Destigmatizing Teenage Mental Illness Through Positive School Culture
Written by: Arya Marwaha and Ms. Jill Thomas, LMFT

Abstract

This research paper is meant to examine various curricula being used by schools worldwide and the results of these methods in destigmatizing teenage mental health issues. The study's overall purpose is to make teenagers feel more comfortable in reporting their mental health issues to school officials and promoting positive mental health in learning environments. Part 1 outlines why adverse mental health negatively affects school communities; how positive school culture can provide unique mental health services; and the overarching responsibility of schools to become socially-aware of students with mental health illnesses. Part 2 delves into practices implemented at schools, including Eliminating the Stigma Difference (ESD) and Whole of School Approach. This section also offers mental health measures being implemented by schools, including Valencia High School in Orange County. Part 3 examines the results of the studies mentioned in Part 2, quantifying their impact on students at the schools that implement these practices. This part also touches on the Association for Children's Mental Health's (ACMH) six-pronged strategy to increase mental health resources at schools. Finally, Part 4 wraps up the research paper to analyze the future implementation of proposed curricula and mental health resources in school, along with the various reasons for doing so (see statistics section). Through this research paper, we hope to help destigmatize teenage mental health illnesses in three ways: analyzing different curriculum approaches, investigating ways to promote mental health resources and better school communities through increased advocacy.

Part 1: Introduction

What is Teenage Mental Health

Mental health includes the absence of mental illness and the promotion of well-being—social, emotional, and behavioral health; and the ability to cope with life challenges. Studies show that students with social, emotional, mental, and behavioral health support perform better at school. It also improves school climate, classroom behavior, learning involvement, student connectivity, and well-being.

Why it Matters

If left untreated, mental health problems can have costly adverse effects such as school and behavioral issues, dropouts, and misconduct. Mental health and behavioral health issues undermine the short-term involvement of students in the classroom and the positive relationships and long-term development of work-related skills in the community and underprivileged youth. Nearly 60% of the 3.8 million young

people aged 12 to 17 years who reported major depressive episodes in the past year were untreated, according to a 2019 report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Department.

Using Positive School Culture To Advantage Students

The school provides an ideal environment for prevention, intervention, positive development, and regular school-family communication. Schools also offer direct and virtual compassionate relationships and stable, ongoing connections between students and staff. Mental health professionals employed at schools (school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, etc.) know students, parents, and other staff who contribute to the accessibility of the service. Studies show that students are more likely to seek counseling if services are available at school. It may also provide the only mental health service in the region, such as rural areas. Comprehensive and culturally sensitive mental health services in schools reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health services by eliminating access inequality and making mental health services part of the school system. It will help.

Comprehensive psychiatric and behavioral school health services also support the school's mission and learning objectives. All services provided by the school must be suitable for the learning environment. Schools aren't just private hospitals with whiteboards, just as children aren't just small adults. To be practical (and cost-effective), it is vital to work in school culture. School psychologists receive professional training in child development, mental health, learning, diversity, culturally sensitive services, school systems, and law. Their unique expertise lies in how these elements interact to shape the child's behavior, learning, and overall coordination.

Other Mental Health School Services

Comprehensive mental health school services are essential to creating and maintaining a safe school. Increasing access to mental health services at school is crucial in improving students' physical and psychological safety and school and academic performance and problem-solving skills. Support for cultural responses to mental health in schools, including social and emotional learning, mental well-being, behavioral health, resilience, and positive connections between students and adults, is safe and empowering for students. It is essential to create a school culture that feels like you are. Reporting safety concerns has proven to be one of the most effective school safety strategies.

In addition, school-based mental health professionals provide post-crisis support, facilitate return to normal, and identify students with sustainable, more intense, or ongoing needs. It helps to cooperate. School psychologists offer a range of services that link mental health, behavior and learning, school and home, school and community services. Collaboration and coordination are needed to meet the entire set of student needs. Municipal providers usually provide supplemental or intensive services that go beyond the school's capabilities. The MTSS approach facilitates collaboration while ensuring that the services offered at the school are appropriate for the learning context and that the services provided after class are correctly linked and supported in the school environment.

Partnerships are coordinated by the school's mental health professionals, defined by a clear statement of intent. They are most effective in fostering an appreciation for each group's unique contributions to create a more seamless and comprehensive service offering. It is a target. This reduces gaps, redundancy, and conflict, reduces family stress, and supports their role as primary caregivers and decision-makers in child development.

Part 2: Methods and Studies

Curriculum: Eliminating The Stigma Difference (ESD)
- There was a developed and tested curriculum for 6th graders about destigmatizing mental illness.
- This curriculum, called Eliminating the Stigma of Difference, or ESD, consisted of three modules delivered over three hours in one week, with each module comprising a didactic component, group discussion, and homework exercises.
  - The first module broaches the concept of stigma, its consequences, and how to end it. The second and third modules introduce specific mental disorders, including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder.
- "The intervention was developed for ease of use by teachers in school settings so that it can be used anywhere there are schools," Link said of the curriculum. "It emphasizes increasing knowledge about mental illnesses and increasing empathy for people who are different in any way, including those who have a mental-health problem."

General Measures: Valencia High School (Placentia, CA) in Orange County
- Put mental health on the weekly faculty meeting agenda. A meaningful discussion among adults can generate new ways to identify what works and what doesn't. These are some questions to ask:
  - Are all our students participating and if not, why not? What are some effective ways to identify students who might be struggling? What are some ways we can encourage our students to seek academic or emotional help? How do we create space for students to seek human interaction with adults?
- Help start an online club featuring programs of the National Alliance on Mental Illness
  - Local NAMI affiliates offer a variety of workshops and classes on different topics that can help students develop coping mechanisms.
  - The National Institute of Mental Health also has resources at nimh.nih.gov.
- Help spread the word about the benefits of guided deep breathing and relaxation techniques.
  - There are many apps that can help (for example the free app Headspace).
  - The wellness center at Dartmouth University has some free videos on how to meditate.
- Arrange for weekly online yoga sessions.
  - P.E. Teachers may be able to include some yoga in their distance-learning plans.
  - Yoga also could be offered after school for our teachers and students.

- Encourage students to keep an online journal or schedule conversations with their teachers.
- Start a Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) committee for the campus that focuses on mental health. It could have a powerful influence as we discuss new strategies and successes throughout 2022.
- Promote fun activities, such as a virtual talent show or a virtual poetry night. Such events can fuel a culture of self-care.

Whole of School Approach
- The school-wide approach requires that everyone (school leaders, teachers, staff, parents) incorporate a safe and comprehensive learning culture and environment, including:
  - Providing social and emotional skills programs
  - Providing timely support to people with additional needs
  - Involve students and families in decision making.
- Organizational level
  - Encourages a friendly, respectful and comprehensive environment.
  - Implement a positive approach to behavioral management
  - Establish a positive welfare and inclusion policy
  - Promote welfare improvement through a framework for school improvement (FISO) and a workforce practice model of health, welfare and inclusion
  - Providing opportunities for student participation and leadership
  - Facilitate strong partnerships with students, parents, caregivers, communities and service providers.
- Pedagogical level
  - School clearly teaches social and emotional learning skills
  - Providing a comprehensive welfare education program
  - Develop personal and social skills in particular
- Relational level
  - School has high but achievable expectations for student learning and behavior.
  - Foster positive and supportive teacher-student and peer-to-peer relationships
  - Manage student behavior using a proactive approach, including promoting different strategies to prevent and respond to bullying
  - If a student has a learning or well-related problem, be aware of it and intervene.

National Education Union (NEU) Survey
2018 survey by the National Education Union (NEU) revealed that:
- almost half (49%) of secondary school education staff reported students had been **suicidal** because of the stress they are under.
- 81% reported cases of self-harming as a way to deal with the pressures.

The survey asked 730 education staff – working in early years, primary, secondary, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges. The survey revealed that, overall:
- more than half (56%) of pupils' mental health issues are leading to self-harm;

- 45% reported pupils having eating disorders;
- 48% said pupils were having panic attacks.

Identifying the underlying reasons:
- 82% of respondents said that tests and exams have the biggest impact on the mental health of pupils
- 67% believed it is due to pressure from schools to do well; 50% said it was as a result of a narrowing of the curriculum
- 48% considered the pressure students put on themselves to do well academically a contributing factor.

Relationship between School Climate and Mental/Emotional Wellbeing from Primary to Secondary

The current study examined the relationship between students' mental and emotional wellbeing and factors pertaining to school climate, focussing on the domains of safety, social relationships and school connectedness, during the last year of their primary schooling (age 11–12 years) and their first 2 years of secondary school. Data was collected using a self-completion questionnaire, four times over 3 years from 1800 students' aged 11–14 years. Multilevel modeling was used to determine the strongest school climate predictor of students' mental and emotional wellbeing at each time point.

Part 3: Results and Remedies

Eliminating The Stigma Difference (ESD)
- When comparing their ESD curriculum with the control and two other interventions, the researchers found exposure to ESD significantly boosted students' knowledge of and attitudes toward mental illness.
- ESD also decreased social distance, meaning more willing to talk with someone that has mental illness
- ESD was associated with an increased likelihood of treatment-seeking for youth with high levels of mental-health symptoms.
- This study shows that a school-based intervention in sixth-grade youth can improve attitudes towards mental illness and increase appropriate treatment-seeking in youth with mental-health problems

Whole of School Approach
- Results indicate that intervention students were significantly less likely to observe bullying at 12, 24 and 36 months and be bullied after 12 and 36 months, and significantly more likely to tell if bullied after 12 months than comparison students.
- The findings suggest whole-of-school programs that engage students in their different social contexts appear to reduce their experiences of being bullied and increase their likelihood of telling someone if they are bullied.

Relationship between School Climate and Mental/Emotional Wellbeing from Primary to Secondary

In the last year of primary school, peer support was the *strongest* protective predictor of wellbeing, while feeling less connected and less safe at school predicted mental wellbeing. Feeling safe at school was the strongest protective factor for student wellbeing in the first year of secondary school. In the second year of secondary school, peer support was the strongest *protective* factor for mental wellbeing, while feeling safe at school, feeling connected to school and having support from peers were predictive of emotional wellbeing.

Anecdote: A Student of Barile
In Nancy Barile's (M.A. Ed.) article, regarding the importance of mental health awareness at school, she shares how she noticed a dramatic change in one of her students in a short period of time. Before, appearance was important, but the student quit his homework and came to school wearing the same clothes as before. When Barril tried to talk to her, she withdrew and was far away.

Fortunately, Barile is trained in mental health and she finds her students in trouble. The staff's social worker was able to talk to the student. She was depressed and prone to suicidal, and she immediately decided that psychiatric intervention was needed. The student was temporarily hospitalized, received medication and treatment, and eventually graduated from class. Had Barile not noticed the signs, the story would have ended in a completely different way.

Association for Children's Mental Health (ACMH) Strategies in School
The ability to identify and support a child's mental health at school is important because mental health problems are widespread and often occur in childhood and adolescence, they are treatable, and early detection and intervention strategies work. As a result, one can help improve the resilience of young people and their ability to thrive in school and life.
Remedies to tackle mental health in schools through a safe, positive school environment
1. Understand mental health needs within the school
    a. It is suitable for teachers to have a top-down view of all students who may have mental health problems. Most schools have a strong understanding of each student's background and situation but should pay attention to mental health issues and ensure adequate support.
    b. Often, many mental health problems remain undetected, either because of a misdiagnosis or simply because the student is hesitant to report the problem. As a result, future schools may not learn about mental illness or crisis until later.
    c. Therefore, it's of utmost importance for school leaders to be aware of the signs when students are in trouble and intervene before things get serious.
2. Consider having mental health training staff onboard.
    a. As teachers who understand the basics of mental health, they're ready to talk about how students feel. They can also use the correct terminology to know the various signs to watch out for.
    b. Primary mental health training for teachers through the school or completing a simple qualification course online can make a difference in students' lives. There's also a wealth

of information and resources online that teachers can study from without a formal qualification.
3. Educate parents and students on signs and symptoms
   a. All members of the school community must be aware of the signs and symptoms that should be noted. That way, they can help those who are struggling. Parents and students are encouraged to hold a mental health evening to attend, ask questions, and learn how mental health is supported at school.
4. Have a safe space where students can go to talk *and* a firm open-door policy
   a. A robust open-door policy means that students feel comfortable and safe when approaching staff members with problems. Even if the teacher is not specifically trained in mental health, listening openly and getting students to tell their problems is beneficial.
   b. However, all schools must be designated as a "safe place" where students know they can talk. Ideally, at least one trained professional will be involved, but any adult can help.
5. Encourage good physical health and increase the social time
   a. Physical and mental health go hand-in-hand. Professional lessons and workshops on healthy eating, physical activity, and stress management all help foster a positive relationship between the mind and body of the student.
   b. Make sure to schedule about 30 minutes each week so that students can interact and focus on things other than the curriculum. In addition to regular breaks, this can encourage you to chat with colleagues about everyday topics and current events and complete tasks together.
6. Make mental health a part of the curriculum.
   a. Introduce the topic of mental health through teaching a lesson or workshop on it, or even during school assemblies. Discuss it elsewhere, too, like in PHSCE lessons, Health & Social Care, and even when studying literacy characters in English class.

Part 4: Discussion

Why mental health and wellbeing should be promoted in schools
Most people experience mental health problems when they are young-half of all mental illnesses appear by the age of 14, at the same time that most people are educated. Promoting mental health and well-being as a central goal of education not only enhances human opportunities and choices in life, but also helps students succeed in their educational journey, build resilience to adversity, and mental illness. It provides them with the skills and confidence to seek help for early intervention.

Statistics emphasizing the need for mental health education
● 79% of British parents feel that mental health education should be a part of the curriculum in schools. Across the globe, parents understand the need for mental health education for children. With 50% of mental health conditions developing in children of age 14 or below, the support for the cause is growing rapidly.

- As reported in US News and World Report, a few small studies have found "that teaching high school students about mental health improved their attitudes toward treatment, increased willingness to seek help from a counselor and boosted their overall mental health literacy".
- According to the Center for Mental Health, one young person in 10 will experience a mental health problem every year.
- A 2017 NHS survey of five to 19-year-olds found that one in eight young people had an identified mental disorder, with 5% of those interviewed meeting the criteria for two or more disorders.
- In the same survey, it was revealed that emotional disorders were the most common disorder among school-age children, with 8.1% suffering from anxiety, depression, mania or bipolar affective disorder. Meanwhile, 4.6% had some kind of behavior disorder, whilst 1.6% had a hyperactivity disorder.

Embedding Mental Wellness in Classroom Culture

Every school should implement five primary activities to improve mental health access and reduce stigma. The first activity is mental health dialogue. Holding open discussions in the classroom can spark mental health awareness among students, utilizing curricula like EVERFI's Mental Wellness Basics course. Students can learn basic skills, including self-care and healthy coping skills. The second activity is brain breaks. Giving students a few minutes every day to reflect and meditate allows students to put their minds to rest before continuing previous tasks and assessments. The third activity is stopping the stigma. Making art has been shown to lower stress levels, as supported by a research study conducted by art therapy professors at Drexel University. Students can create colorful mini-poster projects for classroom topics. The fourth activity is a mood tracker. Students should track their daily mood in a chart, associating colors with each emotion. Tracking moods and their fluctuation over time create awareness, making students more effective managers of their attitudes. Finally, the sixth activity is starting positive post-its. Teachers should make a sticky post-it wall in their classrooms where students can leave their thoughts and write positive messages.

Part 5: Bibliography

"Comprehensive School-Based Mental and Behavioral Health Services and School Psychologists."
National Association of School Psychologists (NASP),
https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health/comprehensive-school-based-mental-and-behavioral-health-services-and-school-psychologists.

Cross, Donna, and Helen Monks. "Three-Year Results of the Friendly Schools Whole-of-School Intervention on Children's Bullying Behaviour: Request PDF." *ResearchGate*, Feb. 2011,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233721212_Three-year_results_of_the_Friendly_Schools_whole-of-school_intervention_on_children's_bullying_behaviour.

Eyrich, Tess. "Youth Who Understand Mental Illness More Likely to Ask for Help Later." *News*, 22 June 2020,
https://news.ucr.edu/articles/2020/05/26/youth-who-understand-mental-illness-more-likely-ask-help-later.

Hovey, Pat. "Mental Wellness Culture in Schools: Why and How." *Thrive Alliance Group*, 26 Oct. 2020,
https://thrivealliancegroup.com/mental-wellness-culture-in-schools/.

"How We Can Support Mental Health in Schools." *True Education Partnerships*, 18 May 2020,
https://www.trueeducationpartnerships.com/schools/tips-for-supporting-mental-health-in-schools/.

Lester, Leanne, and Donna Cross. "The Relationship between School Climate and Mental and Emotional Wellbeing over the Transition from Primary to Secondary School." *Psychology of Well-Being*, Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2015, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4615665/.

Narez, Sergio. "Commentary: School Communities Can Help Prevent and Address Student Mental Health Problems." *EdSource*, EdSource, 10 Nov. 2021,
https://edsource.org/2020/school-communities-can-help-prevent-and-address-student-mental-health-problems/638882.

"Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Your School." *Department of Education and Training Victoria*, 17 Jan. 2022,
https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/Pages/promoting-mental-health.aspx.

"Six Ways to Embed Mental Wellness into Classroom Culture for High School Students." *EVERFI*, 4 Nov. 2021,
https://everfi.com/blog/k-12/6-ways-to-embed-mental-wellness-into-classroom-culture-for-high-school-students/.