

## VERBATIM

# “Self-care” podcast

### Ariane, Host:

Hello, I'm Ariane Fiset, and I work with the Comité québécois pour les jeunes en difficulté de comportement. I'm hosting this podcast episode, which is for Elementary Cycle Three and Secondary students and talks about the importance of taking care of yourself. In this episode, I will speak with three guests: Nancy Goyette, Marie-Hélène Véronneau and Florence Lacroix. Nancy is an associate professor in education at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. Her job is to understand what well-being at school means and to teach at university. She studies how teachers and students can be happy in the classroom so that the school is a pleasant place for everyone. Marie-Hélène is an associate professor in the psychology department at Université du Québec à Montréal and is also the UQAM Chair for the promotion of well-being during school and post-school transitions. She conducts studies with young people and adults to understand how their relationships and daily activities help them to thrive in life. Finally, Florence is a coordinator of educational services at the Institut Pacifique, which provides schools with violence prevention and conflict resolution programs called *Vers le Pacifique* and *Différents, mais pas indifférents*. So before we get started, I think it's important to point out that taking care of yourself isn't just about feeling good in your body. We'll call this physical well-being, but it's also about feeling good in your head and in your heart, which we call mental health. Did you know that among a group of some 70 000 secondary school students who took part in a recent survey on the health of young people, 37% said they had very

good mental health, 52% said they had fairly good mental health, while 12% said they were experiencing mental health difficulties. It's as if in your group of 10 friends, there were 4 with very good mental health, 5 with fairly good mental health and one person experiencing difficulties. This data reminds us that, regardless of how well we're doing mentally, it's important to work on our well-being. And one of the ways we can do that is by taking care of ourselves. But in order to take care of yourself, it's important to understand how to do so. To find out more, we asked two researchers and the coordinator of the Institut Pacifique's educational services to reflect on the subject and help us better understand what positive mental health is all about.

Hello Nancy, hello Marie-Hélène, hello Florence, thank you for accepting our invitation and especially for taking the time to help us better understand what positive mental health is all about.

So first, Nancy, I think it would be a good idea to establish a common understanding of what positive mental health is.

### Nancy:

Positive mental health, according to the World Health Organization, is a state of mental well-being that enables people to realize their abilities, so they can overcome the little challenges of everyday life. It also helps us do our work, like at school, and contribute to society or community life, like when we're with friends. So, there are manifestations of positive

mental health. A manifestation just means that you can see signs of it in certain people. So, what signs can you see when someone has positive mental health? Well, first of all, the person will often be optimistic, grateful toward others and empathetic, so they'll put themselves in other people's shoes to try to understand others better. Sometimes, these people have a joy of living. But what's also really important to remember is that people with positive mental health know their strengths, their talents. It's interesting to ask yourself this question: what am I good at? What talents do I have? This helps us have and build self-confidence. And we know the resources we can use when we're having little problems. We are able to find the help we need to get our well-being back on track. And that's basically it.

### **Ariane, Host:**

That's very enlightening. I understand that positive mental health is something you can see and feel, and that a lot of it comes down to knowing yourself. Do I know myself as a person, my strengths, my challenges? But at the same time, it's not that easy to get to know yourself. I guess, over time, you get to know yourself better.

### **Nancy:**

Of course, we'll get to know ourselves throughout our lives. Then, we'll discover our strengths in certain situations, in certain experiences. So we shouldn't expect ourselves to know absolutely all of our strengths and talents by fifth grade or Secondary 3. I think our life experiences at school and in life in general really contribute to this.

### **Ariane, Host:**

Excellent. We talk about positive mental health when things are going well, it's obvious when things are going well, but is it normal that sometimes we don't feel well? Marie-Hélène, I'd like to ask you, does this mean that our mental health isn't doing well?

### **Marie-Hélène:**

It's very normal to have unpleasant emotions sometimes. It happens to everyone, children, adults, so it doesn't necessarily mean that our mental health isn't doing well if it only happens once in a while. What exactly causes these negative emotions, whether it be sadness, anger or anxiety? What researchers say, is that everyone has goals in life, things that they care about, that are important, things we want to achieve in our daily lives or in the long term. The emotions we feel help us understand where we stand in relation to achieving our goals, the goals that are most important to us. If we listen to our emotions, if we take the time to ask ourselves: why do I feel sad? Why do I feel angry? Why do I feel happy today? It will help us reflect: am I taking the right steps to succeed in the important things in my life? I can give you an example that might be a little more concrete, let's say my best friend invites me to spend a day with her this weekend and then, at the last minute, she changes her mind because she has an invitation to do another activity that she finds really interesting. Maybe I'll be angry, maybe I'll be sad, these are normal emotions. If I take the time to think about why I'm sad, I might come to realize that this person is so important to me that I really want to do something with her, then I'll find a solution. I'll suggest another activity maybe the week after to maintain my relationship with this person who's important to me. All this to say that all emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are important. They are tools to help us get to know ourselves better and choose actions in our lives that will lead us to succeed in our most important goals.

### **Ariane, Host:**

It's super interesting; I understand the role of emotions and it makes me wonder about the things around us that can positively or negatively impact our mental health.

## Marie-Hélène:

Yes, earlier Nancy mentioned the World Health Organization, a group of researchers and experts from all over the world who study health, including mental health. And what these researchers tell us is that we're more likely to have mental health problems when we're experiencing difficulties in our relationships, whether with our family or at school, or more generally when we're in an environment where there's violence or injustice, or when we're faced with major life challenges such as a serious illness or disability. So we know that even concern about climate change can affect young people's mental health.

## Ariane, Host:

There are many elements that can have an effect on mental health. So, from what I understand, having positive mental health means you have to take care of it, but how do you take care of it?

## Marie-Hélène:

Yes, there are tangible things we can do to take care of our mental health. If we go back to emotions, it's true that sometimes when we experience an unpleasant emotion, we feel sad, anxious or angry; well everyone has their own strategies for managing this. And what research tells us is that some strategies are better than others for promoting good mental health. If, for example, we try to avoid our negative emotions, forget about them, not think about them, not face them, which may make us feel a little better in the short term, but in the long term, these emotions will come back, we'll feel more anxious or sadder or even sometimes, these emotions will be taken out on others and make us become aggressive. So, on the contrary, when we're experiencing emotions, we need to take the time to calm down if they feel too intense: take deep breaths, find a quiet place to experience them properly, and then reflect on why we're experiencing these emotions, as I mentioned earlier. Also, if we feel like we can't manage our emotions ourselves when we're young, that's normal. So, we shouldn't hesitate to talk about it with people who can help us, whether it's our parents, our teachers or mental health

professionals who are there to support us and give us advice, like psychologists, psychoeducators, social workers. These are just a few examples of people who can help us develop good strategies for managing our emotions that will promote positive mental health in the long term.

## Ariane, Host:

Thank you, Marie-Hélène, for giving me lots of tips and strategies. I'd like to ask Florence the same question: how do we take care of ourselves? I'm sure there are many other things we can do.

## Florence:

Yes, of course, a little earlier we talked about how discovering our strengths and qualities, but also those of others, having the support of our friends and the world around us will help. But also, developing an inner dialogue that is more optimistic toward ourselves and trying to appreciate others despite their differences will also help. For example, we're talking about getting the best friend's filter and asking ourselves the question. For example, if my friend was going through what I'm going through right now, what would I say to them? The idea is to take this approach on yourself, because we're often more forgiving of others than of ourselves, and if a friend says or does something inappropriate, we'll encourage them to make amends and remind them that, despite everything, they're still a good person. Then again if it were me, I might find myself being meaner or feeling guilty a lot longer. For example, when we experience an emotion or situation that's really difficult or unpleasant, it could be a conflict with my friends, with my romantic partner, at school with my teachers, we try to take a step back, we try to see if these moments are temporary and if they're having an impact on our mental well-being. Then, we ask ourselves: "It's true that I'm not doing well at the moment, but is there something in my life that is going well? Are there moments in my life when I'm doing well?" So, asking ourselves these questions and taking a step back can help. Building positive relationships with others and communicating in a caring way will also help. I can take the very real example of written communication in the form of text

messages or comments on social media. When we communicate in this way, we only receive 7% of the message, so we're missing a lot of information, like the person's non-verbal language, their intonation, their voice, the sound level, whether they're speaking loudly or not, and the intensity of their message. It's also much more difficult to understand sarcasm in a written message. So, being aware of these elements also means asking yourself whether what I'm reading is true, and then ask what impact it might have on the other person. This also works the other way around: when someone writes something about you, ask yourself if it is true. So, taking these things into consideration will guide us and help us throughout our lives.

### **Ariane, Host:**

Thank you, Florence, I would say there are 3 main points to remember. First, you have to be gentle with yourself, even if you have to take the time to question yourself and, above all from what I understand, you have to understand that your well-being is influenced by others, and that you influence the well-being of others. So, correct me if I'm wrong, but well-being and positive mental health is a bit like a collective mission?

### **Florence:**

Yes, it means taking care of ourselves, but also of the others around us. So, yes, it's a matter of collective well-being, because we also live in society, we live with others, and our friends and families can also play an important role in our lives.

### **Ariane, Host:**

Thank you, Florence. And that naturally leads me to ask Nancy: I understand that it takes effort, and I understand why positive mental health is important, but if I take care of myself, what's in it for me?

### **Nancy:**

In a way, it brings many benefits because positive mental health increases our quality of life. When we feel good, we're able to have experiences that are

really joyful and exciting, which in turn helps us grow and thrive. There are also physical benefits to taking care of yourself, for example, playing sports or eating well, which is really important because overall health depends on not only mental health, but also on physical health. There are also mental and emotional benefits. For example, resting and relaxing helps us concentrate better at school. And when we feel good, we're much more willing to learn. These are some of the benefits. It's also about developing a positive attitude toward ourselves. Seeing yourself in a positive light isn't about boasting, but seeing ourselves in a positive light by recognizing the strengths we have that help us overcome challenges. Because when we know what our strengths are, we're able to develop our potential more fully, and that helps us succeed, more than if we just talk negatively about ourselves, as Florence said. There are also other benefits, including interpersonal and social benefits. If we develop self-confidence because we recognize our strengths and our talents, we'll be able to reach out to others, better manage our conflicts and make friends. Friendship is complex, but if we feel good about ourselves, we're often more comfortable in establishing relationships with others, and as Marie-Hélène was saying, relationships are very important for our well-being and our mental health. So, what we need to remember in all this is that taking care of ourselves helps us grow as people, to feel good despite the difficulties, despite the slightly less pleasant experiences, and it also helps us to foster positive mental health. But I also think we need to remember that we need to work on our well-being to improve the well-being of others. So, if we feel good, we'll be able to reflect this state of mind and these attitudes, which will promote the well-being of the community and of our friends and family.

## Ariane, Host:

Thank you, Nancy, I understand that taking care of ourselves is important to feel good about ourselves, but it's also beneficial for others, our family, our friends and those around us. I'd like to warmly thank our three guests for this wonderful discussion on positive mental health. I don't know about you, but I learned a lot. First, I learned that taking care of our relationships with adults and other young people around us is also a way of taking care of ourselves. I also learned that when we experience an emotion like sadness, anger, anxiety or whatever, we must first remember that we have the right to feel that way, and then remember that the emotion exists to help us find out what's not going how we want in our lives. It's really the first step toward finding a solution, and then improving our mental health. I also learned that taking care of ourselves by listening to our needs and those of others can help us develop self-confidence, which in turn will enable us to thrive at school and in our personal lives, and to have relationships that are positive and meaningful. Finally, we discussed a number of strategies for taking care of ourselves, such as resting, playing sports, eating well, listening to our needs and taking action to improve the world around us. In fact, even little things like doing a favour for a friend, picking up litter in the park or even taking the time to call your grandparents to check up on them are good for your mental health. If you'd like to learn more about how to take care of yourself, check out the list of resources in the podcast episode description. The Ministère de l'Éducation would like to thank its partners and collaborators for this podcast episode. Nancy Goyette, professor and researcher in education at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Marie-Hélène Véronneau, professor and researcher with the département de psychologie at Université du Québec à Montréal, Florence Lacroix, coordinator of educational services at the Institut Pacifique, Isabelle Boissé, director general of Institut Pacifique and the Comité québécois pour les jeunes en difficulté de comportement.