

# The Alberta Counsellor Letter

June 2020



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# Editorial

As another winter comes to an end and we begin seeing promising signs of spring, the Council of School Counsellors (CSC) has taken some time to reflect on the importance of hope. While we transition to this new season, we continue to face challenges in our school communities and in our province at large.

It is my hope that despite these difficult situations, we can see opportunity in adversity – the opportunity to connect with and lean on one another for support and the opportunity to prioritize the causes that matter to us most.

This issue of *The Alberta Counsellor* offers snippets of hope for you. Perhaps you will find a spark of inspiration from the great work your colleagues are doing across the province, or be comforted by the knowledge that the council gives members a space to collaborate and ask for help. Maybe you will give yourself permission to set healthy boundaries, or to take pause and reframe your language, mindset and outlook. Whatever your take-away, please share the message with a colleague, a student or a friend in need. Hope is a seed that when nurtured can grow exponentially.

*Miranda Mackenzie*

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## President's Report



Welcome to a new year and a new decade! I look forward to 2020 and all the opportunities it will provide for the CSC.

Collaboration was in the air on January 17 at the ATA's PETS (presidents, editors, treasurers and secretaries)

training for specialist councils. We also participated in an ATA PD session on andragogy (tips for teaching adult learners).

Members of the CSC executive have also been providing professional development around the province. We hope you caught us at your teachers' convention!

One event I have especially been looking forward to is our Vision Towards Wellness conference, jointly organized with the Health and Physical Education Council (HPEC), which was to take place April 30 to May 2 in Lethbridge. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19, we have had to postpone this conference until next spring. This promises to be a tremendous opportunity to gather with other professionals from across the province who want to promote positive mental and physical health. Stay tuned for updates!

*Erin Luong*

# Regional Reports

## Calgary

I joined the CSC in January, and my first duty was to attend the ATA specialist council preservice carousel. This event was held on Saturday, January 18, at Mount Royal University. It truly was extraordinary. The more than 200 student teachers who attended were engaged and curious about the services that specialist councils provide. For me, it was a great opportunity to talk to members of other specialist councils and to see how passionate we all are about our vocation.

I look forward to getting to know the other members of our council.

*Pattie Quinn*

## Mid-Central

It's hard to believe that we are quickly approaching the end of yet another busy and exciting school year. Here's a quick update on what we've been up to in the Mid-Central region.

This year, all school counsellors, teachers, and administrative and support staff participated in a full-day Go-To Educator Training. This training provides mental health knowledge, literacy, identification and support strategies for working with students, families and health providers. As a facilitator, I am excited to see so many colleagues using common language to discuss mental health and to better understand the pathways for supporting their students. Our next step is to deliver the mental health curriculum to students in the upcoming school year.

Our high school counsellors also had an opportunity to collaborate in order to share best practices, challenges, helpful resources and ideas for schoolwide mental health promotion. This was a worthwhile opportunity to get to know each other and develop our school counsellor network. We plan to meet again to further our collaborative efforts, learn from each other and build capacity.

We are excited to continue partnering with Stan Kutcher (a psychiatrist and now a Canadian senator) and TeenMentalHealth.org to keep up the momentum in valuing mental health and wellness in our schools and communities.

*Melissa Brennan*

## North

Greetings from Fort McMurray and northern Alberta!

I am pleased to share that as I write this report, the weather has warmed up here (well, it's not 40 below, at least).

Our school counselling staff have stayed busy, getting the new and improved online FRIENDS program off the ground for implementation in our district's Grade 5 classrooms. This program, which promotes socio-emotional learning and self-regulation, is sure to help our students learn more about themselves while equipping them with simple and efficient tools they can use throughout the day, at school and beyond.

I recently attended EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) training with district colleagues and practitioners from the community. This powerful and engaging approach to therapy was very well received, and we now feel better equipped to support students and families going through any form of distress in relation to traumatic events or crises. This training will help us bring some much-needed relief to our community, which is still recovering from the May 2016 wildfire.

I have been increasingly interested in learning more about posttraumatic growth and how this work can facilitate disaster recovery in my community and beyond. It was such a pleasure to have a conversation about hope with our CSC executive and psychologist Wendy Edey last November, as hope ties nicely into posttraumatic growth work.

Last summer I supported the IT for Dominica Foundation's Summer Institute as a counselling course instructor following Hurricane Maria. I am scheduled to return this summer, and I hope to share some of this very interesting work with this year's participants.

Additionally, I will offer our regional CSC members a workshop on posttraumatic growth concepts. I hope this workshop will take the form of a conversation and an opportunity to share ideas about how this work can be integrated into our schools and our community.

I feel hopeful as the weather warms up and as my focus shifts to the strength and the lessons that traumatic events can bring to a community.

*Natalie Doucette*

## **South East**

The 2019/20 school year has been a busy one, so the South East Regional has not gathered yet. A few new colleagues have joined the school counselling profession in our region. Welcome to the club! I am still encouraging colleagues new and old to join the CSC.

In November, I attended a professional development workshop and CSC executive meeting in Edmonton. The workshop was Finding Hope: Supporting Student and Teacher

Hope in Bad Times and Good, presented by Wendy Edey. With the current education climate in our province, this session was exactly what we needed. Wendy was uplifting, realistic and inspiring. I encourage colleagues to check out her work and her blog, *The Hope Lady* (<http://thehopelady.blogspot.com>).

In February, I hosted a session at the Southeastern Alberta Teachers' Convention for school counsellors, teachers and administrators on understanding obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This session included information from Nicoelle Wanner, a physician in Medicine Hat; a short film called *Unstuck: An OCD Kids Movie*; and a first-hand account from a former Medicine Hat High School student diagnosed with OCD. Strategies to help students cope with OCD were shared.

Please contact me at [leah.steiner@sd76.ab.ca](mailto:leah.steiner@sd76.ab.ca) if you have any questions.

Thank you to all school counsellors for their work in our region and across Alberta!

*Leah Steiner*

# Hope Workshop

## Hope

*A poem collectively written by the CSC executive*

Optimism for our future and  
Acceptance; differing from one person's  
Journey to the journey of  
Others. It is a mindset to keep  
Going and a desire to practise with  
Purpose. It feels positive.  
Hard to find.  
Sometimes.

It can be lost, yet regained and  
Shared. And it changes with the ages.  
We can feel pain and still  
Find hope. The aftermath of  
Loss shifting.  
Challenging those with many  
Layers.

Implying that things will be different.  
Directed, yet stronger when linked with  
Others. Looking forward.  
Gathering one's self,  
Ourselves, modifying our  
Collectivity and action.  
Motivating.

Hope and reality can  
Exist.

On November 23, the CSC executive gathered before our executive meeting to participate in the workshop Finding Hope: Supporting Student and Teacher Hope in Bad Times and Good, with psychologist Wendy Edey. You may remember last fall as a time of upheaval and uncertainty for education in our province. Having Wendy present to sit with us and share her understanding and practices of hope was like having a three-hour massage. She helped us de-stress and come together with a common hope framework to underpin the work we do as school counsellors.

After years of working as a psychologist, Wendy developed her hope-based counselling approach, which she became well known for in Edmonton. Her work has now blossomed into Hope Studies Central, at the University of

Alberta, where psychologist and professor Denise Larsen researches the role of hope for those suffering from serious physical and emotional illnesses. The field of hope research is vast, and research indicates that higher levels of hope are associated with beneficial outcomes, including in the areas of physical and mental health, education, sports, and even business. A hopeful orientation, despite adversity, encourages active engagement in life and creative problem solving.

Wendy began by asking us to complete three sentences stems: "I will . . .," "I wish . . ." and "I hope . . ." Then, we were asked to think and to feel the intentions of each statement and to thoughtfully examine how we used our words. We also worked on changing the structure of our phrasing to reflect a hope-based attitude. For example, Wendy talked about how normally one would complain about rain ruining a picnic. She suggested that we instead try a hopeful approach (for example, hoping that when the picnic is on, the sun might show its face or shifting our language by stating that the sun is not shining *yet*). This might remind you of some current methodologies, such as Carol Dweck's mindset theory.

We were then asked to collectively think out loud about what hope feels like, sounds like and looks like, and our ideas were written on the board. When we put these thoughts together to make some sense, we created the found poem at the beginning of this piece.

During the rest of the workshop, we discussed common themes related to the future of school counselling. With Wendy's guidance, we were able to air our concerns and shift into a positive and hopeful framework. One of our main take-aways was that we must be cognizant of how we use our words while counselling and work to bring the language of hope into our conversations.

To learn more about the hope philosophy, visit the Hope Studies Central website (<https://sites.google.com/a/ualberta.ca/hope-studies/>) and Wendy's blog, *The Hope Lady* (<http://thehopelady.blogspot.com>). Hope Studies Central also offers an educational psychology course at the undergraduate and graduate levels called Hope and the Helping Relationship.

*Mary Frances Fitzgerald*

# It's OK to Say No: How Establishing Boundaries Can Help in the Long Run

Most of us entered the teaching profession because we want to make a difference for the people around us. People in our lives may ask for our time and attention, and we may be drawn to say yes to these requests for a variety of reasons, including feeling honoured to have been asked, feeling pressure because we have always helped in the past, and feeling guilty about saying no and letting someone down.

However, research shows that sometimes saying yes can do more harm than good, as we lose track of our priorities and our boundaries. As Michael Hyatt (2019) writes, "All my yeses meant I was overcommitted, shortchanging my relationships, and unable to do my best work."

## Have You Heard of the Pickle Jar Theory?

As Mulder (2017) explains,

Every day, we fill out time with important, less important, and unimportant things. The Pickle Jar Theory serves as a visual metaphor to determine what is useful and what is not useful. It helps you to set your priorities for daily life and plan tasks in such a way that you have time to spare instead of too few hours in the day.

Imagine that your daily calendar is a pickle jar. A number of requests are made of you each day, and these requests fill up your jar. Rocks are the most important tasks, which you must do. Pebbles are tasks of average importance, which can possibly be carried out by others or can

simply wait. Sand is the least important tasks and disruptions. If you put only sand in your jar, it becomes filled to the top without leaving any space for those most important rocks.

When we start filling our calendars with our priority tasks (rocks) and then fill them out with the tasks of average importance (pebbles), we can see how much, if any, space we have left for the extras in our lives (the sand).

## Saying No Gives You More Time to Say Yes to What's Important to You

What are your priorities? Take some time to identify the rocks, pebbles and sand in your life.

Rocks	Pebbles	Sand

## Remember That Saying No Helps You Establish Healthy Boundaries

If you are asked to do a task that will overload your calendar (or leave no room in your pickle jar), you need to be able to say no. Saying no will help you feel empowered while maintaining your relationships with others. By committing to only those tasks that you are confident you can accomplish in a timely manner, you are showing those around you that you are reliable. This helps to establish trust in your relationships.

Hyatt (2019) reminds us what will happen if we don't say no:

1. Other peoples' priorities will take precedence over ours.
2. Mere acquaintances – people we barely know! – will crowd out time with family and close friends.
3. We will not have the time we need for rest and recovery.

4. We will end up frustrated and stressed.
5. We won't be able to say yes to the really important things.

## So How Do We Say No Respectfully?

*Experteer Magazine* (2018) suggests strategies that can help us establish our boundaries in a respectful manner:

- Postponement: "I am buried in work at the moment. Could you please come back to me later?" With this statement, you are making it clear that you are restricted when it comes to time. If they come back again later, you know they are serious about speaking with you.
- Referral: "I am not qualified enough to work on this project. However, maybe this will help." You do not need to give advice on topics that are out of your area of expertise.
- Introduction: "I am not the best person to speak to about this topic, however, I know who could help." Direct them to one of your contacts who is an acknowledged expert in that specific area. . . .

- Refer to your relationships: "Unfortunately, if I help you with that, I won't have any time for anyone else." Point out the obligations you have to other people.
- Personal development: "I am really sorry to disappoint you. I am making a point of saying no more often this year. You seem especially persistent and it seemed like a good opportunity for me to practice my resolution."

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*Erin Luong*

# Rita's Run

*As a result of COVID-19, Rita's Run has been cancelled for 2020. However, please keep this valuable event in mind for next year.*

I want to share with you all a bit about a friend of mine.

Sandra Asuchak is a business owner in Lethbridge. She is the inspiration behind a successful fitness studio (Kinetic Indoor Cycle and Fitness) and cofounder of the Lethbridge chapter of 100 Women Who Care. She is highly involved in the Lethbridge community, giving her time, sponsorship and support to many local initiatives. She is a mom, a friend, a daughter, an aunt and a sister to Rita – who died by suicide because of mental illness.

Sandra's story is one of trauma, pain, loss, growth and resilience. She has purposefully invested in her own recovery in many ways. One is by establishing Rita's Run in support of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). This annual run is held on the first weekend of May, which is the start of Mental Health Week. Last year's inaugural run raised \$17,500 for the Lethbridge chapter of the CMHA. Simply amazing! Sandra inspires me so much, and I want to share her and Rita's story here with you all.

*Cathy Kitagawa*

## Our Story

Who is Rita? And why are we running for her? Rita was my older sister, and this is our story.

Rita was always the loud, funny one in the group. The centre of attention. The leader. The one making the plans. The life of the party. But she was always a good person. She never got into trouble, she always did well in school, and she was a beautiful person inside and out. My sister got married and had two beautiful boys. Her career as a teacher was a successful one. But somewhere down the line things began to change.



Being the first-born, my sister was very close to our parents. She would always visit our mom and dad during her lunch breaks or on her way home. It was very common to see her sitting at the kitchen table having an espresso with them.

One beautiful, sunny day in April 1999, my parents returned from grocery shopping to find their oldest daughter unconscious, with an empty pill bottle on the floor next to her. I was away at school, and I got the dreaded phone call telling me that my sister had overdosed and they were taking her to the hospital. Luckily, the emergency personnel were able to save her, and she was admitted into the psychiatric ward in a Toronto hospital on suicide watch. After a few days, she convinced us that she didn't belong there and that she felt fine. Our family was naive – we didn't understand mental illness. We just believed her when she said she was fine and signed her discharge papers.

The next few years were filled with ups and downs – almost literally, in fact, as my sister was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She described her low days as “dark clouds over me.” Her desire to undertake everyday tasks was minimal at best. During her manic periods, things spiralled out of control. She was not herself. Her doctor worked with her, trying to find the right medication and providing counselling.

By then, I had moved to Lethbridge, and our only way to stay in touch was through phone calls, which became more frequent as she fell deeper into a state of depression. I felt helpless, as did my family. We were not providing the support she needed, or the “solution” to her “problem,” as she would say. My sister was beginning to lose the sparkle in her eyes and the jump in her step. Something in my gut told me I





needed to see her, so I booked a flight and was set to arrive in Toronto on June 22, 2002.

On June 21, my older sister – my best friend, the person I looked up to the most in the world – made the decision to end her struggle

with mental illness and to end her life. She left behind a husband and two sons, ages four and six. We lost a daughter, a sister, a mom, a wife and a friend to so many. I now know in my heart that when she made that decision, she felt peace and relief. Things were different 18 years ago. People didn't talk about mental illness as openly as they do now. Fortunately, since then there have been so many advances in medical research and support for people suffering from this awful disease. It is now my turn to help.

Please come and run or walk with me to help raise funds and awareness for mental illness. Please help me help others who suffer from this debilitating disease.

*Sandra Asuchak*

# The Power of a Pause

*Originally published in the ATA News 54, no 6, December 10, 2019, [www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Vol54/Number-6/Pages/The-power-of-pause.aspx](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Vol54/Number-6/Pages/The-power-of-pause.aspx).*

Colleagues, the fierce energy and dedication we have been using this school year need to go on pause for one minute, a morning, one day, a few days, a week or even longer. The outer noises of politics, schedules, expectations, celebrations, academics, hustle and bustle need to soften into silence. We need to pause, regroup and be still.

Pausing is a simple act, yet we find it hard to do. In positive psychology, one might call a pause an act of mindfulness, which simply means that we are recognizing our brain and body chatter. We need to deactivate our overstimulated nervous systems, articulate and minimize our distressing thinking patterns, and find an anchor in the art of the pause. Recognizing the chatter is simply metacognition, the act of observing our thinking patterns that yearn for space, quiet or at least a decrescendo. Metacognition allows the brain to build capacity to pay attention to our thoughts, feelings and actions.

When we stop to notice our thinking, we are taking a natural pause, yet we might not recognize the thinking patterns we are using on a constant basis.

Let us take a moment to focus on a few patterns that cause distress, and if we start to recognize our patterns, we may learn to replace the thinking with a powerful rejuvenating pause.

One distressing pattern is all-or-nothing or black-and-white thinking, which makes no allowances for grey. This can cause distress because answers are not always “this or that” or “yes and no.” Our lived experiences have shown us that there are multiple layers to any situation.

A companion to all-or-nothing thinking is overgeneralizing. This is characterized by statements such as “All teachers are worried for their future,” which may, in reality, not be true.

If we pause, we may check our inner chatter and find that our thinking is black-and-white or overgeneralized and understand that this thinking is not accurate. It is the act of naming your thinking style that is mindful and certainly worthy of a pause.

Another common pattern is jumping to conclusions, which involves mind reading, fortune-telling or magical thinking – you might find yourself thinking you know what another person is thinking. For example, to this day, if I am called to a visit with the principal, I jump to conclusions and my inner chatter starts yelling a list of potential failings. This is usually accompanied by butterflies in my stomach. This is sometimes humorous for me, as in my training I know how to name and counteract my negative thinking; however, I still find myself in this uneasy predicament. After I name my negative thought pattern and tell myself I am jumping to conclusions, I then must check for the truth of my thinking. Thinking about one’s thinking is not always easy, and I work on my pauses through the process.

Your pause may offer opportunities to absorb rejuvenation in tiny bursts, like feeling the sun’s warmth on your face, observing the natural laughter of children, hearing the crunch of your boots on fresh snow, smelling the fragrance of a spruce tree or recognizing the gustatory joy of festive bites.

The pause allows us to wax nostalgic, connect with our grief and joy while we sparkle in our moments of hope. Yes, there are very real hard and harsh situations in our world, in Alberta and possibly in our homes. The gifts we can give to ourselves are self-compassion, self-kindness and self-worth. Reflect and recognize all that you have accomplished, endured and made possible for yourself, your families, your students and your world.

Teachers, we certainly understand how to give care, comfort and compassion to others, but most often we forget to give it to ourselves. Give yourself the opportunity for self-care. May you find the joy of rest, a good sleep, a few moments without noise. May you feel a quiet contentment, a moment of equanimity and the delight of hope. May you refresh your need for peace and gratitude.

And remember: give yourself the gift of a pause.

*Mary Frances Fitzgerald*

# School-Based Suicidal Ideation Response Protocol

The CSC is grateful to Alberta Health Services (AHS), as it continues to support our social-emotional work with students in Alberta schools.

Each school board has its own protocols with regard to information sharing, suicidal ideation response and nonsuicidal self-harm. If you are designated as a school counsellor, you should be aware of these protocols.

The CSC wants to ensure that all staff at schools, including school counsellors, understand these words: do no harm. One can do harm by not being trained to handle serious and possibly life-threatening situations. If you are unsure of how to handle such situations, and even if your school board has its own protocols, we suggest that you look at AHS's School-Based Suicidal Ideation Response Protocol to ensure that you understand the breadth and scope of care that might be expected of you.

In 2017, a committee was formed, with representatives from numerous AHS departments, various southern Alberta school authorities and related community-based organizations. The goal was to create an evidence-informed protocol for staff at schools to

follow in order to address suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour. The resulting School-Based Suicidal Ideation Response Protocol is now available on AHS's Mental Health Online Resources for Educators (MORE) website (<https://more.hmhc.ca>).

The protocol, which applies to students in kindergarten to Grade 12, aims to

- ensure the most appropriate response to suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour;
- build mental health capacity in school settings;
- improve student and family experiences;
- offer safety and supports in the school setting, wherever possible;
- reduce the number of non-urgent presentations to emergency departments for suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour; and
- coordinate responses across multiple systems and multiple mental health providers.

## Want to Participate in MORE Learning?

First, make sure you are registered on the MORE website (<https://more.hmhc.ca>). If you previously registered before December 2018, you will need to register again. Once you receive your confirmation e-mail, you're ready for the next step.

Next, log in with your username and password. Now you can enroll in as many courses as you like, including courses related to the School-Based Suicidal Ideation Response Protocol and the Non-Suicidal Self-Injury Response Protocol.

Healthy Minds Healthy Children

# MORE

Mental Health Online Resources for Educators

## Is there a Protocol for that?



### School-based Suicidal Ideation Response Protocol (SI Protocol)

**Are you ready to support a student expressing suicidal behaviour?**

This protocol is designed to:

- guide the most appropriate response
- outline roles & responsibilities
- build mental health capacity

Modules are tailored to all roles:

- SI Protocol: School Administrators
- SI Protocol: School Staff
- SI Protocol: Point Person
- SI Protocol: Mental Health Professional



### Special Project Updates

Stay Connected! Receive updated information by completing a form related to your project of interest.

<https://more.hmhc.ca/special-project-updates/>

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*growing healthy minds, supporting healthy children*



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780-447-9429 (direct)

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**“YOU ARE NOT ALONE.”**

**Jason Schilling**

*Teacher, President  
Alberta Teachers’ Association*

We are in a crisis.

Schools have been closed to students, parents and the community. However, teachers, along with parents, are still working hard to provide education to each child.

This is the temporary Face of Education.

The Alberta Teachers’ Association reminds you that you are not alone. Keep communication open between your teachers and your school—it’s the best way to get through this difficult time.

Thank you and please take care.



The Alberta Teachers’ Association

**teachers.ab.ca**

*Help is available. Call these numbers to reach the extra support you need:*

*Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 • Mental Health Help Line 1-877-303-2642 • [www.canwetalk.ca](http://www.canwetalk.ca)*

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