives, we need a coordinated, collaborative approach across the college that focuses on our strengths and gives all of us the opportunity to be leaders and champions for mental wellness. This will ensure the future of NSCC is one where mental wellness is prioritized, understood, and embraced by all.

Understanding Mental Wellness

In any given year, 20% of Canadians experience a mental health or addiction problem, with young Canadians (aged 15 to 24) more likely to experience mental illness or substance use disorders than any other age demographic (Smetanin et al., 2011). A 2016 survey conducted by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) found, in a 12-month time period, that 59.6% of college students felt that things were hopeless, 89.5% felt overwhelmed, and 13% seriously considered suicide. About half of post-secondary students with mental health disabilities will experience the onset of their condition over the course of their post-secondary education (Condra et al., 2015). We are aware of the relationship between student wellness and student success and understand that NSCC must support and promote student wellness in meaningful ways.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada notes that addressing and supporting mental wellness at work is vitally important, with most adults spending the majority of their waking hours in the workplace (n. d). They also indicated that 70% of Canadian employees are concerned about the psychological health and safety of their workplace, and 14% believe their workplace is not healthy or safe (n. d., para. 2).

The Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges (Charter) was released in 2015. The Charter calls on post-secondary institutions—including NSCC—to embed health into all aspects of campus culture across their administrative, operational, and academic mandate. The Charter also challenges post-secondary institutions to lead health promotion actions and collaboration locally and globally.

We are reminded through the Charter that the well-being of people requires us to take an explicit stance in favour of health, equity, social justice, and sustainability. By embracing our values of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, we are able to tailor our Mental Wellness Strategy initiatives to meet the unique needs of our community.

The Public Health Agency of Canada describes the social determinants of health as income, social status, social support networks, education, employment/working conditions, social environments, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, gender, and culture. Building on the social determinants, our approach to mental wellness is one that recognizes intersectionality—the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups.

At NSCC, we acknowledge that colonialism and systemic racism are social determinants of health that disproportionately impact Indigenous and African Canadian communities. Therefore, our approach must be aligned with our values to ensure that it is culturally relevant to all members of our community. The college is committed to ensuring that its mental wellness supports and programming are grounded in culturally competent, anti-oppressive approaches that acknowledge the impacts of historical and ongoing oppression in Indigenous and racialized communities. Research confirms that the experiences of social inequities, systemic discrimination, economic disadvantages and marginalization of Indigenous, racialized (particularly, historically Black/African Nova Scotians) and 2SLGBTQ+ communities has debilitating impacts on the mental health prospects for members of these communities (Across Boundaries, 1996; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health, 1988; Department of Health and Human Services, 1999; Kafele, 2004; Krieger, 1990; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1999). We must inquire, listen, and learn so that our actions are informed by our communities.

Indigenous Communities

Our college is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report and Calls to Action compel the college to expand opportunities and approaches that contribute to the elimination of gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and employees, and ensure policies and programs reflect the diverse experiences and needs of the community. Although Indigenous peoples are diverse in their life practices and perspectives, their worldviews are similar in many respects, including an understanding of the relational interconnection of all living beings. NSCC is committed to building on partnerships with Mi'kmaq communities and value Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

African Canadian Communities

A growing population in Nova Scotia, African Canadians (including some immigrants and refugees) make up 57% of the province's racially visible population (Benjamin et al., 2010). A 2004 report on African Nova Scotian communities identified a need to increase knowledge and awareness concerning the broad determinants of health and how they impact African Canadians (Nova Scotia Health Authority, 2004). More recently, researchers have found that process is in its infancy and that the experiences of African Canadians need to be considered when shaping policies and procedures (Benjamin et al.,

2010). As such, there are opportunities to ensure that our Mental Wellness Strategy draws upon an Afrocentric approach that destigmatizes mental health issues and prioritizes culturally relevant supports.

Persons with Disabilities

According to Nova Scotia Labour Market information from 2012, close to 90,000 people aged 15 to 64—or 14.2% of the population in this age group—reported being limited in their daily activities because of a mental or physical disability. Nova Scotia had the highest prevalence of disability of all the ten provinces, and the overall unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is double that of persons without disabilities. At NSCC, we understand that mental health and physical health are fundamentally connected. People living with a serious mental illness are at higher risk of experiencing a wide range of chronic physical conditions. Conversely, people living with chronic physical health conditions experience depression and anxiety at twice the rate of the general population. A 2018 report from the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development identified a need for an updated framework and policy for inclusion in the public school system, and highlighted the need for additional funding for specialized services to support students with disabilities (Njie, Shea, & Williams, 2018). This historical gap in support services has hindered the development of self-advocacy, disability awareness, confidence, and competencies among students with disabilities in our province.

2SLGBTQ+ Community

For members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, we understand that mental wellness is influenced and impacted by various factors including the inclusiveness of their workplaces, and the social, political and economic marginalization of the community. Research indicates that 2SLGBTQ+ people are more likely to report unmet mental wellness needs and 2SLGBTQ+ youth have an increased risk of self-harm, isolation, suicide and substance abuse (Benibgui, 2010; Tjepkema, 2008). To provide barrier-free services and programming, NSCC must take a holistic approach that considers the social, economic, and legal context of the community.

Immigrants and Newcomers

Our Mental Wellness Strategy aims to respond to the Ivany Commission's call in "Now or Never" by contributing to a more welcoming and inclusive Nova Scotia that attracts immigrants and newcomers. The holistic, intersectional approach that this strategy adopts will ensure that culturally appropriate supports and programming is made available to support newcomers to the region.

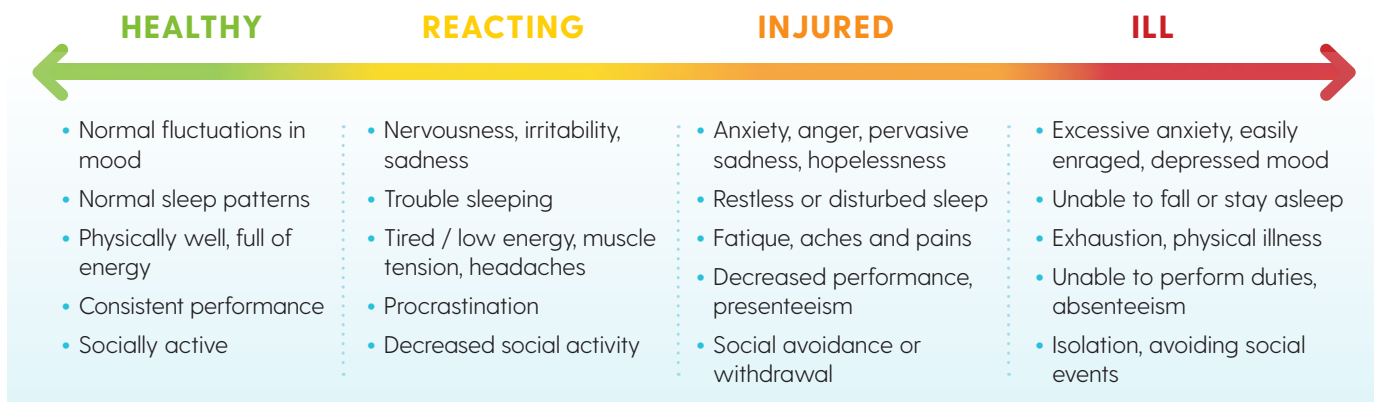
MENTAL WELLNESS CONTINUUM

At NSCC, we understand that mental wellness is a continuum that recognizes the spectrum of all mental and physical health concerns that may affect people during their lives. Our preferred continuum model moves from healthy adaptive coping (green), to mild and self-limiting distress or functional impairment (yellow), to more severe, persistent injury or impairment (orange), and clinical illnesses and disorders that require more concentrated medical care (red).

The arrow along the four colour blocks indicates health is a continuum, and the state of one's health can move

back and forth. Mental wellness is not static. Many people have physical and mental health concerns that –when identified and treated early–can be temporary and reversible. Even if injured or ill, it is possible to return to healthy and achieve a high level of functioning.

Finally, using the mental health continuum model and its colour-associated zones prevents the use of stigmatizing labels. We are all on the continuum and how we move along is influenced by many factors. Mental health and mental illness are reflected in how we think, feel, and act as we react to, and cope, with life.



ACTIONS TO TAKE AT EACH PHASE OF THE CONTINUUM



Mental Health Commission of Canada (2014)

MENTAL WELLNESS STRATEGY

Building and supporting an environment at NSCC conducive to mental wellness is a shared responsibility—we all have a role in creating conditions that support growth and care. This strategy is an approach to move from where we are now, to where we must collectively be.

Our Approach

NSCC is a diverse community of people of many ages, backgrounds, cultural, and social identities. Our students and employees are all at different stages in life and carry their experiences and commitments with them before, after, and during learning and working hours. Many of our students and employees are also spouses, parents and guardians, members of the workforce, mentors and community leaders. Their time as a student or employee at NSCC may be one role of many. Some have and continue to experience oppression, marginalization, violence and/or trauma. We understand that students and employees have lived experiences which intersect with socio-economic factors that impact their ability to feel healthy and be well. We see tremendous strength, resilience, talent and wisdom, and collectively we can create a community in which we can all thrive.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for mental wellness or for care. We view the whole college as the domain to be addressed. Our approach is about:

- ▶ Creating environmental conditions for the flourishing of all students and employees that is grounded in values of social equity and sustainability
- ▶ Providing proactive supports integrated with development and capacity building
- ▶ Providing targeted programs for employees and students who would benefit from assistance
- ▶ Providing specialized services for those experiencing mental health issues

All college community members have a shared responsibility for creating environmental conditions that support learning and mental health. This strategy amplifies the work that has been done to date and the efforts currently being seen across the college community—we're in this together.

In the development of this strategy we heard that in order to support student mental wellness we must support employee mental wellness. This strategy is intended to address the following:

- ▶ Promoting and supporting student mental wellness
- ▶ Promoting and supporting employee mental wellness
- ▶ Supporting employees to support student mental wellbeing

Building The Strategy

NSCC brought together students, employees, and leadership teams from across the college to discuss mental wellness opportunities and key initiatives. This strategy has been informed by an evolving understanding of mental wellness in the NSCC community. The process of creating this strategy included:

▶ **Literature Review:**

To determine best practices, an extensive literature review was conducted and focused on the mental wellness of students and employees. This review focused on post-secondary institutions, including both college and university environments, as well as other workplaces that have begun to develop strategies focused on wellness.

▶ **Stakeholder Consultation:**

NSCC is a diverse community which includes Indigenous, African Canadian, and international students, located throughout the province in both rural and urban communities. We endeavoured to have representation from every area in the College. As part of the development process we held sessions with key stakeholders including: students, managers, educators, community members, and senior leaders of the college. Through these sessions, we developed our guiding principles, as well as our priority areas.

▶ **Community Feedback:**

In order to share, validate, and build upon the strategy development with the NSCC community, we hosted pop-up engagements on campuses across the province. We facilitated conversations with students and employees, and solicited feedback on our guiding principles, priority areas, and input on next steps.

Our Goal

To foster an NSCC culture that prioritizes the mental wellness of students and employees, allowing us all to learn, grow, contribute, and thrive.

Our Guiding Principles

The development of guiding principles helps determine the decisions and actions involved in achieving our goal. The guiding principles of this strategy also hold us accountable, ensuring we are taking an inclusive, intersectional approach to mental wellness that supports every member of the college community.

- ▶ **We understand that mental wellness is essential** for our academic and career success and impacts our ability to fully participate in learning and employment and also impacts our quality of life.
- ▶ **We value and respect where each of us have come from and what we bring to our community.** We recognize the factors that affect mental wellness are complex – mental wellness is a continuum. Taking a holistic approach that addresses discrimination, inequities, and social determinants of health is essential to build and support a culture of wellness at NSCC.
- ▶ **We embrace our roles and available resources.** We are here to help and care but not to diagnose and treat. We have the resources and talents to support one another and the ability to partner with services and supports outside the College to extend our knowledge and address our gaps.
- ▶ **We have a responsibility to take care of ourselves and each other.** We do our best when we are at our best. A community of support allows for growth and encourages the practice of self-care. As a college community, we have a shared responsibility to participate in maintaining our individual and collective wellness.

Our Priority Areas

Understanding that the needs of students and employees are varied, dynamic, and complex, this strategy takes a holistic approach to wellness. NSCC is a unique environment and we are proud of what differentiates us from other post-secondary institutions. We believe in and embrace our commitment to our communities to transform Nova Scotia one learner at a time. We recognize that the learning and workplace environment has unique challenges and dynamics that can impact wellness.

By developing a Mental Wellness Strategy, we aspire to create conditions for each member of the community to feel supported and be well. We have examined and researched many mental wellness frameworks and strategies to inform our approach. We heard from students and employees that we need to prioritize mental health literacy, ensure ongoing communication of available resources and services, critically examine our policies and practices, and ensure the mental wellness conversation is integrated into our daily lives and reduce stigma.

Build Understanding

Build Capacity

Build Connections

We will Build Understanding

We approach each day with openness and acceptance

We will build on our supportive, inclusive college community.

We will create an environment where our focus on mental wellness is apparent in our priorities, policies, practices and physical environment. We will ensure that NSCC has a respectful, inclusive culture that reflects the values of our institution and the wellness needs of our communities.

Our commitment:

- ▶ Consider student and employee wellness when setting priorities for learning and working, ensuring that initiatives and commitments are integrated, sustainable and measured
- ▶ Critically examine our policies and procedures and make changes and additions where appropriate in an effort to eliminate inequities for employees and students
- ▶ Create opportunities to develop greater understanding of cultural perspectives on wellness that embrace our promise of inclusion, so that every student and employee feels welcomed and supported
- ▶ Create and support wellness spaces throughout the college

We will build awareness and reduce stigma.

We will increase mental health by creating opportunities for education and dialogue focused on mental wellness. We will foster an open and accepting environment that reduces stigma and celebrates individual and collective well-being.

Our commitment:

- ▶ Create safe and inclusive learning opportunities and forums for dialogue to increase student and employee knowledge and understanding of health and wellness
- ▶ Build an appreciation of holistic wellness that considers intersectionality and the social determinants of health
- ▶ Create understanding for how mental wellness impacts academic and work performance
- ▶ Build awareness of the mental health continuum affirming that mental wellness is always present and that our day to day activities impact our wellbeing
- ▶ Provide incoming students and new employees with information and resources about mental wellness supports, services, and initiatives

We will Build Capacity

We will nurture the best of what we do now and embrace the opportunity to adopt new thinking and best practices to help us do even more

We will build resilience and skills for self-management.

We will strengthen our resilience and ability to manage the multiple demands of learning and work life through skill development and the awareness of resources to mental wellness

Our commitment:

- ▶ Offer learning and development opportunities and resources to help students and employees to manage health and mental wellness both independently and with support from others
- ▶ Create spaces and opportunities for individuals and communities to support their own mental wellness in culturally relevant ways

We will build capacity to recognize concerns and intervene early.

We will support the NSCC community in recognizing early warning signs of distress. By educating our students and employees about issues faced, we will reduce stigma and create opportunities for skill development for having conversations about well-being. In doing so, we create the conditions for those experiencing difficulty to seek and gain support before harm occurs.

Our commitment:

- ▶ Provide resources for students and employees to assess their own well-being, including those related to problematic substance use, and related risk factors
- ▶ Provide employees and students with training/education of how to recognize and respond to signs of distress in others
- ▶ Work with our cultural and equity seeking communities to develop resources that are accessible, inclusive, and relevant

We will provide mental wellness services and support.

We will offer services to support students and employees in their well-being.

Our commitment:

- ▶ Create understanding of when to seek professional help and convey that help-seeking is a normal and legitimate strategy
- ▶ Ensure that NSCC has the resources and services to respond and support those facing challenges with mental wellness
- ▶ Highlight what mental wellness supports and resources are available for students and employees and how to access those resources

We will Build Connections

We are stronger together and we connect with one another and to supports in our community

We will strengthen partnerships with community.

At NSCC, we are fortunate to be part of many communities across the province. By leveraging external partnerships—and ensuring ongoing communication and engagement—we can seek opportunities to create meaningful connections and improve access and support for students and employees while at the college and in their local communities.

Our commitment:

- ▶ Participate in local community wellness programs and provincial initiatives that promote wellness, anti-stigma, and cultural awareness
- ▶ Endeavor to build collaborative partnerships within NSCC and with health care agencies, policing agencies and community resources in local communities to build a coordinated approach to supporting our employees and students in pursuit of education and career success
- ▶ Participate in research initiatives at NSCC and with partners and health agencies to develop evidence based resources that build on our knowledge and programming for our employees and students
- ▶ Ensure that student and employees have access to information about Mental Health and Addiction Services, critical care, and resources in our local communities
- ▶ Build relationships with Mi'kmaq and African Canadian communities and service providers to improve access to culturally-relevant resources for our employees and students

TAKING ACTION

This strategy is a foundational document to ensure that our environment is one that allows each of us to learn, grow, contribute, and thrive. The collaborative work that has been done to develop this strategy established our strategic vision and will help shape the future of NSCC.

An implementation plan will be developed in consultation with key stakeholders to ensure the college is thoughtful with our approach in addressing the priorities and commitments outlined in our strategy. This strategy supports and amplifies the work that has already begun across NSCC's campuses and in local communities, building on partnerships, programs, and services. It will take the entire college to bring this strategy to life and make it sustainable for years to come.

The Mental Wellness Strategy will be reviewed annually and incorporated into our business planning.

We will foster a culture that prioritizes mental wellness to build resiliency. As a college, NSCC works to prepare students and employees for the future. Building and supporting an environment at NSCC conducive to mental wellness is a shared responsibility. We all have a role in creating conditions that support growth and care at NSCC, and enable us to take care of ourselves and each other.

Mental Wellness Strategy

OUR GOAL

To foster an NSCC culture that prioritizes the mental wellness of students and employees, allowing us all to learn, grow, contribute, and thrive.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ▶ **We value and respect where each of us have come from and what we bring to our community**
- ▶ **We understand that mental wellness is essential for academic and career success**
- ▶ **We embrace our roles and the resources available to us**
- ▶ **We have a responsibility to take care of ourselves and each other**

OUR PRIORITY AREAS

We will Build Understanding

We approach each day with openness and acceptance

Build on our supportive, inclusive college community

- ▶ We will create an environment where our focus on mental wellness is apparent in our priorities, policies and practices and physical environment.
- ▶ We will ensure that NSCC has a respectful, inclusive culture that reflects the values of our institution and the wellness needs of our communities.

Build awareness and reduce stigma

- ▶ We will increase mental health by creating opportunities for education and dialogue focused on mental wellness. We will foster an open and accepting environment that reduces stigma and celebrates individual and collective well-being.

We will Build Capacity

We nurture the best of what we do now and embrace the opportunity to adopt new thinking and best practices to help us do even more

Build resilience and skills for self-management

- ▶ We will strengthen our resilience and ability to manage the multiple demands of learning and work life through skill development and the awareness of resources to mental wellness.

Build capacity to recognize concerns and intervene early

- ▶ We will support the NSCC community to recognize early warning signs of distress. By educating our students and employees about issues faced, we will reduce stigma and create opportunities for skills development to have conversations about well-being. In doing so, we will create the conditions for those experiencing difficulty to seek and gain support before harm occurs.

Build mental wellness services and supports

- ▶ We will offer services to support students and employees in their well-being.

We will Build Connections

We are stronger together – we connect with one another and to supports in our community and post-secondary partners

Build and strengthen partnership with community

- ▶ At NSCC, we are fortunate to be part of many communities across the province. By leveraging external partnerships and ensuring ongoing communication and engagement, we can seek opportunities to create meaningful connections. This will improve access and support for students and employees while at the College and in their local communities.

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