

# Supporting Mental Health During Back to School

by  
Karen Speirs  
Foundry BC

The start of the school year can be anxiety-inducing for students of any age, and this year will bring new challenges. Through [foundrybc.ca](https://foundrybc.ca), educators can access a variety of tools and resources to support the mental health of their students – all in one place.

Foundry offers young people ages 12-24 health and wellness resources, services, and supports through integrated service centres in communities



*"The start of the school year can be anxiety-inducing for students of any age, and this year will bring new challenges."*

across BC, and through the new [Foundry BC App](#). Our focus is lifecare for youth. We provide youth and their caregivers with rapid, free access to advice, experts, tools, and resources.

Supporting the orientation of teachers, counsellors, and school staff to the different mental health issues that may be experienced by students – and the resources that support youth mental health – is important preparation for the school year.

## A New Set of Mental Health Concerns

Schools have played a critical role in student mental health during the pandemic through school-based programs and relationships with service providers in communities. During this challenging time, young people have shown incredible strength and leadership.

The year ahead will also be unique. Through our work with young people across BC, and learning from our provincial data, the Foundry team has identified five new concerns to watch for this year. Foundry offers tools, resources, and services for each.

### 1) Anxiety around returning to school

For youth who live with anxiety, remote learning may have provided respite. Many of them report feeling better – less depressed and experiencing fewer mood issues – without the pressure of attending school in person. What does this mean for the transition back to school? Some students may feel overwhelmed attending school for a full day.

### 2) Concerns around the 'return to socialization'

Many students have had limited social interaction since March 2020. They report feeling disconnected. Many have come to rely on videogaming to pass the time and to stay connected with friends. They may feel anxious to suddenly be reinserted into an intense social situation when school is back in session, or to break away from some of the activities that have allowed them to feel connected.

### 3) Dramatic increase in disordered eating

One of Foundry's youth peer support workers doesn't mince words when she reflects on the significant increase in disordered eating among young people during the pandemic: "It's shocking," she says. Restrictions over the past 18 months have created a perfect storm of conditions: fear of gaining weight, scarcity in grocery stores, and social media 'compare and despair' to name a few. Some young people speak about the pressure to have improved themselves. And since disordered eating is often a hidden problem, it may go unnoticed.

### 4) Impact on OCD and other conditions

The increased focus on sanitizing and physical distancing during the pandemic has heightened our vigilance, and for some this has led to OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) behaviours. Young people who have not yet had OCD recognized may not be coping well and may struggle when restrictions are lifted. They may continue to experience symptoms.

### 5) Angst around missed learning and other experiences during the pandemic

Young people are likely aware of concerns among educators about the inability to complete curricula during the pandemic period. For students in Grades 11 and 12, there may be concerns about not learning what they need to advance. Missing out on their final years of athletics, arts, and other experiences may impact applications for post-secondary education (and scholarships).

***"Many students have had had limited social interaction since March 2020. They report feeling disconnected."***

## Resources and Support for Youth, Families and Educators

Beyond understanding the issues, there are several ways educators can support the mental health of students.

### 1) Info & Tools on foundrybc.ca

Info & Tools on the Foundry website features extensive information, self-checks, tips, apps, and stories from other young people. For the individual who wants to explore issues on their own or privately, this is a terrific way to gain a better understanding of issues ranging from anxiety and body image to substance use and self-injury.

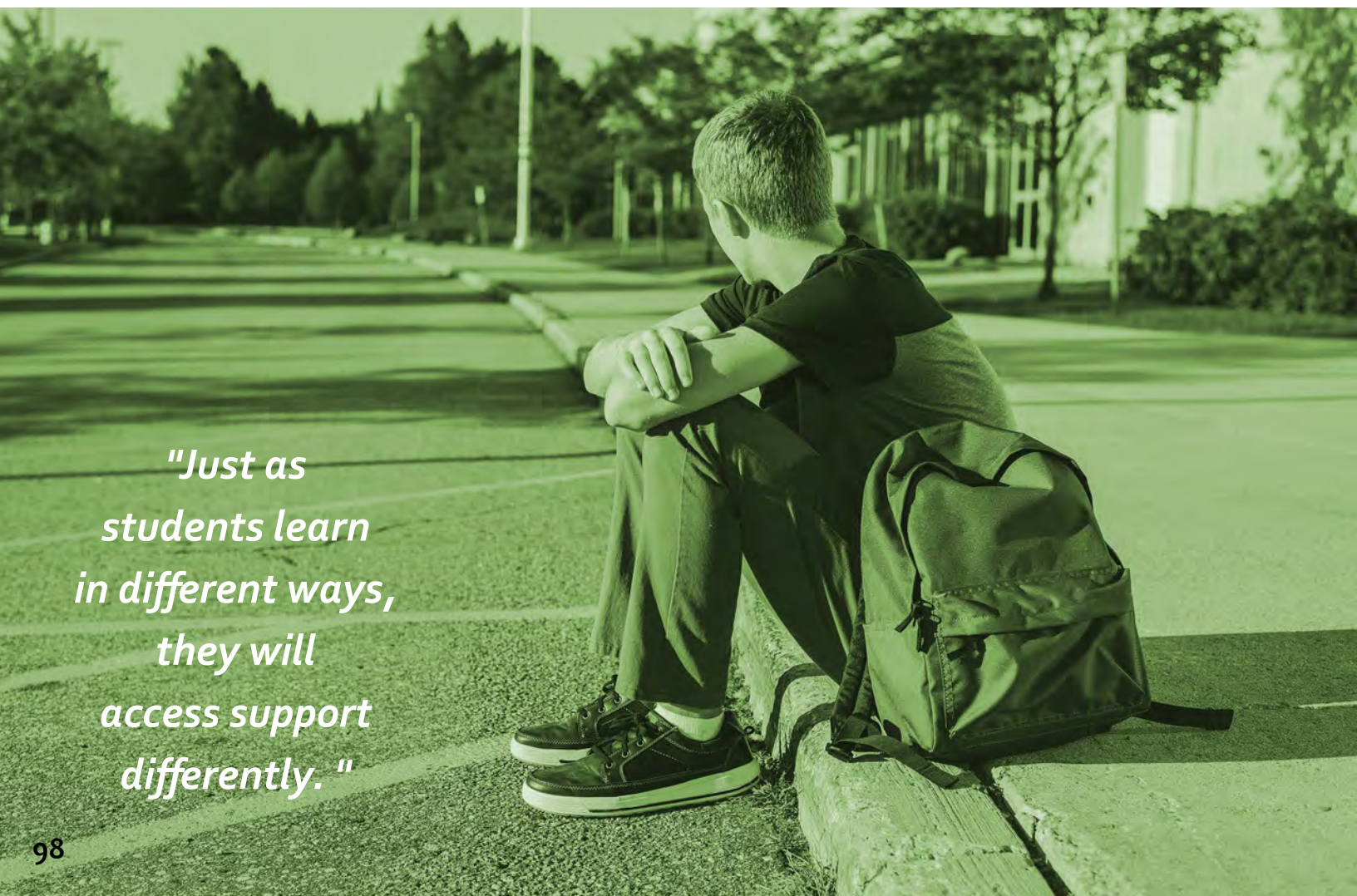
- School Professionals Section has resources for people working in school communities to learn more about mental health and support student mental wellness.
- Pathfinder helps individuals find support through a four-step interactive tool that helps individuals

identify issues, understand how issues are affecting them, and find a personalized list of support options.

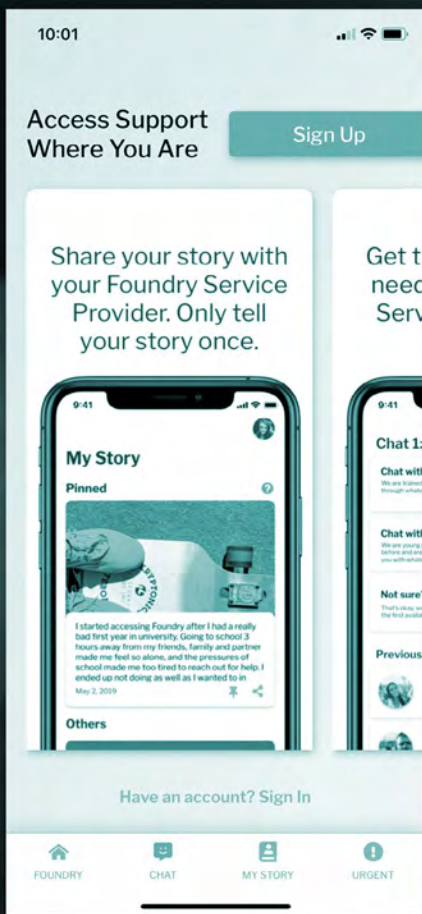
### 2) Foundry offers a variety of supports

Just as students learn in different ways, they will access support differently. Foundry offers a wide range of approaches to support the mental well-being of young people.

- Foundry centres are located across BC and offer multiple services in one location. Young people can get support from health and social service providers. All centres provide free, respectful, non-judgmental, and strength-based services in a youth-friendly environment. Foundry's holistic approach helps young people find the help they need without having to retell their story and trying to navigate a complex system alone. Referrals are not required, and caregivers can also find navigation or peer supports.



*"Just as  
students learn  
in different ways,  
they will  
access support  
differently."*



- The Foundry BC App is a provincial virtual service, the first resource of its kind in Canada. Young people aged 12-24 and their caregivers can use the app to access drop-in or scheduled virtual counselling appointments, find peer support, or join groups that include mindfulness, SMART recovery (substance use), or Emotion-Focused Family Therapy.

Dr. Steve Mathias, Executive Director of Foundry, has a simple suggestion for educators: “Walk your class through the Foundry website, and download and demo the Foundry BC App. Take 30 or 40 minutes to explore the various tools and resources. This introduction will give students familiarity with support that is available, whether they need it now, will suggest it to a friend or may access it in the future.”

### 3) Offer validation

Foundry’s peer support workers emphasize the importance of validating the feelings that young

people are experiencing. There is uncertainty, frustration, and anger. Youth often feel they are the only one feeling that way. By reassuring students that it’s okay to feel that way, it helps normalize how they are feeling.

In addition to the services and supports available through Foundry, family doctors and other services in communities, such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) Child and Youth Mental Health Teams, are important resources.

Educators play an important role in supporting the mental health of students, creating supportive school environments so they feel safe, and connecting them with resources and services when needed. Help make your school community aware of the resources that exist.

Foundry centres, our virtual care team, and online resources are here to support school-aged youth. We look forward to the new school year!