# Background

Many people experience the onset of serious mental illness or substance use disorder during adolescence and early adulthood, with 50% of psychiatric conditions appearing before the age of 14, and nearly 75% before the age of 25 (Solmi et al., 2021). Although the onset of mental illness peaks during the transition years, utilization of mental health services declines sharply during this time and many young people do not access the treatment they need (Walker, Cummings, Hockenberry, & Druss, 2015; Duong et al., 2020). The prevalence of mental illness among youth and young adults are at historic highs and have recently been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Patrick et al., 2020; Magsen et al., 2021).
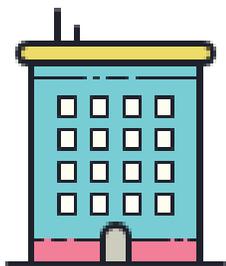
Schools are major institutions in young people's lives and where they spend most of their time outside of the home. For this reason, schools may be an appropriate setting for mental health services and interventions (Magsen et al., 2021). It is important that educators understand how to identify a student who may be struggling with a mental health challenge and have the tools to support young people navigating a mental health condition. The following are tips and strategies for educators to promote mental health literacy to enhance the ability to recognize students who may need additional supports:

Familiarize yourself with the REDFLAGS model (Kalkbrenner, Lopez, and Gibbs, 2017; Kalkbrenner and Carlisle, 2019) and share this model with your students.). Note: Initial statistical tests of this model suggest that it is a reliable predictor of mental distress. Encourage students to talk about stressors at school with one another and during private check-ins.

> The REDFLAGS acronym stands for Recurrent class absences that are unusual for the student; Extreme or unusual emotional reactions, Difficulty concentrating, Frequent worrying about class assignments, Late and incomplete assignments gaining in frequency, Apathy toward personal appearance, Gut feelings that someone is experiencing distress, Sudden deterioration of contributions in class and/or assignment quality or content towards negativity and stress.

- Encourage adults to reach out should they notice any changes in their student's behavior at home.

Understand mental health checkups as an intervention against the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a set of policies and practices that make it more likely for some youth to be criminalized and ensnared in the legal system than to receive a quality education and the community-based supports they need to thrive. There is evidence that youth with substance use and/or mental health challenges experience a higher prevalence of discipline and school-based police contact

The school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately affects youth of color, young people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ youth. The effects of discrimination impacts students' psychological and emotional well-being and may lead to a further decline in their mental health and disengagement from school. (Mallet, 2017)

Discuss the process of accessing learning accommodations with your students and their families at the beginning of the year (**Mental Health America, 2020**). Strategize with your students, those with accommodations and those without, and your school's learning services coordinator to create assignments that ensure that success is attained by all (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Despite the growing attention given to talking about mental health broadly, students report difficulty accessing services, likely due to "mental health professional shortages, lack of insurance coverage, lack of providers who take insurance, culturally incompetent services, and complicated paperwork" (**MHA, 2020**).

Define mutual respect and trust with your students, and link actions/teaching practice with these definitions.

Mutual respect is **defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2021)** as a non-judgmental stance from which to approach each young person as a complete individual, "including their cultures, perspectives, behaviors, expressed ideas, and experiences." Mutual respect recognizes that each person has the right to care even if they choose not to disclose or otherwise relive traumatic events.

Practices that may demonstrate mutual respect include
1.) Acknowledging your own cultural background
2.) Modeling healthy boundaries and open communication
3.) Welcoming feedback on your practice of mutual respect
4.) Supporting, but not hovering over, a young person's decision-making process.

Trust is the result of **consistent, dependable, transparent, and honest communication and action in a caring relationship**. Ability to trust is affected by our cultural identity and lived experiences. It's important to acknowledge that students who come from historically marginalized communities may have eroded trust with systems- you may need to engage more deeply to earn trust.

Practices that may demonstrate trust:
1.) Inform young people of your legal responsibility as a mandated reporter before they disclose sensitive information. Know the specific mandated laws in your state prior to sharing.
2.) Follow the lead of the young people you work with
3.) Honor their right to privacy
4.) Express gratitude after being given personal information
5.) Share parts of your own story to let young people know more about who you are, what you enjoy, and what you value.

Positive school climates promote increased academic, social, and emotional outcomes for young people. Educators can play a key role in helping students thrive by considering the mental health of the youth being served. Schools, administrators, teachers and other school staff set the tone about the acceptance and importance of mental health- by taking steps to model appreciation and understanding of how mental health impacts us, educators can support normalizing conversations about mental health and create nurturing environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

References

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