

# TRANSITION/ORIENTATION INITIATIVES FOR STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

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# Context

- This project was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities.
- The focus was to develop a program to help ease the transition to post-secondary education for students with mental health issues.
- There were three partners:
  - University of Guelph
  - Conestoga College
  - Boards of Education

# Program Objectives

- Normalize developmental experiences surrounding transition to post-secondary education
- Promote recognition of differences between high school and college/university
- Decrease self-stigma and increase ability to ask for help
- Increase practical knowledge of mental health supports on campus, including resources, adaptive technology, etc
- Give participants the opportunity to meet other first year students

# Program Components

- There were three program offerings in this initiative:
  - LaunchPrep
  - GPS Launch (Guelph Pre-semester Launch)
  - STEPS (Summer Transition Experiential Program for Students facing mental health issues)

# LaunchPrep

Offered entirely at University of Guelph, June 28th-July 3rd, 2015

Students lived in residence on the University of Guelph campus

Program focused more generally on issues in the transition to post-secondary education for students with mental health challenges

# Launch Prep: Program Content

The program content for LaunchPrep focused on 3 main areas

Personal Wellness (mental and physical health)

Eg.- sleep, stress management, healthy eating

Academic Success

Eg.- time management, interacting with instructors, self-advocacy

Social Connections

Eg.- formal session on connections/communication, informal social activities in evening

# LaunchPrep: Evaluations

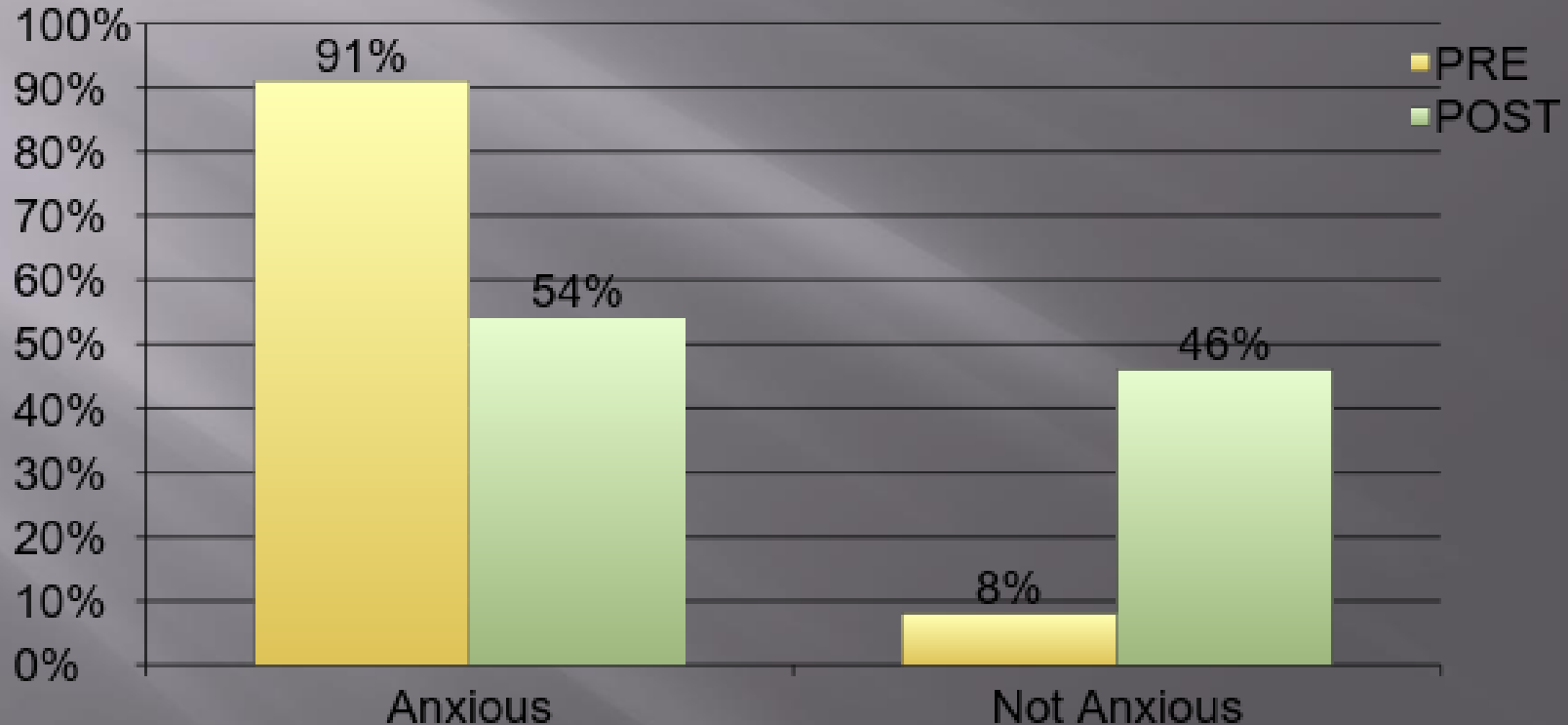
Participants reported decreased anxiety about entering post-secondary studies.

Feelings of preparedness and comfort about entering post-secondary studies increased.

Students expressed a greater degree of confidence in their ability to self-advocate.

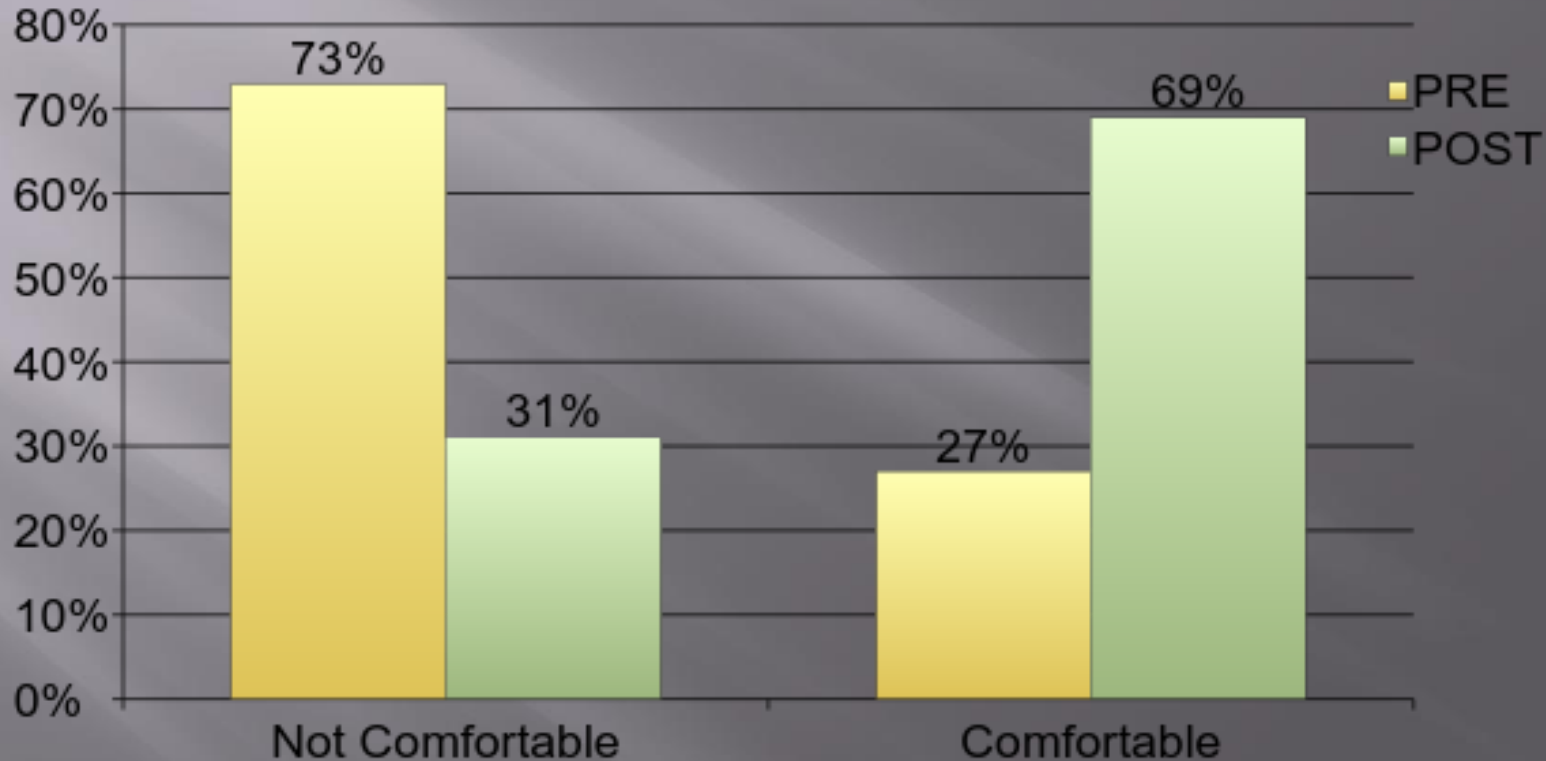
# Anxiety about post secondary studies

- ✧ No students reported being “extremely anxious” to start University/College after Launch Prep

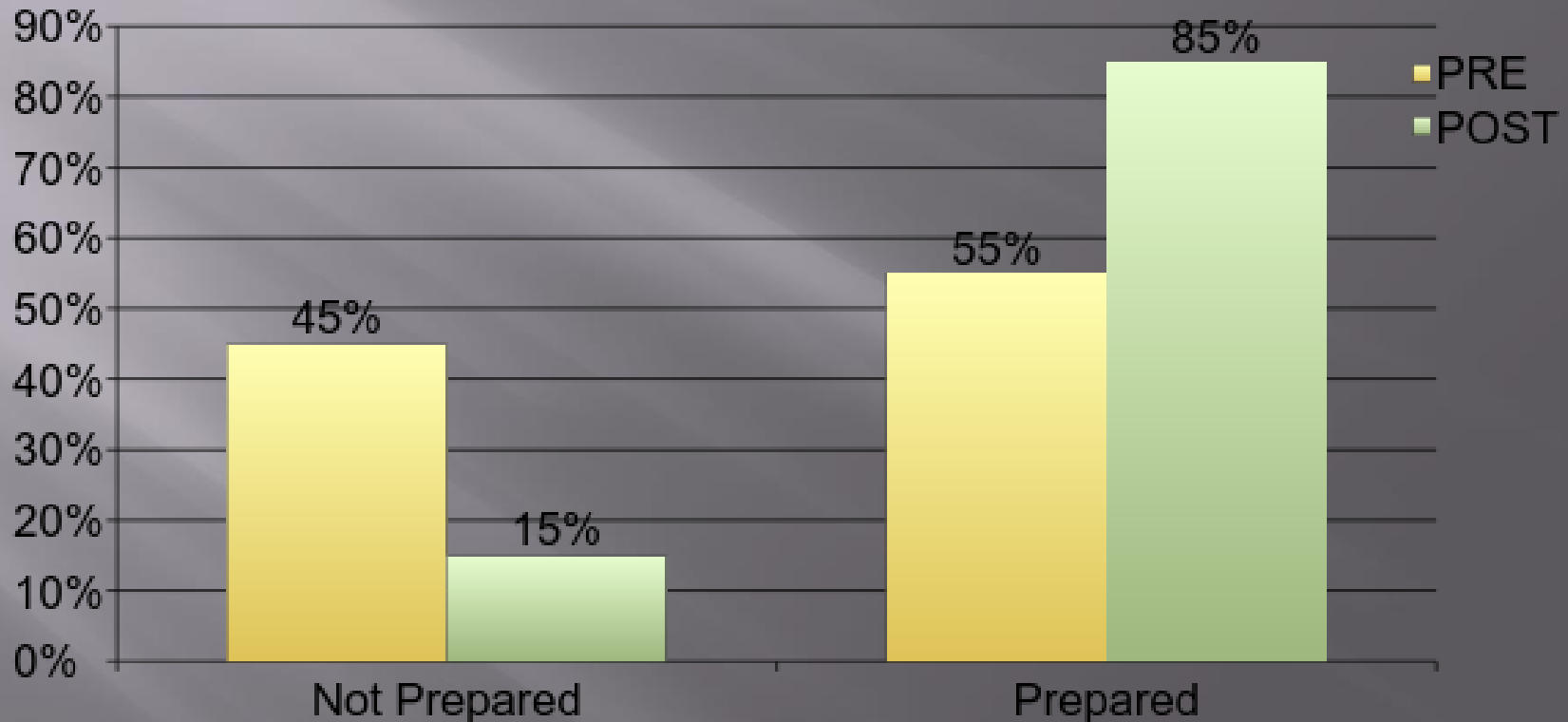




# Comfort in the post-secondary environment

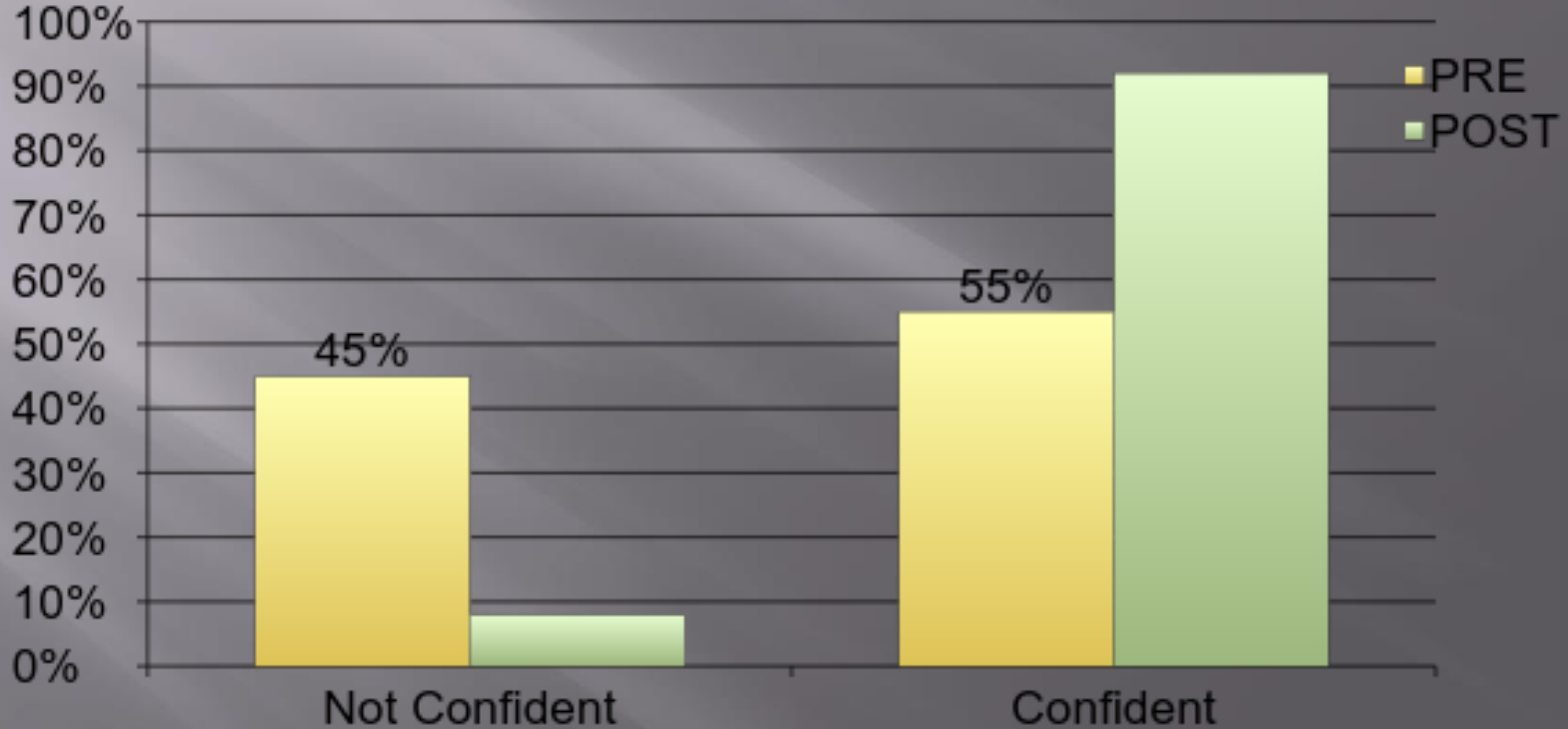


# Perception of preparedness to enter post-secondary studies



# Confidence with self-advocacy

✧ Only one student was “not confident” in advocating for their needs after Launch Prep



# Launch Prep: Most Helpful Presentations

## TOP 3 MOST HELPFUL

- ✦ TIME MANAGEMENT
- ✦ STRESS MANAGEMENT
- ✦ SLEEP

✦ INSTRUMENTAL/PRACTICAL STRATEGIES WERE RATED MORE HELPFUL

## TOP 3 LEAST HELPFUL

- ✦ SUBSTANCES AND MENTAL HEALTH
- ✦ PERSONAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN
- ✦ MINDFULNESS

✦ EMOTION/PERSON-FOCUSED STRATEGIES WERE RATED LESS HELPFUL

# Campus-specific orientation Guelph Pre-Semester Launch/STEPS

GPS Launch offered at University of Guelph, STEPS at Conestoga college

Offered in late August/early September

GPS Launch 2.5 days, STEPS 4 days

Content focused on transition issues for students with mental health issues (self-advocacy and asking for help, managing workload, managing symptoms understanding how/where to get assistance, etc)

Programs were structured to provide a more personalized orientation to campus services, most especially accessibility services

# GPS Launch/STEPS: Evaluations

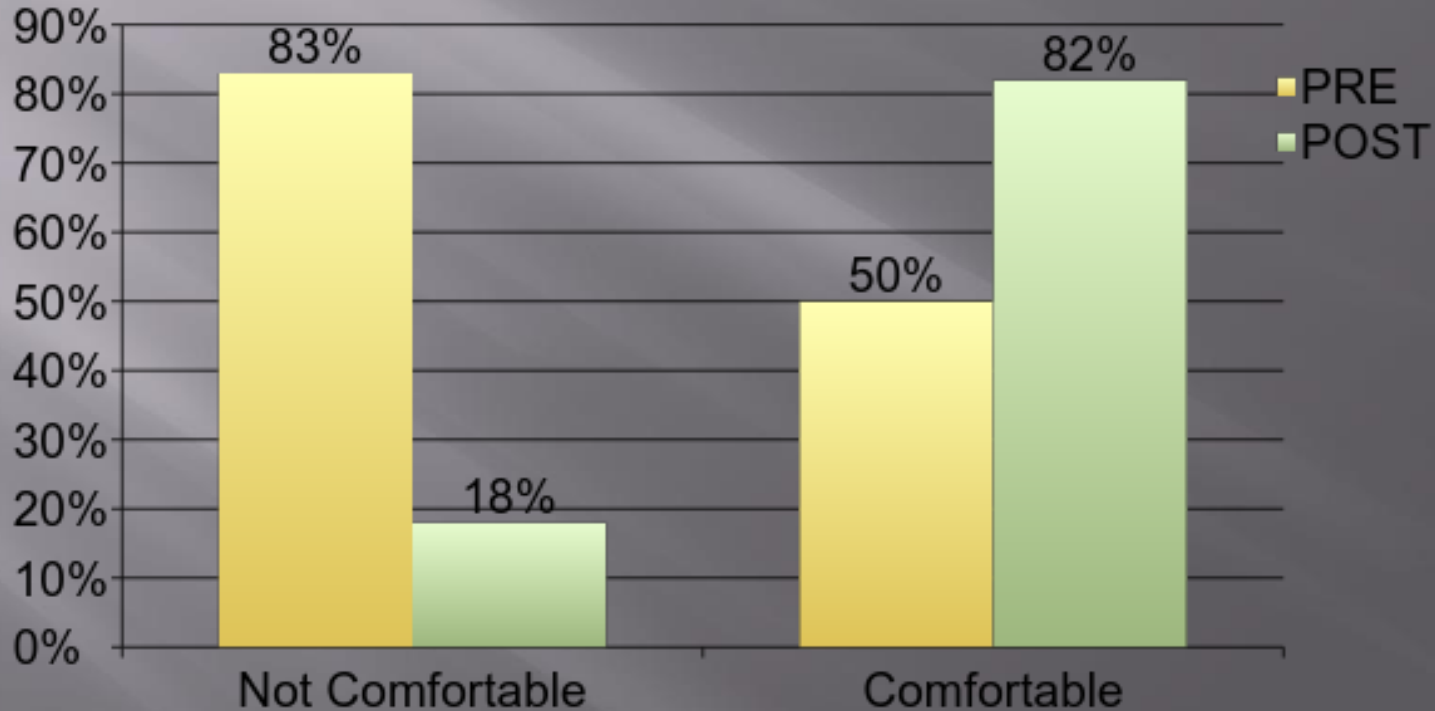
Anxiety levels about starting college/university remained high,

Students rated themselves more comfortable with starting college/university, and more aware of campus resources and assistance than before the program. When asked to provide comments, students stated that they were more aware of the need to ask for help than they had been before the program.

Students appreciated meeting their advisor and interacting with other students who were experiencing similar concerns.

# Comfort in the university environment

✧ Most students felt comfortable in the university environment after the program



# Stigma

- There was little change in response to survey items indicating stigma around mental health issues (feeling isolated, withdrawing socially due to mental health concerns, mental health concerns as a barrier to help-seeking). There was little increase in stigma resistance.
- Students indicated that they wanted to be “just like everyone else,” and tended to view having a mental health challenge as a negative thing.
- Stigma is difficult to shift in a short program, and is an area that continually needs to be addressed in program and service delivery.



# Participants on the Autism spectrum

- Appreciated the opportunity to become oriented to campus
- Had trouble relating to content and delivery of some sessions
- Students on the Autism spectrum have transition support needs that are different from the needs of students with mental health issues.

# Overall participation outcomes

Normalized students' developmental experiences surrounding the transition to post-secondary education especially anxiety

Helped students to understand important differences between high school and university or college

Increased students' practical knowledge of mental health and other supports on campus

Increased students' willingness and perceived ability to ask for help

Alerted students to considerations in balancing health, academics and social life

Provided opportunities to interact with others who had similar concerns and who were also making the transition to post-secondary study

## Challenges with Promotion and implementation of week-long general orientation (LaunchPrep)

Difficult to gain visibility within high schools

Students who may benefit from the program are not well identified within high schools (this is in contrast to students with Learning Disabilities, who tend to be well-identified.)

Students may not show interest in the program due to stigma and the wish to “be like everyone else.”

# Promotion and implementation: the role of high schools

## Challenges In Working with High Schools

Organizational structure of each board of education is unique and different. There is no one office which serves as the point of contact for program-eligible students

There is not always a consistent, formal process for identifying students who may need accommodations

Parents' perspectives play a significant role in terms of identification and accessing supports. We need to reach both students and their parents

# Recommendations: Program Promotion and Implementation

Start promotion early (Mid to late February would be ideal for late June program start).

Concentrate on high schools from within the institution's catchment area, or from which past applicants have come

Develop good working relationships with high schools

Program promotion should be integrated with admission processes

Integrate with other orientation initiatives within accessibility services

# Recommendations: Conceptual Framework

Recognize that students with mental health issues have unique concerns about the transition to post-secondary education, and may need specific supports and accommodations.

Emphasizing diagnoses or “mental illness” terminology in program promotion or delivery is seen as negative and may affect student engagement

Present issues in the context of adolescent and young adult developmental theory is useful for normalizing experiences

# Recommendations: program structure and content

- Post-secondary institutions should offer transition support and orientation initiatives tailored specifically to the needs of students with mental health issues.
- Students should be offered the opportunity to consult with upper year peers and professional staff in order to assist their understanding of campus resources, particularly Accessibility Services.
- Students should be given the opportunity to hear important information more than once, and to ask questions to confirm understanding
- The availability of assistance, and the importance of help-seeking and self-advocacy should be emphasized
- Transition support initiatives tailored to the needs of students on the Autism Spectrum should be offered
- Consideration should be given to energy levels and internal resources of participants as they manage a stressful transition.
- Stigma reduction around mental health issues is a major concern to be considered in program planning