

## **Happier and Healthier Teens: An Initiative to Help Teen's Mental Health**

An estimated 50% of teens have had a mental disorder in their life<sup>4</sup>. But how do we know if something is a mental disorder? After all, it is normal for teenagers to go through a wide range of emotions. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a mental disorder is characterized by a set of specific symptoms<sup>4</sup>, including:

- Spending more time alone
- Engaging in risky or destructive behavior
- Having difficulty sleeping or eating

If mental health is so important, why aren't we talking about it? According to the Children's Health Council (CHC), it boils down to three things. Stigma, lack of knowledge, and lack of access to care<sup>2</sup>. For some teens, treatment for their mental health concerns isn't feasible.

However, it seems that mental health isn't something to be ashamed of. Why? Social media may have the answer to that. According to a paper for the Journal of Teaching and Education, there is a distressing rise in websites that promote self-harm and glamorize depression and anxiety<sup>3</sup>. "Pro-ana" websites - websites that promote anorexia - have shocking images of incredibly emaciated people, inspiring others to become like them. Offering dieting tips to lose weight fast and unconventional methods to burn calories, anorexia is now being seen "... as being in control".

The media has also contributed to the rise in the glorification of mental health<sup>3</sup>. The TV show *13 Reasons Why* has been criticized for glamorizing depression and suicidal acts, and grossly misrepresenting the portrayal of suicide. Related to this, characters on TV who have a mental illness “... are often portrayed as violent and dangerous.” “Many teenagers... now see mental disorders as relatable, normal and desirable...” because of this misrepresentation in everyday life.

So how can we do better? Jessie Yu, author of an article titled “From Stigmatized to Sensationalized”, has some ideas<sup>6</sup>. First, remove the stigma around mental illness. Second, asking the media to show more accurate portrayals of mental health. Third, raise awareness among young adults on how and where to get help for mental health concerns.

My idea for helping teens with mental health issues comes in the form of an initiative, based in the Omaha area. There are many parts to this initiative, called Happier & Healthier Teens. This initiative and its services are open to anyone and everyone.

- Teen to teen mentoring opportunities, giving students the opportunity to work with people their age, and have a role model.
- Free or little cost counseling services. This is important, as many people don't have access to the mental care facilities they need, because it just isn't feasible.
- Classes on how to take care of mental and physical health, as well as understanding what it means to have a mental disorder, will be provided in English, Spanish, and possibly ASL, to be inclusive of our deaf population.
- For those struggling with abuse, anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns, support groups will be available.

Finally, this initiative will offer cognitive behavior therapy, and behavioral health screening tools including<sup>5</sup>:

- Adolescent Domain Screening Inventory (for alcohol and other drug use)
- Depression Scale for Children
- Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (for suicide risk)

It is important to know that while the idea for Happier & Healthier Teens is completely original, there is another facility for children and teens regarding mental health. This facility is called Boys Town. So how does Boys Town differ from Happier & Healthier Teens? Boys Town offers treatment plans for ADHD and ADD, developmental and neurodevelopmental delays, and spectrum disorders<sup>1</sup>. Boys Town also offers counseling services, and has a hotline for suicide prevention.

In conclusion, mental health isn't something to be scared of or kept behind closed doors. Most disorders are something that can be treated, and suicides can be prevented. But it is up to us to make sure that we remove the stigma around mental health concerns. We need to help and support, not berate and belittle, those with mental health concerns.

## Works Cited

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<sup>6</sup> Yu, Jessie. "From Stigmatized to Sensationalized." *National Alliance on Mental Illness*, 1 May 2019, [www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/May-2019/From-Stigmatized-to-Sensationalized](http://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/May-2019/From-Stigmatized-to-Sensationalized). Accessed 4 July 2021.