Setting the Record Straight: Authenticating Mental Health Information Online

Duration: 2 hours

Overview

This lesson begins by having students consider the use of the Internet as a research tool and discuss its advantages and drawbacks. Students then consider the Internet as a source for information on mental health and discuss specific advantages and disadvantages in that context. The teacher introduces students to techniques for using search engines and databases more accurately and efficiently in order to produce more reliable and relevant results. Students examine and analyze several good sources of information on mental health (such as Kids Help Phone) in order to recognize the markers of a reliable source. Finally, the teacher leads a guided discussion on popular myths about mental illnesses and students investigate a list of "facts" (some true and some false) about mental illnesses and report on their findings to the class.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as a research tool

- Learn and practice Internet search skills

- Become familiar with reliable online sources on mental health

- Research information on mental health

- Evaluate online sources of information on mental health

Preparation and Materials

To prepare for this lesson, please ensure you:

- Read the *Let's Talk: Finding Reliable Mental Health Information and Resources Teacher Training Guide* [http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/Lets_Talk_Teacher_Training_Guide.pdf]

- Review the *Let's Talk: Finding Reliable Mental Health Information and Resources Teacher Training Presentation* [http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/tutorials/teacher-training-presentation/index.html]

- Review the *Let's Talk About Mental Health* student presentation [http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/Lets_Talk_Student_Presentation.zip].

Load the interactive quiz *Hide and Seek: How to Find What You Need Online*

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *True or False? Myths and Facts about Mental Health*

- *Internet Search Skills*

- *Reliable Sources* (make three copies per student of the second page)

- *Website Evaluation Form*

Procedure

Begin by asking students how good they think they are at finding information online. Are there things that they find easier or more difficult about online searching? Do they find it easier to search for information they need for personal reasons or information they need for school? Who would they turn to if they had trouble finding information they needed – a teacher, a parent or another adult, or a peer (a friend, sibling, etc.)?

Now ask students why they like to use the Internet for research and answers and record their responses on the board. Responses are likely to include that it's easy to access information online, it can be done quickly and that they're comfortable with the technology.

Ask students what might be some drawbacks of getting information online. It may be harder to elicit responses in this case so, if necessary, guide students to or simply add the following: information on the Internet isn't always accurate; you're not always sure who the source or author is; there's so much information you can't always sort it out; and it's easy to find things you're not looking for instead of things that you are looking for.

Now show students the *Let's Talk About Mental Health* student presentation to help them understand the context of the lesson. Make sure students are clear on the distinction between the terms *mental health* and *mental illness*: we all have mental health in the same sense that we all have physical health. People with a mental illness can still enjoy mental health and have a high quality of life and people who are never diagnosed with a mental illness can still experience mental health challenges.

Once students understand the concepts of *mental health* and *mental illness*, ask the class what they think would be the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet specifically as a source of information about mental health. Advantages are likely to be that it's anonymous and less embarrassing than talking to a person face-to-face or doing research in a public place like a library. A major disadvantage, in addition to the drawbacks considered above, is that it can be hard to find reliable information online.

Explain to students that finding any kind of information online is a skill: there are methods and tricks they can use that will help them to find what they want, get more relevant results and have fewer unwanted results.

Hide and Seek Interactive Quiz

Explain to students that they're now going to apply online search skills towards questions around mental health. Distribute the *Internet Search Skills* handout and have the class complete the *Hide and Seek: How to Find What You Need Online* interactive quiz. This can be done as a whole class (using a data projector or interactive whiteboard) by students individually or in pairs in the classroom, computer lab or at home. *(Some parts of the quiz involve reading a significant amount of text. It is recommended that you preview the quiz before doing the lesson and, if you feel your students may have difficulty with the reading involved, present it in a whole-class setting using a data projector or interactive whiteboard.)*

Alternative Internet Search Skills Exercise

If you are not able to use the *Hide and Seek* interactive quiz, do the following exercise instead:

1. Explain to students that they are now going to learn some tricks to help them when they are searching for information online, and then they will practice what they've learned by answering some questions about mental health.

2. To start, distribute and review the handout *Internet Search Skills*. Once this is done, have students imagine they have been asked to find out what the most common form of mental illness is among youth. First ask what they think the answer might be, and after a brief discussion, invite them to write on the board search strings they might use to find answers to this question online. The first few suggestions will probably be fairly rudimentary, so remind them to go through the tips for building a search string from the handout.

   - **More terms:**

     What are all of the relevant terms that should be included? Probably "youth" or "teens," certainly "mental illness" and "common," perhaps some forms of mental illness you suspect may be common such as "anxiety" or "depression."

   Where could "OR" or "~" be usefully employed (i.e. how many similar terms are there for "youth" or "teens"? Could there be synonyms of "common"?). Are there terms that could be usefully searched as phrases ("anxiety disorder" is likely to get more relevant results than using "anxiety" as a search term).

   - **Filtering bad results:**

     Ask students if there are any terms they might want to exclude by using "NOT" or "-" to avoid getting irrelevant hits. Remind them that they can always refine a search after doing it, so they can use "NOT" if they find any irrelevant hits appearing.

3. Encourage students to boil down the discussion into two or three search strings such as:
   - common ~teens "mental illness"
   - ~effects teens anxiety OR depression OR schizophrenia
   - "mental illness" youth OR teens

4. Make sure to remind students that while the Internet can be a good source of health information, it's not a good idea to use online resources to diagnose yourself, your family members or friends. If students are concerned about their or someone else's physical or mental health they should always go to a parent, a medical professional or another adult they trust.

When students are done, ask them:

- What did they have to do to find the information they needed? What tools or techniques did they use that helped them to find it? (e.g. NOT, quotation marks, site-specific searches.)

- What sources did different students end up using? How did they decide to use those sources?

- How did they know if the source they used was reliable? What were some clues to its reliability or unreliability? (The Web address, who runs the site, whether the site's author has any authority on the topic, whether the site has any hidden motives such as trying to sell things.)

Make sure to remind students that while the Internet can be a good source of health information, it's not a good idea to use online resources to diagnose yourself, your family members or friends. If students are concerned about their or someone else's physical or mental health they should always go to a parent, a medical professional or another adult they trust.

Myths and Facts about Mental Health

Distribute or project the handout *True or False? Myths and Facts about Mental Health* and review it with students. As you go through it, ask them to circle "True" or "False" for each question but not to share their opinions at this point.

Now divide the class into pairs or groups and have students research the statements in the handout to find out whether or not each one is true. For each statement have students record the search strings and websites they are using to find the information they need.

Once the groups have finished their research, have them share their findings (and correct them if necessary, using the *True or False? Myths and Facts about Mental Health Answer Sheet*). Each time a student or group volunteers an answer, ask them for the name and URL of the website they used as a resource.

Correct answers are in bold.

1. **Most people with mental illnesses start to get them as children.**

☑ **True**   ☐ False

2. **Most people with a mental illness are likely to be violent.**

☐ True   ☑ **False**

3. **Most people with mental illnesses are also developmentally delayed.**

☐ True   ☑ **False**

4. **Mental illnesses are the most common cause of disability in young Canadians.**

☑ **True**   ☐ False

5. **Mental illnesses can be contagious.**

☐ True   ☑ **False**

6. **There are effective treatments for most mental illnesses.**

☑ **True**   ☐ False

Reliable Sources

Explain to students that in addition to using search engines, another option for finding information about mental health online is to use websites that specialize in mental health that are known to be trustworthy.

But before you can bookmark these trusted sources, you need to establish that they are reputable. Distribute the handout *Reliable Sources* and talk students through the answers. Then, as a class, individually or in groups, have students navigate to the three websites listed below and evaluate each one using the handout:

- www.kidshelpphone.ca
- http://mindyourmind.ca
- http://www.cmha.ca

Ask students: What clues were present about the reliability of each site? How useful did each site seem as a source of information, and why? (These are all authoritative sites so it's important to stress *how* students know they're reliable.)

How Much Does the Internet Know?

To close the lesson, return to the question of the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as a source of information on mental health and ask students if they have identified any new strengths or weaknesses. Point out that as with any medium, the Internet is only as strong as the sources of information that you use – which makes it vital to be sure that each source you use is reliable.

Distribute the handout *Website Evaluation Form* and have students return to their groups. Have each group choose three of the sources they used when they were researching their myths and evaluate them using questions in the handout (if they consulted fewer than three sites, have them evaluate one or more of the "reliable sources" provided above).

Have students share their findings with the class and have each group name one site they felt was the best resource on mental health information for youth.

INTERNET SEARCH SKILLS

The Internet is a terrific source of information on all kinds of topics. But sometimes it's **too** good: there's so much information out there, it can be hard to find just what you're looking for.

Most of the time, we use **search engines** like Google or Yahoo to help us find things. Search engines catalogue part of what's on the Internet, but they're only as smart as you are: they give you exactly what you ask for. If you're not specific enough, you may not get the information you need.

The words you use in a search engine are called your **search terms**. All of them together are called your **query** or **search string**. In general, the **more relevant words** you include in your query, the better your results will be.

As well as the actual words you're searching for, most search engines will let you add OR and NOT to your search to limit the number of results.

Including OR between two words means that you will get results that include either word. This is good when you have two words that are synonyms or close in meaning.

For example, "manic depression" is an older term that was replaced by "bipolar," but because this term is still sometimes used, if you are searching for information about bipolar disorder, it is a good idea to include "manic depression" in your search string.

Example:

    manic depression OR bipolar

You can also use the tilde sign (~) to look for a word and any words that mean the same thing. For example, a search for "~bipolar" will also search for "manic depression," because the two words mean the same thing.

Placing NOT before a word means that you will only get results that **do not** include that word. This helps eliminate many irrelevant results. You can also do this by putting a minus sign (-) before the word or words you want to exclude.

Using NOT or a minus sign is helpful when a term is important in more than one situation. For example, if you're searching for information about depression you may find a lot of your search results are about the Great Depression of the 1930s. By keeping out any results that include the word "history" you can avoid a lot of these irrelevant hits.

Example:

    depression NOT history
    depression -history

You can also search for a whole phrase by placing it within quotes. This means you will get only results where those words occur exactly as they are quoted. For example, if you want information about manic depression, and don't want separate search results for "manic" and for "depression," you would enter the whole phrase in quotation marks:

    "Manic depression"

You can also limit your search to a particular website by placing "site:" and then the site's URL (Web address) after your search string. This is useful if you know of a good site and want to find particular information there. For example, if you are looking for information about schizophrenia on the Kids Help Phone website you would enter:

    Schizophrenia site:www.kidshelpphone.ca

TRUE OR FALSE? MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

There are a lot of myths about mental health and mental illness. Use search engines and reliable sources to find out which of the statements below are true and which are false. (Even if you think you know the answer, look it up.)

---

1. Most people with mental illnesses start to get them as children.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

2. Most people with a mental illness are likely to be violent.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

3. Most people with mental illnesses are also developmentally delayed.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

4. Mental illnesses are the most common cause of disability in young Canadians.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

5. Mental illnesses can be contagious.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

6. There are effective treatments for most mental illnesses.

☐ True   ☐ False

Website(s) used:

_____

_____

Search string(s) used:

_____

_____

RELIABLE SOURCES

The Internet is full of sources of information, but not all are created equal. Some are reliable, but others are trying to persuade you or sell you things, some are just jokes and some are just individual opinions that could actually be harmful.

You can find out if a website is useful by considering the following questions:

1. What is the website's purpose?

- Is it to inform, entertain or persuade, to sell something, to make a joke?

- How do you know?

2. Who is behind the screen?

- Has someone taken responsibility for what is written there? Is an author's name listed?

- Is information about the author or organization clearly stated?

- Can you contact the author or the organization?

- Are there links to detailed information about the author or organization?

- Who links to the site? (Go to Google or your preferred search engine and search "link:" and the site's URL, as in "link:www.mediasmarts.ca." Do not put a space between "link:" and the URL.)

3. Is the information biased in any way?

- Is there a connection between the author's viewpoint and the organization he or she represents? (You can do a Web search on the author or the organization to help you figure that out.)

- Is emotion a big part of what the site uses to try to persuade you?

- Does the author use "loaded language" (words that get a strong emotional reaction) or make broad statements that are not supported by evidence?

- Can the information be verified from other sources?

- Does the site offer more than one point of view or link to other points of view?

4. Is the information up to date?

- Is it important that information about your topic be up to date?

- Does the site show when the information was created and last updated?

- Do all the links still work?

Use the worksheets on the following pages to evaluate three websites on mental health information.

RELIABLE SOURCES (CONTINUED)

Website title: **URL:**

Is the site's purpose to inform, entertain or persuade, to sell something, to make a joke?

_____

_____

How do you know?

_____

_____

_____

Is an author's name listed? What is it?

_____

Is information about the author or organization clearly stated? What is it?

_____

_____

Can you contact the author or the organization? What contact information is given?

_____

Are there links to detailed information about the author or organization?

_____

_____

Who links to the site?

_____

_____

Is there a connection between the author's viewpoint and the organization he or she represents? (You can do a Web search on the author or the organization to help you figure that out.)

_____

_____

Is emotion a big part of what the site uses to try to persuade you?

_____

_____

Does the author use "loaded language" (words that get a strong emotional reaction) or make broad statements that are not supported by evidence? Give examples if so.

_____

_____

Does the site offer more than one point of view or links to other points of view? Give an example if so.

_____

_____

Is the information up to date? How do you know?

_____

_____

_____

Do all the links still work? List any broken links.

_____

_____

_____

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WEBSITE EVALUATION FORM

Website title: **URL:**

Did you find the information you were looking for on this site?

_____

_____

How easy was it to find? Why?

_____

_____

_____

Was the information presented in a way that was engaging and easy to understand? Give examples of why or why not.

_____

_____

_____

Was the information you found on this site reliable? How do you know?

_____

_____

_____

Was the information you found on this site complete or were there other things you would have liked to have know?

_____

_____

_____

Did the site seem biased in any way? How do you know?

_____

_____

_____

Do you think this is a site young people would want to visit to get information on mental health challenges? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____