Empathy in the Face of Addiction

Fact Sheet

- In 2016, 2,816 Canadians died from opioid-related overdoses. (Macleans)
- At the heart of the national epidemic, called a "crisis" by Canada’s chief public health officer, are two different, but related, types of drugs: prescription painkillers and illicit street drugs, such as heroin and fentanyl. (Globe and Mail)
- The crisis has reached every part of Canada, with small cities and towns—such as Moncton, Kelowna and Regina—showing among the highest rates of hospitalizations resulting from opioid poisoning. (Globe and Mail)
- Safe-injection sites offer a supervised location for people to use pre-obtained drugs, as well as a concentrated area of social and medical services for communities at risk (including counselling, treatment for hepatitis, HIV, etc.); this is part of a strategy called harm reduction. (Global News)
- Toronto’s first sanctioned safe-injection site opened in November 2017, joining Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal and cities across the country in providing the service. (CBC & Global News)
- At various times, to respond to a lack of safe-injection sites operating in areas of need, roughly 30 “pop up” sites have been run by activists and medical practitioners. (Macleans)
- Experts point to a funnel effect, where people begin using legitimate prescription painkillers before becoming addicted and turning to cheaper illicit street drugs. (The New Yorker)
- Recently, an even more dangerous drug called fentanyl has made its way to Canada, which is estimated to have caused half the overdose deaths in British Columbia and Alberta in 2016. (Macleans)
- To respond to the latest wave of overdoses, universities across the country, including the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and the University of King’s College in Halifax, are providing naloxone kits for students on campus; naloxone is an antidote to opioid overdose. (Toronto Star)
- Early childhood trauma, including physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect, significantly increases the risk for several psychiatric disorders in adulthood, including addiction. The National Survey of Adolescents, conducted in the United States, found that teens who had experienced physical or sexual abuse were three times more likely to report substance abuse issues than those without a history of trauma. (US National Library of Medicine)
Essential Question:

- How can empathy contribute to social change?

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- Develop an understanding of empathy
- Recognize how showing empathy can support those affected by issues such as addiction

Discussion:

1. What factors contributed to Ruston Baldwin’s drug addiction?
2. Why did Baldwin benefit more from going to a rehabilitation program than going to prison?
3. How does Baldwin’s journey give others hope?
4. What do the authors mean when they say: “Instead of relying on stigma and stereotypes of addicts as immoral and depraved, we should see them like Baldwin—as people in pain, in need of help and capable of so much more”?

Dive Deeper:

**Educator’s Note:** In the following activity students will be encouraged to share their feelings, opinions and personal experiences. Make sure to review classroom guidelines about respect and appropriate use of language to create a safe and inclusive environment where all students feel comfortable participating.

In this lesson students will explore the concept of empathy (verb) and how to display empathy to all people. Empathy is the action of understanding, being aware, being sensitive and experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others. Students will use the action of empathy to understand the experience of individuals who have overcome an issue or challenge.

**Part 1: Exploring Empathy**

1. Place a long strip of tape down the centre of the class and label one side of the line Agree and the other side Disagree.
2. Explain to students that they will be exploring the concept of empathy. If students are not familiar with the concept of empathy, explain to them that the purpose of the following activity will be to begin to develop an understanding of what empathy means and what it looks like.

3. Read out the following statements and ask students to decide whether the action in the statement demonstrates empathy. If they think it does show empathy, ask them to move to the Agree side of the line, and if they think it doesn’t, ask them to move to the Disagree side.
   - Listening to someone to understand what they are going through
   - Getting frustrated or angry when someone doesn’t understand something
   - Considering other people’s feelings before acting
   - Teasing someone when they are upset or afraid
   - Trying to see things from someone else’s perspective

4. After reading each statement, pause to discuss students’ responses and allow students to move to a different side of the line if their opinion changes. Begin to develop a class definition of empathy and continue to revise it throughout the lesson.

5. Explain to students that empathy can often be expressed as “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.” We often react negatively to situations (i.e., with anger, frustration, disgust or fear) when we don’t try to put ourselves in another person’s shoes or don’t try to see things from another person’s perspective.

6. Choose one of the scenarios from Blackline Master 1: Building Empathy and share it with students. Once they have heard the scenario, discuss the following guiding questions in small groups or as a class.

   **Guiding Questions:**
   - How would you feel if you were the character in this scenario?
   - How could you learn more about what this person is experiencing?
   - How could you show this person empathy?
   - Why is it important to show empathy to a person in this situation?

7. Divide students into pairs and give each pair one of the other scenarios from Blackline Master 1: Building Empathy. Have students read the scenario and discuss the Guiding Questions above. Display the questions on the front board or on chart paper for students to refer to during their discussion.
8. Ask students to imagine they are the character in the scenario and write a diary entry or personal blog post, describing the situation from their perspective. What would you want people to know to help them understand the situation? How would it help you if someone showed empathy toward you?

Extension:

Introduce students to the Empathy Museum project, www.empathymuseum.com, and explore how this innovative project is helping people step into another person's shoes. Consider how students could create a similar project in the school to help other students build empathy.

Part 2

1. Review the definition of empathy from Part One and, in pairs, ask students to describe a time they showed empathy to someone or someone showed empathy toward them.

2. Explain to students that it can be difficult to show empathy to someone when we aren't aware of the issues or challenges they are facing. When someone's life experience is very different from our own we often view them through stereotypes or make assumptions about them instead of trying to understand the person's individual story.


4. Divide students into small groups and have them to discuss the following questions. If students require more support understanding issues such homeless or addiction, consider discussing the questions as a class.

   • What assumptions might people make about Joseph?
   • Why might they make those assumptions?
   • What goals does Joseph have? What are his plans for the future?
   • How could showing Joseph empathy help him as he works toward his goals?

5. As a class or in small groups, read the article “Empathy in the Face of Addiction” and discuss the questions in the Discussion section.

6. In the same small groups, have students create a role play of a scenario where they need to show empathy to a person who is overcome by an issue or challenge. Students can present the role play to the class or videotape the role play to show to their fellow classmates. After students have presented the roleplay, have students guess:

   • What is the scenario?
   • What issue the roleplay was addressing?
   • What solution did the group present?

Educator’s Note: If students are not familiar with the words stereotype or assumption, investigate and create a definition for each word. Post the definitions in the class for reference.
Blackline Master 1: Building Empathy

Scenario 1:
A bully and two of the bully’s friends are surrounding a child alone on the playground and making fun of his/her haircut. Another couple of children are watching from a short distance away but they aren’t sticking up for the child.

Scenario 2:
A child was walking home from school when a man starts following him. The man starts yelling at the child. The child feels very scared and starts to run home, afraid that the man will follow him.

Scenario 3:
Children are picking teams for a softball game. The last two children are left.

Scenario 4:
A new child comes to school from a foreign country. Their English is not very good yet and they have a strong accent. When the teacher introduces them to the students and they say “Hello, my name is _____,” a few of the other children laugh quietly.

Scenario 5:
There is a child at school who has to wear a back brace, thick glasses or has something about their appearance that is different. No one sits next to the child in the cafeteria at lunchtime.

Scenario 6:
A child wants to play alone with their friend, but a younger sibling wants to tag along. The little sibling is on one side of a door crying. The older sibling and friend are on the other side.

Scenario 7:
A child comes home from school. When they enter the front door they can hear loud yelling. They feel very scared to go inside because they know that mom and dad are fighting again.