

Mental Health Inclusivity

March 2020: The United States was hit with a global pandemic. Adolescents across America were told to stay at home away from the outdoors, people, and any social interaction. While some predicted that this would be a quick break from the world, stay at home orders dragged across months. Adolescents, specifically high school students, began to see their mental health deteriorating by the minute as this almost two year pandemic dragged on.

Jumping to the present, the pandemic is slowly beginning to fade away across America, and schools are reopening, yet students have developed anxiety, stress, and on occasion: depression. According to webmd, “Researchers found that 46% of 977 parents of teens said their child has shown signs of a new or worsening mental health condition since the start of the pandemic”. Adolescents are expected to transition into their pre-pandemic lives with no guidance whatsoever. This is where my project Mental Health Inclusivity emerges. Mental Health Inclusivity is a project where adolescents in my community join together over summer break. The event would include all diversities and treat every adolescent with equality. This project would entail having students come together to interact with one another by connecting through their struggles regarding mental health over the pandemic. Prior research has proven that adolescents improve and develop their mental health to the greatest extent this way. While discussing the adolescent demographic’s mental health, the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health explained that, “[adolescents’] peer interaction is a vital aspect of development”. By discussing their struggles and experiences regarding mental health with their peers, adolescents would transition into arriving back on campus for high school with far more ease. This project would ultimately prevent students from being thrown into a group of thousands of students after being in one area with their families for a prolonged period of time.

The project, Mental Health Inclusivity, would not simply have students attend to speak with one another, but it would include many activities and icebreakers to help the students feel comfortable with one another. A known fact to many is that adolescents are not the first ones to share their feelings on the spot. They tend to keep to themselves by fighting the realities of their mental health struggles, but by doing so, they are only worsening their mental health further. As stated by Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, “new research shows that teenagers who do share their emotions and talk about their feelings in a specific way are less likely to get depression. It’s based on a concept called negative emotion differentiation, which is the ability to make detailed distinctions between negative emotions, and give those emotions labels”. This event would additionally be held in a naturalistic area on a nice and sunny day. Students feel calmer and more comfortable when they are surrounded by nature in general, thus this would help them feel positive and safe. Everyone in the community would begin introducing themselves one by one and sharing one change in their mental health due to the pandemic, and based on their responses, the event would flow. With activities such as journaling, communication, and exercise, adolescents who attend would be practicing mental health improvement exercises while enjoying the company of their peers and feeling included. The day would include communication games such as escape rooms which force students to interact but not through a pressurizing method ultimately relieving social anxiety.

Ultimately, mental health is a key factor to any adolescent’s development and growth, yet it is not discussed properly. Throughout the pandemic, students’ internal struggles have gone unvoiced leading to unexplainable actions. Schools offer resources to help their students through guidance counselors and therapists, but they consistently lack a key factor: peer to peer interaction. Mental Health Inclusivity is a creative, purposeful, and effective project that

ultimately creates a safe space to help adolescents break out of their inner battles and improve their overall well being.

Works Cited:

Why Teenagers Need To Start Discussing Their Emotions:

<https://sbtreatment.com/blog/teenagers-discussing-emotions/>

The Effects of Social Deprivation on Adolescent Development and Mental Health:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7292584/>

Pandemic Has Harmed Mental Health of Teens:

<https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20210315/pandemic-has-harmed-mental-health-of-teens#1>

The Mental Health Benefits of Exercise:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm>