

Let's Change the Narrative: De-stigmatizing Mental Illness

The names Dylan Kebold, Eric Harris, Seung-Hui Cho, and Adam Lanza have become permanent figures in the historical narrative of school violence in the United States. Undoubtedly, their names are also on the minds of the 223 Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) trainers in North Carolina as they begin each training. I know they are on mine. For me these young adults aren't symbols of violence, but rather represent the hurting students who sit in our classrooms hoping for adult intervention but just can't ask for it themselves. I think about what warning signs were missed and all the potential that was lost. Additionally, the coupling of school violence and mental illness leads to the false perception that mental illness is rare, and when present, ultimately leads to violence. With the focus on the extreme, well-meaning adults may miss the mental health challenges that hide in plain sight: the middle school student who hides the marks of self-injury under clothing, the overwhelming anxiety to succeed that becomes detrimental to a student's health, or the trauma of abuse a young person hides under a mask of nonchalance.

Ten years ago the National Behavioral Health Council embarked on a mission to change the conversation about mental illness through the Mental Health First Aid program. At its core, YMHFA aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illness and negative perceptions of adolescence. Rather than adolescence being some sort of pathology that needs to be overcome, participants are asked to work through interactive activities to identify the strengths of young people, as well as, recognize warning signs of mental health challenges and crises. While YMHFA does not teach an adult to diagnose or treat mental illness, the program equips them to be first aiders in time of a mental health crisis. Similar in concept to CPR training, YMHFA instructs participants to follow an action plan in order to respond appropriately to non-crisis and crisis situations until professional help is obtained. Topics addressed in the course include: anxiety, depression, substance use, psychosis, ADHD, and eating disorders.



The course is designed for any adult who works with youth, such as parents, teachers, health educators, police officers, and clergy. Recently, Rachel Gamelin, a student in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, completed the YMHFA course. When asked about her experience, Gamelin remarked, "The YMHFA training opened my eyes to the needs of the students I'll be working with every day in the classroom. As a result of this training, I feel prepared to intervene in youth mental health crises and encourage self-care practices to my students regularly."

The Mental Health First Aid program, which includes YMHFA, has strong bipartisan support. In fact, on September 26, 2016 the US House of Representatives passed the Mental Health First Aid Act (H.R. 1877) that authorizes \$15 million to train police officers, teachers, veterans and first responders. In North Carolina, Mental Health First Aid is funded through Mental Health Block Grants from the NC Division of Mental Health, Development Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services. The Governor's Task Force on Mental Health and Substance Use supports the statewide implementation of Mental Health First Aid as an evidence-based practice to reduce stigma. For more information on North Carolina's initiatives, contact Ruby Brown-Herring, NC Mental Health First Aid Coordinator, at rubylo@email.unc.edu and visit: <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/mental-health-first-aid>.

The YMHFA course is 8 hours in length, and participants earn a certificate upon completion. If your school, organization, agency or faith community is interested in hosting the program, trainers can be sought out in your area to facilitate the program, or as an individual, you can join an already scheduled training. To find a trainer or course in your area visit: <http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/take-a-course/> and join the other 7, 771 youth first aiders in our state to change the narrative.

Rebecca Wenrich Wheeler is a former high school teacher, and currently serves as a Senior Health Educator and Youth Mental Health First Aid trainer for the Alice Aycock Poe Center for Health Education in Raleigh, NC. She also is a proud PTA member. For information on other prevention programs, such as bullying and substance use prevention, visit www.poehealth.org. Rebecca can be contacted at r.wheeler@poehealth.org.