

UNIT 2: MENTAL HEALTH

Grade Level 9 - 12



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 Log Worksheets](#)
- Activity 2: [Sensory Nature Walk Reflection Sheet](#)
- Activity 3: [Role Descriptions](#) | [Job-Alike Discussion Cards](#) | [New Product Description Cards](#) | [Pre-Release Safety Agreement Template](#)

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Discussion Prompts & Video Reflections

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

 [View/Show: AI Regulation & Safety \(1 minute, 50 seconds\)](#)

1. Expert Reflection (Zak Stein): "Why is the burden of proof not on the tech company (to demonstrate safety) rather than... on the consumer (to demonstrate risk)?" What other industries require proven safety before release (e.g., medicine, autos)?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Fishbowl](#)
- [Socratic Seminar](#)

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

2. Expert Reflection (Dr. Anna Lembke): Dr. Lembke notes that AI "therapy" bots only provide validation without the necessary "pushback" an actual therapist provides. Why is constructive human pushback essential for emotional growth?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Talk-Listen Partner Sharing](#)
- [Poster Board Discussion \(Chalk Talk\)](#)

3. How much of your day is spent with immediate device access? What specific boundaries can you set regarding your first and last screen contact of the day?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Post-It Notes \(Silent Gallery Walk\)](#)
- [Turn-and-Talk \(Elbow Partners\)](#)

 [View/Show: Unsafe AI Models \(50 seconds\)](#)

4. The film highlights how companies rushed safety testing to beat competitors to market. Why is it dangerous to release untested AI models or allow romantic/sensual chatbots for minors?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Anonymous Comments](#)
- [Fishbowl](#)

5. Respond to the following prediction from an economist:

"In the near future, AI friends will be quite real, albeit automated, and they will talk back to our children as directly as we wish. Having an AI service for your child will be as normal as having a pet, except the AI service will never bite. It will be carried around in something like a tablet, though with a design that is oriented toward the AI."

Cowen, Tyler. "How Will AI Transform Childhood?" *Marginal Revolution*, 24 Mar. 2023,
<https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2023/03/how-will-ai-transform-childhood.html>.

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Socratic Seminar](#)
- [Four Corners](#)

 [View/Show: Impacts of Sleep Deprivation \(25 seconds\)](#)

6. How does screen-induced sleep loss directly impact anxiety, depression, focus, and daily motivation? What makes it easier or more difficult to disengage from your screen at night?

Suggested Discussion Formats:

- [Anonymous Comments](#)
- [Talk-Listen Partner Sharing](#)

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: Daily Screen Contact Audit & Schedule Redesign

Overview: High schoolers calculate their exact screen accessibility percentages over a 24-hour cycle and write a redesigned schedule that protects sleep quality and reduces daily anxiety.

Approximate Time: 20 minutes

Supplies:

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

Teacher Instructions:

- **Preliminary Framing (2 mins):** Ask:
 - *Do you know the exact time your eyes meet a screen in the morning and leave a screen at night?*
 - *What percentage of your waking hours do you spend within reach of an active digital notification?*
- **Audit & Calculation (10 mins):** Students log their daily routine, calculate their total screen-access percentage and highlight their first/last contact timestamps.
- **Schedule Redesign (8 mins):** On the back of the sheet, students draft a revised 24-hour routine inserting a non-negotiable 60-minute "Screen-Free Wind-Down Window" before bed.
- **Follow-up Debrief (5 mins):** Ask:
 - *What is the hardest barrier to enforcing a phone-free bedroom at night, and how can you overcome it?*

ACTIVITY 2: Sensory Nature Reset & Data Log

Overview: Students execute a structured outdoor mindfulness walk, collecting pre- and post-walk quantitative mood data to evaluate nature as an evidence-based stress-regulation tool.

Approximate Time: 20 - 25 minutes

Supplies:

- [Sensory Nature Walk Reflection Sheet](#) (one per student)
- Pens/pencils

Teacher Instructions:

- **Baseline Assessment (3 mins):** Students log baseline metrics on the first page of the [Sensory Nature](#)

[Walk Reflection Sheet](#)

- **Silent Sensory Observation (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-Reset Assessment & Debrief (7 mins):** Students log post-walk metrics and calculate net changes. Discuss the "Post Walk Questions" as a class. Ask:
 - *How does sensory engagement in nature impact your nervous system differently than scrolling on a phone screen?*

ACTIVITY 3: The Safety Agreement Briefing

Overview: Using a jigsaw structure, students first collaborate in role-specific "Job-Alike" expert groups (Tech Developers, Public Health Experts, Consumer Advocates) to evaluate four emerging AI product scenarios. Next, students break into cross-functional panels to negotiate and sign a binding 1-page "Pre-Release Safety Agreement" for an emerging tech product.

Approximate Time: 35 - 45 minutes

Supplies:

- [Role Descriptions](#) (1 per student)
- [Job-Alike Discussion Cards](#) (1-2 per Job-Alike group)
- [New Product Description Cards](#) (1-2 per Job-Alike group)
- [Pre-Release Safety Agreement Template](#) (1 per Mixed-Job group)
- Pens/pencils

Teacher Instructions:

- **Preliminary Framing (3 mins):** Frame the central dilemma from Zak Stein's reflection: *Should tech developers have to prove a product is safe before release, or should consumers have to prove it's harmful after it's been made available to the public?*
- Ask: *"Should tech developers have to prove an AI product is completely safe before releasing it, or should consumers have to prove it's harmful after it's already in millions of hands?"*
- Explain the Jigsaw structure: *"First, you will meet with other experts in your assigned jobs to build your strategy. Then, you will step into a high-stakes negotiation panel with competing stakeholders."*

Step 1: Job-Alike Groups (15 mins)

- Divide the class into 3 large "Job-Alike" home groups:
 1. Tech Developers

- 2. Public Health & Youth Experts
- 3. Consumer & User Advocates
- Hand out the appropriate Role Descriptions & Job-Alike Discussion Sheets to each group along with the 4 New Product Scenario Descriptions
- Students analyze their professional motivations, discuss the guiding questions, and review all 4 tech items to establish their "non-negotiable" features across every scenario.

Step 2: Cross-Functional Negotiation Panels (15 mins)

- Re-sort students into mixed-job panels of 3 - 4 students. Each new panel must contain:
 - 1 - 2 Tech Developer(s)
 - 1 Public Health Expert
 - 1 Consumer Advocate
- Assign one New Product to each new panel.
- **Task:** Panels will negotiate and complete a single Pre-Release Safety Agreement for their assigned product.
- **Constraint:** Students must negotiate concrete trade-offs (e.g., adding sleep locks, turning off default filters, or requiring physical mute switches) rather than just arguing over timeline numbers. All stakeholders must sign the final document to authorize the product launch.

Step 3: Synthesis & Debrief (5 mins)

Reconvene as a whole class and ask:

1. *How did your strategy change when you moved from your comfortable "Job-Alike" group into the mixed negotiation panel?*
2. *Which stakeholder was forced to make the largest compromise to get the safety agreement signed?*
3. *If a signed agreement fails and a product still causes harm, who holds ultimate responsibility: the developer, the regulator, or the user?*

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.