



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS



School Social Work
Association of America

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL ASSEMBLIES ON MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) are working together to provide schools, families, and communities resources to help increase awareness, understanding, and tolerance of mental health issues and mental illness in our society. We have joined with the National Association of Secondary School Principals to help promote and facilitate school assemblies on mental health to answer President Obama's call for a National Dialogue on Mental Health.

Our goals in promoting school-based assemblies on mental health are to:

- Educate students and teachers about mental health and mental illness
- Empower students to speak openly about mental health;
- Support students and families in making lifestyle changes that promote mental health;
- Encourage students to seek help when they need it and speak up when they see others in need.

School counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers are the most qualified school staff to address the mental health needs of students and identify those students and families in need of more intensive services. These professionals are also ideally equipped to help facilitate mental health assemblies and other programming to educate students, teachers and administrators about mental illness. Additionally, school-employed mental health professionals are available to provide ongoing in-service training and consultation for teachers, principals, and other school staff, and to implement school-wide programs to improve school climate and conditions for learning. These professionals should be available in every school to address these critical needs and support schools in their mission of academic achievement. We offer the following resources to help plan for and implement school mental health assemblies.

Considerations when planning mental health assemblies or other discussions with youth

- Consider the size of the student population. Would a whole school assembly, grade level assemblies, or individual classroom dialogues be the most effective way to reach your students?
- Who should be included in the planning and implementation of the assemblies? Appropriate individuals include
 - Principal
 - School counselor/ school psychologist/ school social worker
 - School nurse
 - Health teacher
 - Parent
 - Community partner
- **Be aware of cultural considerations within your school community and be sure to tailor your information and dialogue formats appropriately.**
- As a result of any effort to raise awareness about mental health issues, like an assembly, your school community may see an increase in self and peer referrals for either school-based services or more intensive mental health services. It is imperative that your school have access

to school-employed mental health professionals and a system to link students, staff and families to community services if necessary.

Whole School Assemblies

Pros

- Assurance that all students hear the same content in the same way
- Time efficient

Cons

- Less time for interactive discussion
- Students may not speak up in a large crowd
- Teachers not able to monitor student reaction to the assembly

Grade Level/Classroom Level Assemblies

Pros

- Easier to facilitate interactive discussions
- Students may feel more comfortable sharing in small groups
- Teachers able to monitor student reactions

Cons

- Time intensive
- No assurance that all students hear the content in the same way

Suggested Talking Points

The overarching message to children and youth is that our mental health is as important as our physical health and that mental health problems can be successfully treated. Recognizing the signs of symptoms and asking for help are critical.

- Mental health exists on a continuum that spans from mental wellness to mental illness. We can all support our own mental wellness by maintain a positive group of friends, seeking support when you need it, nurturing a talent or skill, hobbies and interests, and identify and work towards a goal.
- Anyone regardless of age, culture, race, gender, ethnicity, economic status, or location can be affected by a mental health problem.
- Many people experience stress, or temporary feelings of depression or anxiety as a result of everyday life experiences (e.g. stressful time at work or school, being bullied, the end of a romantic relationship, family conflicts). We can often cope with these feelings by connecting with friends, talking to a parent or trusted adult, doing things we enjoy, and getting exercise, eating healthy, and getting enough sleep.
- When conditions are more severe and long-lasting, they are referred to as mental illness and include depression, anxiety, and other disorders which may require treatment and support. Many people with a mental illness who get the help they need live happy and productive lives. It is important that we ask for help when we need it.
- Struggling with mental illness does not mean you are weak. In fact asking for helping when you or someone you care about is struggling is really a sign of strength.
- Left untreated, serious depression can lead to suicidal feelings and thoughts. Both can be prevented which is why it is so important to know the signs of depression in yourself and others and get help.
- Due to lack of understanding and stigma surrounding mental illness, many people do not ask for help when they need it.
- Mental illness is very common in our society and counseling or therapy can be helpful treatments.

- You each have specific strengths that can help you cope with daily struggles.
- Abusing drugs or alcohol is often a symptom of a mental health problem and can also make the problem worse. Never self-medicate.
- Here at school, there are a number of adults who can help with a mental health problem. These include NAMES OF SPECIFIC STAFF MEMBERS). They are here for you.
- If you are struggling or are concerned about a friend, here is where you get help (SPECIFIC STEPS AND CONTACT INFORMATION)

Discussion Questions

Without naming names, can you identify a trusted adult who you would go to for help if you felt you or a friend needed it?

Why do you think kids don't ask for or get help when they need it?

How can we as a group/class/school help reduce the stigma around mental illness so that people talk about and get the help they need?

What are some ways we can support a friend or classmate who is struggling with a mental illness?

What are some healthy ways that you deal with stress and other problems you may face?

Facts and Myths About Mental Health¹
Myth: If I have a mental health problem I should be able to take care of it myself.

Reality: Some mental health problems can be solved with support, taking care of yourself, and reaching out to others. However, if problems persist, you should consult with a trusted adult and seek the proper care.

Myth: If I have a mental illness, it is a sign of weakness—it's my fault.

Reality: Mental illness is not anyone's fault. Just as people do not choose to have diabetes or cancer, people do not choose to have a mental illness. Mental illnesses are not results of any specific behavior and no one should have to feel ashamed of this condition any more than any other medical condition.

Myth: People diagnosed with a mental illness are always sick, act crazy, and are out of touch with reality.

Reality: Most people suffering from even the most severe of mental illnesses are in touch with reality more often than they are not. Many people quietly bear the symptoms of mental illness without ever showing signs of their illness to others, and most people with mental illness live productive, active lives.

Sample Agenda (see attached, *Exploring Mental Health*)

This agenda can be used in its entirety or modified to fit the needs of your student population.

Suggested Topics for follow up Small Group/Classroom Discussion

- Resiliency
- Physical health and mental well-being
- Stress
- Tolerance and Respect

Resources

Resources for youth

www.braverytips.org

[Save a Friend: Tips for Teens to Prevent Suicide](#)

Teachers/Administrators

[Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students](#)

[Health, Mental Health, and Safety Guidelines for Schools](#) <http://www.nationalguidelines.org/>

Parents

[Depression in Young Children](#)

[When it Hurts to be a Teenager](#)

General Resources

[Overview of School Mental Health Services](#)

[Supporting Children's Mental Health: Tips for Parents and Educators](#)

[The Importance of School Mental Health Services](#)

[Speak Up for Kids Website](#)

[Toolkit for Community Conversations About Mental Health](#)

[School Psychologists and Mental Health Services \(pdf\)](#)

[Role of the School Counselor and Student Mental Health](#)

[School Social Workers' Role in Addressing Students' Mental Health Needs](#)

[ABC's of Children's Mental Health—Article for Elementary School Personnel](#)

[Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students—Article for Secondary School Principals \(pdf\)](#)

[Depression in Children and Adolescents: Primer for Parents and Educators \(pdf\) \(English\)](#)

[Depression in Children and Adolescents: Primer for Parents and Educators \(pdf\) \(Spanish\)](#)

[Preventing Youth Suicide - Tips for Parents and Educators](#)

[Bullying and Youth Suicide: Breaking the Connection—Article for Secondary School Principals \(pdf\)](#)

[Bullies and Victims: A Primer for Parents \(pdf\)](#)

¹ Adapted from information provided by the National Alliance on Mental Illness www.nami.org