

# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



# A Dark Room

A STORY ABOUT HOCKEY, CONCUSSIONS AND THE PATH TO RECOVERY

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### ABOUT THE GUIDE

This study guide explores the potentially devastating effects of concussions in youth sports, using the documentary **A Dark Room** as a springboard for class discussions. The content of the guide is ideal for educators teaching courses in the subject areas of Health and Physical Education to students aged 15 and up.

Teachers are advised to preview the documentary before screening it in the classroom, as it touches on the difficult subject of suicide. Educators may also wish to preface the screening with a trigger warning.

The documentary **A Dark Room** and the **Concussions in Youth Sports Virtual Classroom** contain content and information about concussion recovery and mental health disorders linked to concussion that may provoke emotional responses from viewers and participants.

We recommend that educators collaborate with a school counsellor or with a local youth mental-health service provider to create a learning environment that is safe and respectful, so that students can discuss these topics openly in the classroom.

This guide provides a brief synopsis of the film, basic information about concussions, pre- and post-screening discussion questions and activities, and links to relevant Canadian educational resources on the subject of concussions.

### ABOUT THE FILM

**A Dark Room: A Story about Hockey, Concussions and the Path to Recovery**

Directed by Joseph Recupero • Produced by Dr. Ryan Todd  
2016, 52 minutes

Max Taylor was headed for a dream career in the National Hockey League, until the day he sustained two concussions and had to be stretchered off the ice. For the next 12 months, Max remained stuck in a dark room as he suffered from recurring headaches. He felt increasing resentment towards the medical team that had coerced him into playing after his first concussion. And then one day, on an afternoon like any other, Max went into the kitchen to grab a knife, planning to take his own life.

Through Max's story we meet Dr. Shree Bhalerao, a psychiatrist who specializes in traumatic brain injury (TBI). By day, Dr. Bhalerao interviews patients and examines brain scans that clearly demonstrate something must be done to prevent head injuries. By night, he can be found either playing or watching hockey with his family and friends, including St. Michael's Hospital co-worker Dr. Ryan Todd.



Photo of Hayley Wickenheiser: Dave Holland

Both doctors recognize that concussion symptoms such as mental slowing, mood disorders, substance abuse, depression and suicide are commonplace in youth sports and are often left untreated. They agree that our culture glorifies toughness and the ability to play through pain and is unwilling to address the taboos around mental illness.

**A Dark Room** explores hockey's macho culture and the dangers of concussions. It includes interviews with: National Hockey League players such as Eric Lindros five-time Olympic medalist Hayley Wickenheiser; several sports journalists and broadcasters, including Stephen Brunt and Michael Landsberg; mental health professionals; fans of the game; and families affected by the devastating consequences of concussion.

### LEARN ABOUT CONCUSSIONS

#### What Is a Concussion?

"A concussion is a brain injury that affects how the brain works. Concussions may happen because of a hit to the head, face, neck or somewhere else on the body. When a hit takes place, the brain moves back and forth inside the skull. If it moves hard enough, the brain can become injured. This can make your brain and body feel different."

— *Concussion & You: A Handbook for Parents and Kids*, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

#### Signs of Concussion

Everybody reacts differently to concussions. Here are some of the most common symptoms:

##### Emotional and behavioural

- Sadness
- Anger
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Irritability

##### Physical

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Sensitivity to Light and Noise

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### Mental

- Fogginess and difficulty thinking
- Feeling slowed down
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty remembering

### Sleep

- Sleeping more than usual
- Difficulty falling asleep
- Difficulty staying asleep

## CONCUSSION EDUCATION RESOURCES

These materials will help you and your students to gain a clearer understanding of the nature and possible mental health effects of head injuries.

### [Halton Student Concussion Education Program \(HSCEP\)](#)

These e-modules have been adapted to be age-appropriate for students in Grades 3, 6 and 9. Composed of compelling graphics and informative audio, they were designed by a learning specialist to be interactive, with the goal of making learning more effective and enhancing students' understanding of concussion as a serious brain injury. The modules are based on the latest published research, protected by copyright, and accessible free of charge through the [Sport Concussion Library](#) website. They are geared towards educating individuals but do not constitute certification courses. The modules are also accompanied by instructors' and coaches' scripts.

### [Concussion & You: A Handbook for Parents and Kids](#)

Experts in youth concussion from the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital Concussion Centre have prepared this handbook to help kids, teenagers and their parents with concussion management and recovery. It provides basic information about concussions and their potential effects on mind and body. The handbook also offers recovery strategies and tools, including a recovery timeline with visuals, to inform and guide injured students as they return to school, sports and other physical activities.

### [Concussion Toolkit from Parachute Canada](#)

This Web-based toolkit on concussions was designed by Canadian concussion experts to help create the conditions for active and safer play, notably in hockey, football, rugby, soccer, baseball, ringette and lacrosse. It helps coaches, trainers, parents, athletes and health-care professionals recognize and prevent serious brain injuries. The toolkit provides sobering statistics around concussions in youth sports and outlines the "3 Es" approach—Education, Enforcement and Engineering—to concussion prevention and management.

### [Centers for Disease Control and Preventable Injuries Fact Sheets](#)

These downloadable and customizable fact sheets have been created to educate athletes and parents on the nature and symptoms of concussions, as well as the best treatment strategies. The athlete information has been adapted to two different age groups, 11 to 14 and 14 to 18, and is also available in Spanish. The fact sheets are accompanied by an informative wall poster, which can be ordered free or printed on demand.

### [Play It Safe Fact Sheet for Educators](#)

This fact sheet has been adapted from materials originally created by the Traumatic Brain Injury Team at St. Michael's Hospital, to explain concussion and its relationship with mental health issues. It is geared towards educators and designed to equip them with the information they need to be more aware of concussion and mental health symptoms and courses of treatment.



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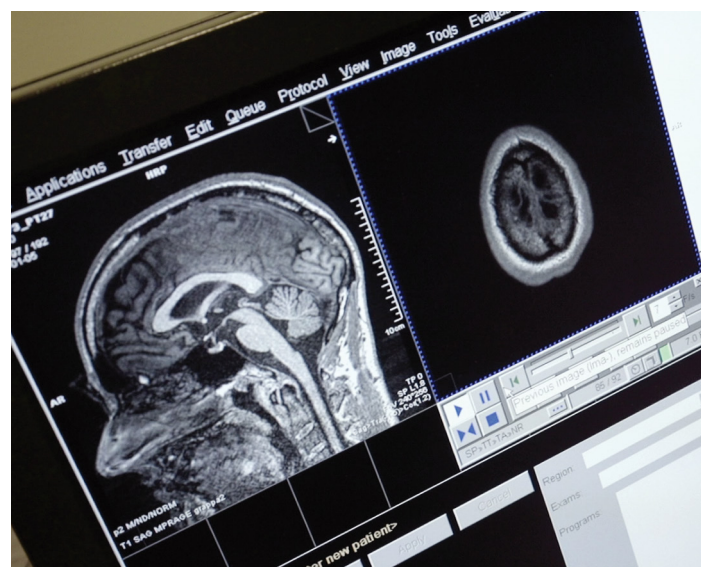
### THINK

#### Pre-screening Discussion Questions

1. Have students discuss the short-term symptoms and long-term effects of head injuries in sports.
2. Invite students to share their experiences of sports concussion if they feel comfortable doing so. The experiences can be either personal or in relation to somebody they know (a family member/teammate/friend).
  - What was surprising about these experiences?
  - How did people close to the situation respond (injured athlete, coach, teammates, medical professionals)?
  - In retrospect, do you think a different approach would have been better?
3. Have students share experiences of succumbing to (or witnessing) the pressure to perform in sports regardless of injuries.
4. What are the responsibilities of the following parties, in your opinion, in relation to head injuries in youth sports:
  - The injured athlete
  - The coach
  - The medical professional
  - The parent
  - The school/sporting organization
  - Lawmakers
5. What stories have you seen recently in the news about head injuries in sports?
6. What changes are taking place in our culture in relation to this issue? Do these changes go far enough or even too far, in your opinion, in relation to the problem?
7. What advances have been made in recent years in our understanding of brain injuries and sports?
8. How is a young person's brain different from that of an older athlete?
9. Do you think there is a stigma around mental health issues in the sports world?
10. Why do you think professional sports leagues have for the most part stayed silent on the links between head injuries and mental health?
11. What kinds of actions do you think could prompt professional sports leagues to change their culture?

#### Post-screening Discussion Questions

1. Having watched **A Dark Room**, do you feel differently about head injuries and youth sports?
2. Are there any symptoms or danger signs you learned about from the documentary that you did not identify in the pre-screening brainstorming exercise?
3. What was the most shocking or surprising thing you learned?
4. Which scenes or interviews made the biggest impact on you?
5. Would you like to see any changes in the way we respond to head injuries in sports?
6. Do you think that you will take concussions more seriously in your own sports activities, going forward?
7. To what extent do you think laws need to change to protect youth athletes?
8. What resources would be most helpful to athletes, coaches and medical professionals to address the potential risks of concussions?
9. Do you think stricter regulations in regard to head injuries in sports (prevention and treatment) would adversely affect the quality of high school sports?



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### CREATE

#### Group Activities for the Classroom

1. Create a project around a recent news story relating to brain injuries in sports. Create a visual display to show statistics on this topic, share a case study, explore recent studies or weigh pros and cons.
2. Interview a high school sports coach about their own experiences in relation to youth head injuries. Find out if their knowledge and approach has changed over the years and investigate why. Share your findings in the form of a short documentary, podcast, Q+A blog post or news-style story.
3. Create a public service announcement or flyer geared towards teenagers, warning of the dangers of head injuries in sports and giving them the tools to better protect themselves from concussions or recognize danger signs.



### LEARN MORE

#### ST. MICHAEL'S HOSPITAL RESEARCH STUDY (OPTIONAL)

##### The Sport Concussion Education Project Survey

This pre- and post-screening online survey, developed at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, is an important complement to the NFB Virtual Classroom featuring **A Dark Room**. The survey is designed to help researchers understand the educational impact of this documentary in teaching about concussion and the mental health stigma surrounding it.

Students should take the survey prior to viewing the movie, to assess their base knowledge and attitudes towards concussion. They should complete it again after they've watched the film.

The survey consists of simple "agree" or "disagree" questions and can be completed in approximately 15 minutes. It collects some demographic information but no identifying information about the students.

The link to the survey can be [found here](#).

Educators: Please provide students with this link before and after screening **A Dark Room**. The survey can be completed in the classroom or at home. It is best to emphasize to students that they should answer the questions honestly and that their answers will be confidential.

Encouraging students to take the survey will contribute to the development of effective educational tools in the future.



Photo of Hayley Wickenheiser: Dave Holland