SEW-ARTS
Social Emotional Wellbeing & the Arts

Understanding and Supporting Mental Health in the arts

This section outlines a practical understanding of mental health, how it can be viewed as a continuum, and why it matters in arts teaching and learning settings. It also offers strategies for teaching artists to feel confident when navigating mental health concerns that may arise during creative learning.

Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) is one important element within the broader landscape of mental health. Promoting SEWB in young people through arts-based experiences can play a meaningful role in fostering positive mental health outcomes over time.

What is mental health

Mental health is best understood as a dimensional construct - a continuum, not an either/or status.

According to the Australian Government's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, mental health spans a range of states from thriving to struggling.

A continuum perspective of mental health invites arts organisations to see **wellbeing as something that can be nurtured intentionally, every day.**

People move along this continuum throughout life, which presents opportunities for intervention and support at any point.

A continuum approach reflects key principles of:

- Promotion - actively encouraging wellbeing, not just treating illness
- Prevention - building strengths before difficulties arise
- Early intervention - recognising and addressing issues as they emerge

In this way, SEW-Arts becomes a tool for mental health promotion, helping young people build strong foundations early.

Viewing mental health as a continuum opens up space for early support - not just crisis response.

What is not mental health

To better understand mental health, it's helpful to clarify what it isn't.

- Mental health is not just about mood, stress, or isolated emotional reactions.
- All people – especially young people – go through developmentally normal emotional adjustments to stressors.
- It is normal for young people to struggle sometimes with change, routine disruption, identity, or academic pressure.

Examples of typical adjustment responses:

- Sudden withdrawal or independence-seeking
- Intense expressions of emotion (e.g., sadness, frustration)
- Acting 'not like their usual self' for short periods

These may be signs of temporary distress — not necessarily a mental health condition. Only mental health professionals are trained to assess when such experiences cross into clinical concern.

Mental health & young people in Australia

Links for more information about understanding mental health and young people in Australia:

- Young Minds Matter Survey (The Kids Research Institute Australia)
- Commonwealth Govt's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Some recommended expert and peak organisations for specialised youth mental health support and education in Australia:

- Headspace
- Beyond Blue
- Butterfly Foundation
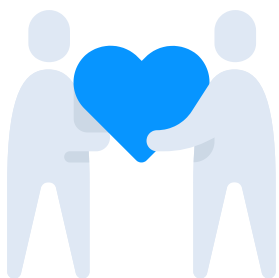- Kids Helpline
- Minus 18

Support for Teaching Artists
Fit Your Own Oxygen Mask First

The most effective way to support young people's wellbeing is to prioritise your own. Teaching artists are encouraged to:

- Practice regular self-care
- Seek support from their arts organisation
- Access training (e.g. Mental Health First Aid)

When tricky stuff happens in class

Young person displays highly distressed or dysregulated behaviour

- Follow your organisation's policy for safety and support
- Consider immediate safety of the group and individual
- Request organisational help if needed
- Communicate clearly with admin teams and caregivers
- Complete MHFA and de-escalation training where available
- Refer to existing behavioural support plans when relevant

You suspect bullying

- Follow policy and respond appropriately
- Use the LATE strategy:
  Listen
  Acknowledge the harm
  Talk about options
  Encourage
- With permission, inform caregivers
- Visit Bullying No Way for practical support and teaching resources

You suspect abuse or neglect

- Adhere to mandatory reporting laws in your jurisdiction
- Consult your organisation's policy
- Familiarise yourself with guidelines via:
  WA Department of Communities
  WA Mandatory Reporting Portal