

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH  
AND WELLNESS OF ALL

# Working towards a Caring and Compassionate University of Ottawa Community

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# Land Acknowledgement

Ni manàdjiyànànig Màmìwininì Anishinàbeg, ogog kà nàgadawàbandadjig iyo akì eko weshkad. Ako nongom ega wikàd kì mìgiwewàdj.

Ni manàdjiyànànig kakina Anishinàbeg ondaje kaye ogog kakina eniyagizidjig enigokamigàg Kanadàng eji ondàpinangig endàwàdjìn Odàwàng.

Ninisidawinawànànig kenawendamòdjig kije kikenindamàwin; weshkinìgidjig kaye kejeyàdizidjig.

Nigijeweninmànànig ogog kà nìgànì sòngideyedjig; weshkad, nongom; kaye àyànikàdj.

We pay respect to the Algonquin people, who are the traditional guardians of this land. We acknowledge their longstanding relationship with this territory, which remains unceded. We pay respect to all Indigenous people in this region, from all nations across Canada, who call Ottawa home. We acknowledge the traditional knowledge keepers, both young and old. And we honour their courageous leaders: past, present, and future.



# Foreword

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## **A message from the Provost and Vice-President, Academic Affairs**

Supporting the mental health and well-being of our community is closely tied to our Transformation 2030 strategic plan objectives and commitment to nurture a sustainable campus culture that promotes overall wellness, embraces diversity and fuels employee engagement.

This framework represents an important milestone on uOttawa’s journey to create conditions favouring mental health and wellness for every member of our University community. It’s a bold, clear blueprint for uOttawa that reflects our diversity, and our commitment to creating inclusive initiatives and environments that promote everyone’s mental health and wellness; nurture diverse, collaborative approaches to wellness; and provide appropriate individual and collective supports.

I would like to enthusiastically and wholeheartedly thank Elizabeth Kristjansson, our University Advisor on Mental Health and Wellness. Through her tireless efforts over the past three years to mobilize our resources and experts, break

down silos and engage our community in a dialogue around mental health and wellness, she has brought constructive change to our University community. With this momentum and ongoing commitment to working together, uOttawa will become a stronger, more caring and more compassionate university with an institution-wide, comprehensive strategic framework.

I also thank all who help advance the mental health and wellness of our University community for your commitment. Congratulations to everyone who contributed to the framework. I know that implementing it will generate transformative change.

As we shape the future of uOttawa together, I invite you to join me in continuing to learn about mental health and wellness, and in building a caring University community.



Jill Scott  
Provost and Vice-President,  
Academic Affairs

## **A message from the University Advisor, Mental Health and Wellness**

Throughout my term, I observed how much people in our community care about the mental health and the wellness of our community. We are all accountable for caring for ourselves and for one another. We must all be part of a compassionate, inclusive community. As an increasing number of people in our University community face struggles related to mental health and wellness, we must commit, individually and collectively, to thinking and acting preventively to overcome these challenges. Mobilizing systemic change, influencing the conditions affecting our individual and collective mental health and wellness, and collaborating across boundaries are key elements in creating a caring, compassionate culture in which we can thrive.

We must examine the ways in which we lead, teach, work, study and interact to shape uOttawa as a caring and compassionate university. This will, in turn, foster student academic success and create a better working, teaching and learning environment.

We should all use the framework's guiding principles to inform ourselves on moving towards a caring and compassionate culture

where everyone feels safe. The priority areas will assist in identifying concrete opportunities and actions.

I would like to thank the community members who participated in the consultation. As well, I thank all who participate in advancing the mental health and wellness of our university community for their timely work and contribution to the Framework. My work would not have been possible without the generous participation of many members of the University of Ottawa community, particularly the members of the Mental Health and Wellness Steering and Advisory Committees. These people have made a tremendous contribution to the University of Ottawa and my work through their rich insights. Without their dedicated support, my work would not have been possible. It is a privilege and a pleasure to work so collegially and collaboratively with them.



Elizabeth Kristjansson

University Advisor, Mental  
Health and Wellness

# Introduction

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“Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much”

Helen Keller

The President’s Advisory Committee on Mental Health and Wellness Report was developed following an analysis of best practices in mental health at postsecondary institutions across Canada as well as an extensive campus-wide listening exercise. The report provided 12 recommendations for changes to improve the mental health and well-being of all members of our community. Elizabeth Kristjansson, the university advisor, mental health and wellness, was mandated to oversee the effective implementation of the recommendations, while identifying and addressing remaining gaps and working towards improving the well-being of the whole University community. She opted for a collaborative approach by creating the Mental Health and Wellness Steering Committee and the Mental Health and Wellness Advisory Committee. Together, these committees formed action-oriented working groups that brought together the representative stakeholders needed to identify and address mental health and wellness issues.



Essential strides in supporting the mental health and wellness of our University community have been made in the last several years. For instance, to advance the mental health and wellness of our student population, uOttawa adopted the [National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Wellbeing for Post-Secondary Students](#) and accordingly developed an operational action plan to implement the Standard, launched a successful [case management program](#), piloted the delivery of workshops that engaged incoming students in learning academic and mental health skills. We developed a [Caring University Community Guide](#) and [one pager](#) to support our community in recognizing and responding to people who are in distress. Easily accessible 24/7 support options and crisis hotlines are now available on various platforms, including Brightspace and the Health and Wellness website. Led by Student Affairs, we opened a [Student Health and Wellness Centre](#) on campus that integrates services for student physical health, mental health, and health promotion. In our commitment to improving the mental health and wellness of our professors and support staff, we adopted the [National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#) through the Excellence Canada Framework and obtained silver accreditation from [Excellence Canada](#). Human Resources has developed guides, workshops and coaching sessions to engage teams in workplace mental health and wellness. We implemented the [Disconnecting from Work policy](#), established formal and informal recognition awards

and programs, developed a new professors handbook and enabled access to the [Employee and Family Assistance Program](#) and [telemedicine services](#) to all support staff and professors.

Despite these considerable advances, our University community still faces ongoing challenges relating to mental health. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic changed our teaching, learning and working environments and disrupted our social fabric, generating long-term impacts on the mental health and wellness of our University community.

Recognizing the effect that our University culture has on the mental health and wellness of our community, uOttawa commits to becoming a **caring** and **compassionate** university, one in which care, respect and compassion for others and for our environment is shown by our leaders, in our pedagogy and in our interactions with each other. In addition, as we commit to continue to provide access to appropriate services, we will aim to strengthen **prevention** to foster a supportive, inclusive and enabling environment, one in which every member of our University community feels supported and encouraged.

The uOttawa Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Framework (“the framework”) provides guidance to strengthen our collective engagement in advancing a caring and compassionate university community.

# Purpose

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“Universities are places where tolerance, dignity and respect should be cherished”

Belak and Waddington

This framework reflects uOttawa’s holistic approach to mental health and wellness, one of creating an environment that promotes care and compassion and supports the mental health and wellness of our entire university community. It outlines ways in which we can care for ourselves and for one another, both individually and collectively.

The framework is anchored in the collaborative, inclusive approach to wellness set out in the [Okanagan Charter](#), a global health initiative that calls on postsecondary institutions to commit to embedding health across all aspects of campus culture and to taking the lead in compassionate actions that promote well-being, both locally and globally.

The University is a signatory of the charter. We commit to living by its values and our [four charter commitments](#) through this framework.

The success of this framework depends on the active participation of all members of the uOttawa community through the various aspects of campus life, including administration, teaching and learning. It is with this lens that we invite you to read our framework and to consider the unique role that you play in embedding care and compassion into campus life, whether you are a senior administrator, an academic or administrative leader, a professor, support staff, student or alumni.

Health, wellness and compassion are everyone’s responsibility.



# Our Framework

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Our framework is designed to be sustainable, flexible and inclusive of diverse ways of knowing about and experiencing mental health and wellness. An intersectional approach to issues related to equity, diversity and inclusion must be adopted in applying the framework principles.

The wellness of our University community will be strengthened by considering social determinants of many mental health and wellness challenges, including poverty, discrimination, racism, the academic culture, and the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

Solutions cannot be found if we work in silos: we need to focus on coordination and collaboration. It supports cross-sector initiatives and improvement and innovation, while enabling our University community to adapt to individual contexts and needs with care and compassion.

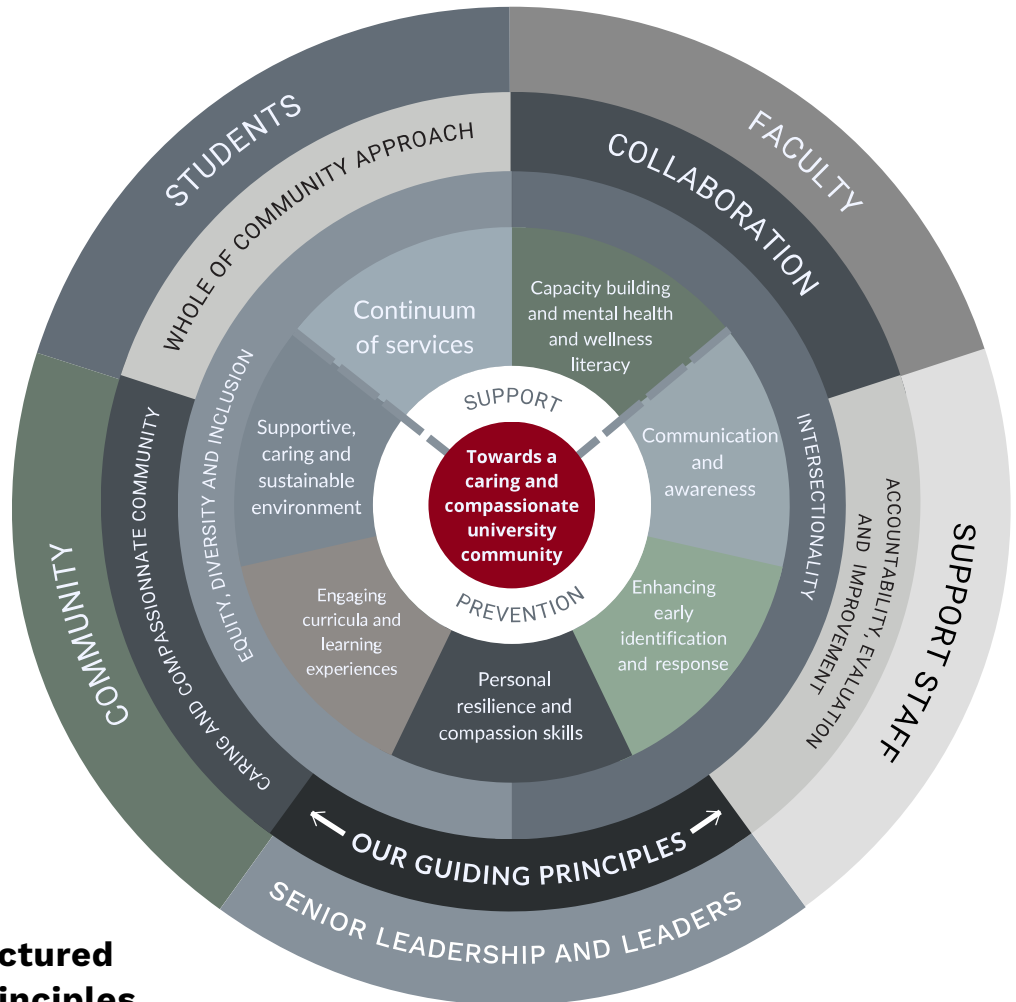


**Goal:** Towards a caring and compassionate university community

Focus areas	Approach	Guiding principles	University community groups
<p><b>Prevention</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive, caring and sustainable environment</li> <li>• Engaging curricula and learning experiences</li> <li>• Personal resilience and compassion skills</li> <li>• Early identification and response</li> <li>• Communication and awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity, diversity and inclusion</li> <li>• Intersectionality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caring and compassionate University community</li> <li>• “Whole of community” approach</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Accountability, evaluation and improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Faculty</li> <li>• Support staff</li> <li>• Senior leadership and leaders</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>

**Support**

- Continuum of services
- Capacity building and mental health and wellness literacy



**The framework is structured around four guiding principles.**

# Our Guiding Principles

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## **A caring and compassionate University community**

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Recognizing the shared responsibility among members of our University community to advance a caring, compassionate and inclusive community, we will create an environment that nurtures inclusive and diverse approaches to wellness, and considers root causes of mental health, including the social determinants of health (e.g. income and social status, marginalization, family history, racism, employment and working conditions).

We recognize the intersection among care, compassion, wellness, equity, diversity and inclusion, Indigeneity, accessibility, antiracism and sustainability, we seek to evolve in ways that foster a culture of belonging, engagement and mutual support.

We embed care, compassion and wellness at all levels of the University and assess how our actions affect other members of our university community.

## **A “whole of community” approach**

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We seek to improve the mental health and wellness of our University community in a holistic, integrated and coordinated way.

We mobilize every member of our university community in our caring, health and wellness endeavours. We collectively develop caring and compassionate systemic change.

We recognize the importance of sustainable natural, built and social environments to mental health and wellness. Everyone needs safe, culturally appropriate and appealing places to teach, work learn, and live.

## Collaboration

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Building on the expertise of our University community, we nurture partnerships and collaborations with internal and external stakeholders, to strengthen our collective capacity to advance mental health and wellness research, teaching, knowledge exchange and action.

## Accountability, evaluation and improvement

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Our actions and decisions are informed by research evidence, best practices in campus mental health and wellness, the voices of our University community, changing environments and emerging needs.

We recognize the need for surveys of our community's well-being and for evaluation of programs, services and initiatives.



# Our Priority Areas

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Our priority areas build on activities and initiatives stemming from the 12 recommendations of the [President's Advisory Committee on Mental Health and Wellness Final Report](#). They also build on many current programs, services and partnerships as well as elements from existing models and frameworks. They reflect best practices in comprehensive approaches to students', professors' and support staff's mental health and wellness.

The University will support the mental health and wellness of students, professors and support staff by focusing on seven priority areas. The priority areas shift our focus toward prevention, early intervention, and mental health literacy as the front line of support. They aim to reinforce coordination of programs, services and initiatives to build a healthy and compassionate university environment, as well as to strengthen resilience among our university community.

The priority areas will be supported by actions to be accomplished in a given period.

For each priority area, the framework highlights ways in which everyone can support their own wellness and that of those around them.

## Prevention

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### Enabling a supportive, caring and sustainable environment

“Diversity of prevention areas; not a one size fits all approach to resources for mental health.”

Support Staff Feedback

The University is committing to:

- Champion compassion and wellness through the creation of new, and review of existing, policies and processes.
- Support administrative and academic leaders in embedding the framework’s guiding principles and priority areas in strategies and operational plans.
- Continue to empower senior leadership as well as administrative and academic leaders to have compassion towards and be a positive influence on others, ensuring that the mental health and wellness needs of students, professors and support staff are understood and taken into account.
- Continue to increase professors’ and support staff’s wellness knowledge and compassion skills through talent development and learning programs.
- Embed compassion towards our University community in selection processes, onboarding and orientation of new professors and support staff, as well as in performance reviews.
- Continue to strengthen connections and build bridges across our University community, to benefit from a wide range of interdisciplinary expertise.
- Continue to build a sense of community at uOttawa through fostering green, safe and engaging spaces and conditions that support diversity and bring us together.

## How you contribute

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### For everyone

- Proactively communicate with care and compassion, possibly by adapting McMaster University's [Compassionate Communications Toolkit](#) and making it available for all.
  - Prioritize mental health and wellness within your working, learning, teaching or environment.
  - Foster connectedness for all in a variety of formal and informal ways in the workplace and the classroom.
  - Expand on existing recognition and reward programs for students, professors and support staff. Celebrate success.
  - Share ideas across disciplines and boundaries to build stronger, more connected approaches and initiatives that contribute to the mental health and wellness of our community.
  - Increase training on and application of intersectionality to address systemic barriers.
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### For senior leadership, academic and administrative leaders

- Champion the [Thirteen Factors of Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#) (specifically those related to workload management, as well as organizational culture).
- Compassionately enforce [Policy 130 - Student Rights and Responsible Conduct](#).
- Encourage conversations to promote healthy and respectful environments and dynamics.

## Fostering engaging curricula and learning experiences

“Having clearer instructions that keep in mind that some students might not have any experience in how to handle situations not taught in high school.”

Student Feedback



The University is committing to:

- Continue to develop resources and support to help professors adopt course design that makes students feel supported and included.
- Continue to encourage professors to take an active role in student well being by fostering a teaching and learning environment that is inclusive and conducive to mental health and wellness for all.



## How you contribute

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### For academic leaders

- Promote the new professors' handbook among colleagues.
  - Promote existing [teaching and learning training opportunities](#).
  - Promote activities where students of all levels can engage and build a sense of belonging.
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### For professors

- Expand initiatives that enhance student learning and success in the classroom (e.g. in class exercises, opportunities for reflection).
- Foster connection by encouraging meaningful contact, cooperation and peer learning opportunities among students.
- Include caring, compassion and active learning in your course.
- Include mental health and wellness resources in syllabi and class sessions.
- Regularly ask students how well they are learning.
- Foster connections between yourself and other colleagues.

## Developing personal resilience and compassion skills

The University is committing to:

- Continue to support our community in building self-compassion, making time for self-care and wellness through appropriate programs and services, so that everyone has the skills and access to resources to support their own wellness and help others do so as well.
- Continue to develop and offer mental health and wellness for-credit courses and microprograms, with modules on compassion.
- Continue to address social determinants of poor mental health, including financial, food and housing insecurities, as well as transitional stressors for students. All of these are related to academic success.
- Strive to expand student wellness, compassion and resilience skill building training, workshops and peer support programs.

### How you contribute

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#### For academic leaders and professors

- Promote [uOCompetencies](#), especially autonomy and resiliency, collaboration and worldview, to our students to encourage skills development and readiness for the future.
  - Encourage students to enrol in the [skill building wellness seminars, training and courses](#) as well as to engage within peer support programs.
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#### For everyone

- Participate in compassion and resilience skill building training opportunities.

## Enhancing early identification and response

“Reaching out to more students. During my short time at uOttawa I have met many students who are struggling greatly yet have too much pride or are too insecure to ask for help.”

Student Feedback



The University is committing to:

- Continue to strengthen our community competencies in recognizing early indicators of concerns as well as more serious distress, to respond with care and compassion, and to refer others to appropriate resources or support on and off campus.
- Continue to streamline access to mental health accommodation services.

## How you contribute

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### For leaders, professors and support staff

- Familiarize yourself with the [Caring University Community Guide](#) and [Caring University one pager](#) developed to support leaders, professors and other employees in helping students and others.
  - Get to know [case management services](#).
  - Actively support accommodations needed in the classroom and the workplace.
  - Apply a caring and compassionate approach when asked for support in the classroom or the workplace.
  - Actively provide professors and support staff with training on [how to support students in distress](#).
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### For everyone

- Get to know the wellness continuum self-assessment tool and other references tools and services available on the [Health and Wellness website](#).
- Take advantage of opportunities to learn how to help others. One of the University's main tools is the [More Feet on the Ground training program](#).

## **Strengthening communication and awareness**

“Communication is more than talking and waiting to talk. Listening well and appropriately can be the most essential element in being compassionate and having compassionate conversations”

Louise J. Lawrence

The University is committing to:

- Continue to coordinate communication strategies that engage, empower and educate our University community:
  - Promoting and living out our values as a caring and compassionate university, as well as promoting the mental health and well-being of all at uOttawa.
  - Raising awareness of existing programs, resources and services, making them as convenient, direct and inviting as possible, both for ongoing use and for times of need.
  - Raising the awareness of all to reduce stigma and support changes in behaviour, for ourselves and others.
  - Continuing to break silos between faculties and services.



## How you contribute

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### For everyone

- Engage in dialogue over messages about care, compassion, mental health and wellness.
- Participate in programs and services to improve how you manage your own mental health and wellness and how you help others.
- Tell your peers about the resources and programming you know.



## Support

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### Continuum of services

“The university should commit to the mental health of every member of its campus community so that everyone is better prepared to help students.”

Faculty feedback

- Continue to optimize referral protocols between faculties and services.
- Continue to coordinate and expand collaboration with our local communities to enhance access to external services and resources.
- Continue to work on appropriate after hours and crisis management support for students.

The University is committing to:

- Continue to offer a spectrum of services to support the mental health and wellness of our professors and support staff. We will ensure that services are supportive, culturally relevant, accessible, timely and easy to navigate.
- Continue to provide a spectrum of services to support student health and wellness, which may include psychotherapy, case management or other services, to support academic success.



## Capacity building and mental health and wellness literacy

The University is committing to:

- Continue to provide information and support to professors and support staff in contributing towards student mental health and wellness.
- Continue to equip our University community to understand and address factors that affect our individual and collective mental health and wellness.
- Continue to provide train-the-trainers programming to create a sustainable University mental health and wellness knowledge base.

### How everyone will contribute

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- Learn about existing resources and services and get to know the [Health and Wellness website](#).
- Students, professors and support staff are encouraged to consider activities, spaces, training and programs available to them (for their own mental health and wellness) and get involved with them.
- Professors are encouraged to regularly learn about existing student mental health and wellness activities, spaces, training and programs and promote them to their students.
- Academic and administrative leaders are encouraged to regularly review existing faculty and support staff mental health and wellness activities, spaces, training and programs and promote them among teams and colleagues.



# Next Steps

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Understanding that advancing a caring and compassionate university community is the individual and collective responsibility of our community, the Provost and Vice-President, Academic Affairs will continue to champion mental health and wellness at the University of Ottawa.

A strong and permanent governance model will be crucial to ensuring the advancement of mental health and wellness. Recognizing that some elements of the framework intersect with other key institutional documents, focus will be directed towards strengthening integration with them to ensure a holistic approach to wellness (e.g. [Transformation 2030](#), the [Indigenous Action Plan](#), the [Final Report Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence](#), the [Sustainability Plan](#), and the [Accessibility Plan](#)).

Building on the cooperative approach established by the University Advisor on Mental health and Wellness, the implementation of the Framework will be done through collaboration; ensuring coordination and efficiency regarding challenges and opportunities; and engagement and sharing of views and expertise. Key to the governance structure

will be the presence of leaders from the most implicated sectors, including Student Affairs, Human Resources, and Faculty Relations. Active and strong engagement from students, professors, support staff and external communities as co-creators of change will also be an essential component.

Achieving our goals of becoming a caring and compassionate university community requires a coordinated implementation through specific actions to support the priority focus areas. uOttawa commits to keeping our university community informed on actions taken and progress made on an annual basis. Periodic evaluation of the University's progress will be accomplished through quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys and focus groups. In addition, we will foster dialogue with the university community and subject matter experts to ensure our efforts are relevant, effective and connected.

The Framework will be reviewed at least every five years to ensure the Framework's continued relevancy in advancing a caring and compassionate environment that empowers our university community to thrive.



# Appendices

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## Appendix 1 - Definitions of Terms

**Health** is viewed holistically, reflecting ‘physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.’ It is a basic human right. (World Health Organization, 1986). ‘One health definition is the understanding of health (salud) as living life with autonomy, solidarity, and pleasure’ (WHO 1946, quoted on p. 4, the Okanagan Charter 2015). Everyone has the right to health (OCHR,2008).

**Mental health.** ‘A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.’ (World Health Organization (WHO), 2022).

**Equity in Health** can be defined as when everyone has fair opportunities to thrive. Inequities occur when there are unfair or avoidable differences in opportunities to be healthy. Usually, these inequities are socioeconomic, racial, or gender based (Tyler, Amare, Hyndman and Hanson, 2014).

**The Social determinants of health.** These non-medical determinants of health and health equity involve that context in which we are born, live, work and play, including our broader social and political systems. The World Health Organization list includes income and social protection, employment and working conditions, food insecurity, housing, social inclusion and non-discrimination, and child development as some of the social determinants of health (WHO, n.d.).

**Well-being.** Well-being concerns not only health, but ‘who you are as a person and your perception of how your life is going.’ ‘Well-being may be defined as a combination of feeling good and functioning well; experiencing positive emotions such as happiness and contentment, the development of one’s having control over one’s life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships’ (p. 1, Ruggeri, Garcia-Gazon, McGuire, McGuire et al., 2020).

**Wellness.** ‘The sum of all the positive steps you take in order to lead a healthier life.’ It is body-focused and depends on your physical, social, and mental state. It is an important component of wellbeing (Bass, 2017). At the University of Ottawa, we focus on the 7 pillars of wellness which encompass much of well-being.

**A healthy campus** as defined by the Okanagan Charter, ‘considers how well being is infused throughout policies and procedures, the built environment, the classroom, communications, programs and services’.

**Intersectionality** is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘relating to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to an individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.’

**Empathy** occurs when someone imagines what it would be like to be the person who is suffering and feels their pain. It is a precursor to compassion.

**Compassion** is ‘valuing and respecting others, recognizing suffering and inequities, responding with kindness and care, and acting’. Thus, the practice of compassion requires interpersonal interaction, and an openness to listening and understanding (Waddington, 2021).

**Self-compassion.** According to Neff, it involves self-kindness, common humanity (recognizing that we are all imperfect and that everyone makes mistakes), and mindfulness. It is important to note that self-compassion is not selfishness or narcissism (Nowlan, 2021), but taking responsibility for your own self-care and resilience.

**Resilience** is the ability to adapt and thrive when confronted with stressful and challenging situations. By equipping our community with the right skills and supports, we can foster resilience, and ultimately the well-being of our community.

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