



Saving Francesca

Ideas for Secondary School Teachers

A package of ideas for secondary school teachers using *Saving Francesca* as a class text and who are interested in the following potential outcomes for students.

- Increasing students' understanding of mental illness and its effect on families.
- Reducing the stigma associated with mental illness.
- Increasing students' 'help seeking' behaviour.

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TEACHER PREPARATION | AND SUPPORT

Preparatory Training and Information

The ideas included in this package require an understanding of the concepts of mental health and mental illness. Prior to commencing work in this area with students it is highly recommended that the teacher has undertaken some MindMatters training (Check the website for training opportunities in your State <http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/>) and has visited the Education section of the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) Worker Resource Website <http://www.copmi.net.au>

Protective Behaviours

1) The nature of this work might touch on personal or sensitive issues for some students. Ensure that students know where and how to get help for themselves or their friends if there are any concerns about their own or someone else's well-being. It is appropriate to link with school psychologists/counsellors and/or community health workers to provide emotional support for these students. Many schools require teachers to notify the school psychologist or counsellor **BEFORE** these topics are discussed as part of the curriculum.

2) Some students may wish to talk about a personal experience or issue that arises from the work. Reflecting on personal situations in a group setting is not recommended in the general classroom and it is important that a student's or staff member's personal experience does not become the focus or content of the curriculum. It is therefore important that teachers provide students with clear guidelines about disclosure of personal information (e.g. seeing the teacher after class, seeing the school counsellor). Teachers should be prepared to protectively interrupt students whom the teacher feels may be about to disclose personal or sensitive information that should be disclosed in a private setting.

RESOURCES TEXTS, VIDEO AND CD

REFERRED TO WITHIN THIS PACKAGE

Saving Francesca, by Melina Marchetta (2003), Melbourne, Penguin Books Australia.
[Also available as an audio book; see <http://www.bolinda.com/aus>]

MindMatters curriculum booklets;

- ***Understanding Mental Illness,***
- ***Enhancing Resilience 2; Stress and Coping and***
- ***Loss and Grief.***

MindMatters is a mental health promotion resource for secondary schools. MindMatters distributed one free resource kit to every secondary school in Australia in 2002 but further copies can be ordered and PDF versions can be downloaded from <http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters>

Joe's Diary: A SANE guide for young people, SANE Australia (2001)
<http://www.sane.org>

SIC CD and Booklet: A resource for Secondary Teachers (and others who work with young people), by Julie Contole (2002). Contact: Phone (03) 9854 5122 for orders.

KOPING (Video and Booklet) Supporting children and young people whose parents are living with a mental health problem. Child & Youth Mental Health Service Royal Children's Hospital and Health Service District, P.O. Box 1507, Fortitude Valley, QLD 4006 (2002). Phone (07) 3835 1434

FAMILY TALK: Tips and information for families where a parent has a mental health problem or disorder, Australian Infant Child Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association (2004). Order free copies or download from <http://www.copmi.net.au>

THE USE OF LANGUAGE PERTAINING TO MENTAL ILLNESS

- Read with the class relevant sections on pages 7, 43 and 57 of *Saving Francesca* and note the ways various people described Mia's illness (e.g. "a bit down", "a bit of a breakdown"). Discuss if these descriptions were helpful to Francesca in understanding her mother's illness (e.g. page 52). Students could read the poem *Thesaurus of Madness* on page 73 of the MindMatters curriculum booklet *Understanding Mental Illness* and complete the creative writing task on page 68 of the same booklet.
- Once Francesca learns that her mother has depression (page 90) she can look up information on the Internet. Use sorting cards to divide the class into random groups to find out about depression from 3 different sources; the fact sheet regarding depression on pages 33-35 of the MindMatter's *Understanding Mental Illness* book; the beyondblue website's youth pages [<http://beyondblue.org.au/ybblue/>], and the SANE Australia website [<http://www.sane.org>].
- On page 120 Sue asks Francesca if Mia has seen a doctor and they discuss the use of anti-depressants. However, Robert is fearful of anti-depressants. Why? (See pages 155 and 156.) Ask the groups to use the websites and information again to develop a list of common treatments for depression. Invite the school counsellor or psychologist to answer questions about medication and other treatments for depression. Discuss how fear/lack of knowledge can prevent people from accessing treatment and/or disclosing that they or a family member has a mental illness.
- Using statements 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, 14 and 15 in the Community Attitude Survey on page 55 of the MindMatters book *Understanding Mental Illness* have the students participate in a 'Values Walk' (i.e. If they agree with the statement they stand at one end of the room, if they disagree they stand at the other end and if they are not sure they stand in the middle). Students are then asked why they are standing where they are, and if they hear something that makes them re-consider, they may move. Encourage students to use examples from both *Saving Francesca* and their further reading when they provide their reasons for standing where they do.
- On page 118, Francesca refers to a bus driver as '*psychotic*' and Will tells Francesca on page 198 that she's '*psychotic*'. Do the characters use this term correctly? (See pages 20-22 of *Understanding Mental Illness*). Discuss the use of labels relating to mental health (See information and activities in Session 5, pages 65-73, in *Understanding Mental Illness*).

Assessment suggestions/options

- In small groups, write and record a 90-second advertisement about depression for a youth radio station. Include useful web addresses and help-line numbers. Develop assessment criteria as a class and peer-assess the advertisements.
- Research the Australian statistics relating to mental illnesses (e.g. see the *National Action Plan for Depression* at <http://www.health.gov.au/>). Develop a poster that indicates the prevalence of various mental illnesses in Australia. The poster must include a clear, 'youth friendly' definition of the mental illnesses, useful web addresses and help-line numbers.
- Produce a crossword puzzle or quiz using the names of characters from *Saving Francesca* and at least 8 words relating to mental illness or mental health. Use definitions of mental illnesses within the clues.
- [For Senior classes] Re-write the end of chapter 5, giving Francesca a more accurate explanation of her mother's illness. Write an additional brief chapter that includes information about what Francesca does with this new information.

LOSS AND GRIEF RESPONSES TO MENTAL ILLNESS WITHIN THE FAMILY

- Ask students to list the ways in which Francesca reacts to the loss of the relationship she had with her mother on pages 18, 47 and 167 (e.g. she has difficulty swallowing, and wants to be sick, she feels weak, she feels alone, the family feels like an amputee). Have them note that Jimmy also misses at least one aspect of his mother's care (pages 176-7) even though at first he says he doesn't miss her. The class may like to listen to the song *Everything Changed* from the *SIC* CD and reflect on the songwriter's feeling of loss (the words appear on the CD cover). Use activities 2-5 on pages 25 and 26 of the MindMatters booklet *Loss and Grief* with the class to explore different reactions to loss (physical responses, behaviour, feelings and thoughts). At the end of the activity, but before the end of the class session, work with students to develop a bag of helpful ideas/coping strategies. Attach it to the figure in the physical responses activity and/or have the students take the 'bag of ideas' with them as they leave the class.
- Francesca thinks she's helping Jimmy by giving him a hug (page 178). Discuss with the class the ways Francesca's friends and teachers try to help her cope with her grief (Ms. Quinn lets her sleep on her couch, Justine asks how she's feeling, etc.). Were they successful? Why or Why not? Using the information and activities on pages 58 and 59 of *Loss and Grief*, discuss different grieving patterns. Highlight that human beings are very resilient and, with support, can often overcome great crises. Brainstorm, in pairs or small groups, things that students can do to help a friend affected by loss but highlight that this support may need to be complemented by professional advice and support. Hand out the information sheet *Helping Yourself, Helping a Friend* (Page 31, *Loss and Grief* booklet) and ask students to compare their answers with those on the sheet.
- In pairs, have students fill in the worksheet *Helping Yourself, Helping a Friend* (Page 32, *Loss and Grief* booklet). Ask students to discuss what they would have done to support Francesca (knowing what they now know) if they were her friends. Ask students to write a possible dialogue or a series of sentence starters.
- Divide the class into groups to write a letter to a magazine columnist ("Dear Dr.") from Francesca, asking for advice on how to cope with her feelings about her mother's illness and its effect on her family. At the end of the activity, pass each letter on to another group and have them develop a response to Francesca's letter.

Assessment suggestions/options

- Write and produce a short play involving friends responding to a teenager experiencing loss of a parent's involvement in their everyday life (e.g. through mental illness, death, divorce, transfer overseas with work). Develop assessment criteria for the play as a class.
- Write a personal account of the way in which you have coped with a personal loss and include ways in which your friends, teachers and/or other adults were helpful or could have been more helpful. Compare your situation to Francesca's. (Teacher note: Discuss confidentiality guidelines relating to this task, i.e. that you will not disclose anything in a personal account to anyone else except in cases where you believe the student may be at risk of harm).
- Create a visual montage or collage of images depicting normal, yet varied reactions to loss and change experienced by Francesca and her friends.
- Write a poem or song as if you are Francesca or Jimmy that expresses your feelings about the loss of your relationship with your mother.

YOUNG PEOPLE CARING FOR A PARENT WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

- Use a grouping activity to divide the class into random groups and ask different groups to list the changes that happened in the everyday lives of Francesca, Luca and Robert as a result of Mia's depression (e.g. Robert had to do the shopping, Francesca and Robert had to take on more domestic tasks such as the shopping, laundry and cooking, Francesca and Luca were often late for school, they were separated for a couple of weeks, the house was more messy).
- Listen to the track *Moosh's Story* from the *SIC* CD (The words are in the accompanying booklet). Ask the students to compare Moosh's care-giving experiences and feelings to Francesca's. Discuss how life for a young person who cares for a parent with a mental illness may be different from their peers'. Ask the students to reflect on what might be different if the young person lives with one parent only and that parent experiences depression.
- Use the scenarios of "Jack" and "Anna" from page 12 of the *SIC* booklet to promote discussion about the situation where a young person has care responsibilities for a family member with a mental illness. Alternatively, arrange for someone from a local young carers' group to speak with your class about the needs and supports for young carers in your community (Contact the Commonwealth Carer Resource Centre on 1800 242 636 to find a local young carers' group or visit the website www.copmi.net.au and look for local programs listed in the *Education* section).
- Page 46 describes how Francesca feels at school and her belief that the teachers see her as "a slacker". Discuss the different responses to Francesca made by Ms. Quinn, Brother Louis, Mr. Ortle, Mr. Brolin and the school counsellor. List ways that having a parent with a mental illness may affect a student at school and responses that a school might make to support the student. Ask the students to prepare questions about what their school currently does to support young carers and encourage them to make suggestions about other actions the school could take. Invite the school counsellor to respond to both the students' questions and their ideas. (Teacher Talk: If it doesn't come up, remember to highlight that not all children of parents with a mental illness will be similarly affected and that some may not want to be treated differently from other students, especially if school is their 'sanctuary' from a stressful or chaotic home life).

Assessment suggestions/options

- Write a short article for publication in your favourite magazine about the role that young carers play in looking after a parent with a mental illness. Include phone numbers and Internet sites that young people could use to find out about local services they might be able to access.
- Write to the producer of a popular Australian television series providing suggestions about how a young carer of a person with a mental illness might be included in the story line. Include suggestions about what safeguards the scriptwriter would need to take to ensure that the mental illness was accurately portrayed. Actually send the letter.
- Produce a piece of music that depicts Francesca's parents' bedroom when it feels like "Grand Central Station" and/or when it is Mia's sick-room.
- Write an article for a School Counsellors' Newsletter about ways in which you believe school counsellors can support students who care for a family member with a mental illness.

COMPARATIVE ACTIVITIES INVOLVING

JOE'S DIARY and/or *FAMILY TALK* and/or the *KOPING* video

(NB: *Joe's Diary* may appeal more to male readers and both booklets may appeal more to those with reading challenges.)

- Divide the class in half with one group focusing on *Saving Francesca* and the other focusing on *Joe's Diary*. Ask them to list all the people that either Joe or Francesca found useful to talk to about their family situation.

- [For Senior Students] In small groups, have students develop Venn Diagrams of two overlapping circles listing the similarities and differences in
 - Joe's and Francesca's experiences
 - the experiences of Mia (Francesca's mother) and Joe's mother as depicted in the books
 - the style of writing used in the books

- Discuss the ways in which Francesca provides hints of the following fears she has about her mother's illness.
 - Concern that her mother's depression is Luca's and Francesca's fault (page 50, 120 and 149).
 - Francesca's fear of inheriting or "catching" depression (page 202).

- Ask the students to critique the information on pages 4, 5, 8 and 9 of *Family Talk*. Do they think that this information would have allayed Francesca's fears? In groups, ask them to develop some more tips or information for teenagers who have a parent with a mental illness. Students could also refer to "Joe's Tips" in *Joe's Diary* for this task.

- Show the video *Koping* that depicts four young Australians with parents with a mental illness. Prior to viewing the video divide the class into 4 groups. Each group takes special note of the feelings identified and expressed by the young person they have been assigned. Debrief after the video (see suggestions for this in the booklet accompanying the video). Discuss the similarities and differences between the feelings expressed by the young people in the video and those expressed by Francesca or by Joe.

Assessment Suggestions/Options

- Write a page of "Francesca's Tips" in the style of "Joe's Tips" (as found in *Joe's Diary*).
- Develop and present an oral presentation/Power Point on supports for families where a parent has a mental illness for an audience of peers.
- Write a supplementary page for *Family Talk* that provides information of specific relevance to teenagers.
- Develop a script for an actress portraying Francesca as if she were appearing in a segment of the video *Koping*. Francesca must answer the same question as the characters in the video do for the chosen segment.
- [Senior students] Write an additional chapter for *Joe's Diary*. Using the diary form, create a chapter in which the characters behave in a way that is consistent with the rest of the prose text. Choose three of Joe's tips to add to your chapter and create an illustration in a similar style.



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ALL FEEDBACK IS WELCOME

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