

UNIT 2: MENTAL HEALTH

Grade Level 6 - 8



INTRODUCTION

Themes & Ideas

- *Mental Wellness*
- *Sleep*
- *Emotional Regulation*
- *Artificial Intelligence*
- *Human Connections*

What Students Will Uncover

Through targeted discussions, self-audits, and hands-on activities, students will examine how generative chatbots, continuous device access to devices, and screen-induced sleep loss can influence their emotional health and daily stress levels. They will explore the psychological boundaries of AI “companionship” and learn concrete, low-tech habits to protect their inner wellbeing, sleep hygiene, and real-world coping mechanisms.

Lesson Overview

This guide addresses the integration of generative AI, screen exposure, and adolescent mental health. It focuses on chatbot persuasion, sleep disruption, and the restorative roles of physical boundaries and nature. It works well for educators to run:

As a follow-up to the Screening and Class Discussion Lesson Plan

OR

Independently, if you already know this is a subject you want to explore in particular.

We recommend that students watch Screenagers: Generation AI prior to (or as part of) this lesson, but relevant clips are embedded throughout the guide if students do not have time to watch the whole film or need a refresher.

The lesson is organized around activities that can be completed during a class period. Educators can select and arrange the activities to fit their class timing, including running activities over multiple periods or assigning them as homework.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- *Evaluate their daily device access, sleep hygiene, and screen habits to identify personal boundaries for emotional wellbeing.*
- *Analyze the risks of relying on AI chatbots or synthetic tools for emotional validation and crisis support.*
- *Examine how face-to-face human connection and sensory engagement in nature reduce stress and restore mental clarity.*
- *Formulate personal, low-tech routines to foster emotional agility and self-regulation without technological interference.*

Lesson Materials

- The lesson plan below
 - Activity 1: [24-Hour Access Worksheet](#)
 - Activity 2: [Sensory Nature Walk Reflection Sheet](#)
 - Activity 3: [Student Instruction Sheet: Non-Verbal Cues Challenge](#) | [Texting Cards](#) | [Emotion Prompt Cards](#)
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LESSON ACTIVITIES

Discussion Prompts & Video Reflections

- Please see the Discussion Format guidance at the end of this document -

 [View/Show: Expert Reflection Lisa Damour \(20 seconds\)](#)

1. Expert Reflection (Dr. Lisa Damour): Damour emphasizes that real counselors and human friends help you navigate hard conversations. Why might a teen turn to a chatbot instead of a counselor or parent? Why is human connection so important?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- Anonymous Comments
- Talk-Listen Partner Sharing

 [View/Show: Expert Reflection Anna Lembke \(20 seconds\)](#)

2. Expert Reflection (Dr. Anna Lembke): Dr. Lembke suggests chatbots might be used to relieve pressure on overloaded mental health systems. How do you think that would look, and what are the benefits and risks?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- Fishbowl
- Poster Board Discussion (Chalk Talk)

 [View/Show: Using AI Late at Night \(20 seconds\)](#)

3. What time is your first and last contact with a screen each day? Have you ever lost track of time on your phone or other device? What makes it hard to put away your screen at night? How does late-night screen access affect your mood, focus, and anxiety the next day?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- Post-It Notes (Silent Gallery Walk)
- Turn-and-Talk (Elbow Partners)

4. What regulations or personal rules do you have around screens in your bedroom at night? Has AI or social media made it harder to go to sleep on time?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- Musical Chairs (Concentric Circles)
- Anonymous Comments

 [View/Show: Time in Nature \(20 seconds\)](#)

5. What are three specific activities outside in nature that help your brain reset without a device?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- Turn-and-Talk (Elbow Partners)
- Poster Board Discussion (Chalk Talk)

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: Daily Device & Access Log

Overview: Students log their typical 24-hour schedule on a paper worksheet to calculate total screen availability, identify "first and last contact" times, and design concrete sleep hygiene boundaries.

Approximate Time: 20 minutes

Supplies:

- Printed [24-Hour Access Log Worksheets](#) (one per student)
- Highlighters

Teacher Instructions:

- **Preliminary Framing (2 mins):** Ask students: *"Do you know the exact time your eyes meet a screen in the morning and leave a screen at night?"*
- **Schedule Audit (10 mins):** Students fill out the hour-by-hour paper chart. They use highlighters to mark hours where a device is physically within arm's reach (including under pillows or beside beds).
- **Calculating Data (3 mins):** Have students calculate their total "Screen Access Hours" and write down their exact first and last contact times.
- **Follow-up Debrief (5 mins):** Ask:
 - *How does having a phone within reach while sleeping affect your rest, even if you aren't actively using it?*
 - *What are two realistic changes you can make to your sleep routine tonight?*

ACTIVITY 2: Sensory Nature Observation Walk

Overview: Students take a silent 15-minute outdoor walk, completing structured sensory check-ins on paper to measure the real-time effect of natural environments on stress and mental clarity.

Approximate Time: 25 - 30 minutes

Supplies:

- Printed [Sensory Nature Walk Reflection Sheet](#) (one per student)
- Pencils or pens

Teacher Instructions:

- **Pre-Walk Rating (5 mins):** Before stepping outside, students complete the
- **Silent Sensory Walk (15 mins):** Lead students outside in complete silence. Stop every 4 minutes and ask students to stand or sit quietly while you ask them the following questions. Students should not respond aloud. Rather, they should think quietly about their answers.
 - *What are five things you **see** right now?*
 - *What are four things you **hear** right now?*
 - *What are three things that you can **feel** or **touch** right now?*
 - *What are two things you **smell** right now?*
 - *What is one thing you **taste** right now?*
- **Post-Walk Rating (5 mins):** Upon returning, students record their post-walk mood and stress score.
- **Follow-up Debrief (5 mins):** Compare pre- and post-walk scores. Ask:
 - *How did stepping outside and tuning into physical senses change your internal state?*
 - *What kind of changes did you notice between your pre- and post-walk responses? Did any of these changes surprise you?*

ACTIVITY 3: "Non-Verbal Cues" Partner Challenge

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Overview: Pairs attempt to communicate complex, blended emotional stories using only written text notes versus face-to-face expressions, experiencing firsthand how much emotional context is lost over digital channels.

Approximate Time: 25 - 30 minutes

Supplies:

- Printed [Student Instruction Sheets](#) (1 per pair)
- Printed [Texting Cards](#) (1 per pair)
- Printed [Emotion Prompt Cards](#) (1 set per pair, kept face-down)
- Pens or pencils

Teacher Instructions:

1. Preliminary Framing (5 mins)

- Ask the class:
"Have you ever gotten into an argument or misunderstanding over a text message simply because someone misinterpreted your tone?"
- Briefly explain that digital communication strips away tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.
- Hand out the **Student Instruction Sheets**, **Texting Cards**, index cards, and a deck of **Emotion Prompt Cards** to each pair. Remind students to keep the prompt cards face-down.

2. Round 1: Text-Only Communication (10 mins)

- **Facilitation:** Instruct students to follow the directions for **ROUND 1** on their Student Instruction Sheet.
- **Enforce the Rules:**
 - Ensure **Partner A** reads only the scenario aloud, keeping the secret emotions hidden.
 - Strictly enforce **NO TALKING, whispering, or drawing** once the Texting Card is handed over. The exchange must happen exclusively through written notes.
- **Timing:**
 - **0:00 - 3:30 (Turn 1):** Partner A draws/reads; Partner B initiates with the Texting Card; written back-and-forth note-passing; Partner B guesses.
 - **3:30 - 7:00 (Turn 2):** Call out "Switch!" Partner B draws a new card and repeats the process as the writer.
 - **7:00 - 10:00:** Allow 1 - 2 minutes for pairs to finish their reveals and tally accurate guesses.

3. Round 2: Face-to-Face Communication (10 mins)

- **Facilitation:** Direct students to move to **ROUND 2** on their sheet.
- **Key Change:** Tell students they can now use spoken words, vocal tone, facial expressions, and gestures. But they still cannot directly say the two secret emotion words.
- **Timing:**
 - **0:00 - 3:30 (Turn 1):** Partner A draws/reads scenario; Partner B asks aloud *"Wow, I heard what happened! What are you going to do?"*; Partner A responds using face-to-face dialogue; Partner B guesses.
 - **3:30 - 7:00 (Turn 2):** Call out "Switch!" Partner B draws a new card and performs for Partner A.
 - **7:00 - 10:00:** Allow pairs to compare how much easier or harder it was to guess correctly in Round 2 versus Round 1.

4. Follow-up Debrief (5 mins)

- Bring the class back together to reflect on accuracy and experience:
 - *How many of you guessed the exact emotions correctly in Round 1 versus Round 2?*
 - *What kinds of details (tone, eyes, posture) made Round 2 clearer than Round 1?*
 - *Why might text-only channels or AI chat interfaces increase emotional distance and misunderstandings in real life?*

Frameworks

CASEL® SEL Competencies

Our Curriculum & Lesson Plans are independently aligned by the Screenagers Team to the CASEL® SEL Competencies Framework.

- **Self-awareness:** Identifying one's emotions. Linking feelings, values, and thoughts.
- **Self-management:** Identifying and using stress management strategies. Demonstrating personal and collective agency.
- **Social-awareness:** Demonstrating empathy and compassion. Taking others' perspectives.
- **Relationship Skills:** Seeking or offering support and help when needed.
- **Responsible Decision-making:** Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being.

AASL Standards Framework for Learners

Our Curriculum & Lesson Plans are also informed by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards Framework for Learners. For additional information and resources, including a downloadable format for the Learners Standards Framework, for AASL's National Standards visit standards.aasl.org.

Inquire

B. CREATE — Generating products that illustrate learning.

Curate

A. THINK — Identifying and evaluating information seeking strategies.

Include

B. CREATE — Evaluating a variety of perspectives during learning activities.

Explore

A. THINK — Reflecting and questioning assumptions and possible misconceptions.

D. GROW — Developing personal habits that reflect a critical stance toward information.

DISCUSSION FORMATS

Turn-and-Talk (Elbow Partners)

Students discuss the question with the closest student to their right, then turn and talk with the closest student to their left. Afterward, students are invited to share their opinions with the entire class.

Supplies Needed: *None*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Present the discussion prompt on the board or read it aloud.
2. Direct students to turn to their right and discuss the prompt with their elbow partner for 60 seconds.
3. Signal a transition and instruct students to turn to their left to discuss the prompt with a new partner for 60 seconds.
4. Bring the class together and invite 2 - 3 volunteers to share insights from their conversations.

Fishbowl

A small group of students sits in a center circle and actively discusses the prompt while the remaining students sit outside taking notes. Periodically, outer circle observers rotate into the inner circle to join the conversation.

Supplies Needed: *Chairs arranged in two concentric circles, paper, and pens.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Arrange 4 - 5 chairs in an inner circle (the Fishbowl) surrounded by the rest of the class in an outer circle.
2. Assign the inner circle to begin actively discussing the prompt while the outer circle actively listens and takes notes.
3. Every 3 - 5 minutes, pause the discussion to rotate students from the outer circle into the inner circle.
4. Conclude with a full-class debrief summarizing key arguments brought up by the inner circle.

Musical Chairs (Concentric Circles)

Students form two facing concentric circles and discuss a prompt in pairs for two minutes. After two minutes, the inner circle rotates clockwise to a new partner to repeat the discussion.

Supplies Needed: *Open floor space or desks arranged in two facing rows.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Divide the class into two equal groups, forming an inner circle facing outward and an outer circle facing inward.
2. Post a prompt and give pairs 2 minutes to share their perspectives.
3. Call "Time!" and instruct only the inner circle to rotate one spot clockwise to meet a new partner.
4. Repeat for 3 - 4 rotations using the same prompt or introducing new reflection questions.

Jigsaw Puzzle

Small groups discuss one portion of a prompt before splitting up to join a new group. In their new groups, students share what their original group discussed before tackling the next prompt.

Supplies Needed: *Playing cards or grouping tokens, chart paper, markers.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Split the class into "home groups" of 3 - 4 students using playing cards or random selection, assigning each group a distinct portion of a prompt.
2. Give home groups 5 minutes to discuss and record key takeaways on chart paper.
3. Re-sort students into "expert groups" containing one representative from each original home group.
4. Give each student 2 minutes to present their home group's findings to their new group.

Post-It Notes (Silent Gallery Walk)

Teachers post questions on boards around the room, and students walk around writing their responses on sticky notes. Classmates then walk through to read the notes and add check marks next to comments they agree with.

Supplies Needed: *Post-it notes, pens, chart paper hung around the room.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Hang poster boards with different prompts around the room.
2. Hand each student sticky notes and give them 5 - 7 minutes to walk silently around the room, posting written answers under each question.
3. Direct students to do a second lap with a pen, drawing a check mark (✓) next to comments they agree with and a question mark (?) next to points they want to clarify.
4. Gather as a class to review the posters with the highest concentration of checks or questions.

Poster Board Discussion (Chalk Talk)

Questions are written on poster boards around the room, and students walk around for 10 minutes writing their thoughts directly on the paper. Students mark a check next to points they agree with, and an X next to points of disagreement for a final class debrief.

Supplies Needed: Large poster paper/whiteboards, markers.

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Write central discussion prompts in the middle of large poster sheets placed on tables or taped to walls.
2. Give students 10 minutes to walk silently between posters, writing their responses directly on the paper.
3. Instruct students to read their peers' comments and draw a check mark (✓) next to statements they agree with and an "X" next to points of disagreement, adding brief written explanations.
4. Lead a debrief focusing explicitly on the clusters of agreement and disagreement across the boards.

Anonymous Comments

Students write their honest responses to a prompt on paper and submit them to the teacher anonymously. The teacher reads the responses aloud so the class can discuss which parts they agree or disagree with.

Supplies Needed: Index cards or uniform slips of paper, collection box/basket, whiteboard & markers.

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Distribute identical slips of paper or index cards, reading the prompt aloud or writing it on the board.
2. Provide 2 - 3 minutes for students to write an anonymous, honest response, then collect all cards in a box and shuffle them.
3. Read selected responses aloud to the class without identifying handwriting.
4. Transcribe main themes onto the board and facilitate a class discussion around common patterns or surprising perspectives.

Talk-Listen Partner Sharing

Partner A has one uninterrupted minute to respond to a question while Partner B listens quietly. Students then switch roles, followed by a final minute where both partners respond to each other's ideas.

Supplies Needed: Visual timer or stopwatch.

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Pair students up as Partner A and Partner B.
2. Partner A speaks for 60 seconds straight responding to the prompt, while Partner B listens completely uninterrupted.
3. Switch roles immediately: Partner B speaks for 60 seconds while Partner A listens.
4. Open a final 60-second block for open, two-way dialogue where partners react to what they heard from each other.

Four Corners

The teacher reads a statement, and students physically walk to a corner of the room labeled with their stance (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree). Each corner group briefly discusses their reasoning before choosing a spokesperson to share with the class.

Supplies Needed: Four corner signs labeled Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Post one sign in each of the four corners of the classroom.
2. Read a statement aloud to the class.
3. Instruct students to walk to the corner that best reflects their opinion.
4. Give each corner group 3 minutes to discuss their reasoning, then have a spokesperson from each corner present their argument to the class.

Socratic Seminar

Students sit in a single large circle and engage in a continuous, open discussion driven entirely by peer-to-peer questioning. Students build on each other's ideas and cite examples from the film without direct teacher intervention.

Supplies Needed: *Circle seating arrangement, printed text excerpts or discussion questions.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Arrange all chairs in a single large circle.
2. Provide a central question based on the film clip or reading.
3. Students lead the conversation entirely independently, raising hands to speak, building on peers' ideas, and citing evidence from the film without teacher intervention.
4. The teacher acts strictly as a timekeeper and recorder of participation.

Line Communication (The Consensus Continuum)

Students physically stand along a tape line on the classroom floor to show where their opinion falls between "100% Agree" and "100% Disagree." The teacher then prompts students standing at different points along the line to explain their stances.

Supplies Needed: *Masking tape line on the classroom floor labeled "100% Agree" on one end and "100% Disagree" on the other.*

Step-by-Step Guide:

1. Lay down a tape line across the room.
2. Read a policy or scenario prompt.
3. Ask students to physically stand along the continuum based on where their stance falls between the two extremes.
4. Ask students standing next to each other why they picked their specific spots, and invite students at opposite ends to debate their stances.