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The Importance of Mental Health Awareness in Our Classrooms

I. Introduction

Attention-Getter: The classroom environment over the past decade and even over the past year has changed immensely for cities, communities, teachers, parents, and students. For everyone, these drastic changes can be draining, especially for our students, who seem like they just have to follow the next set of ever-changing guidelines.

Listener Relevance: As teachers, we want our students to achieve their academic and personal goals, so they can get to where they want to be in life and be an educated member of society. We know that students need our support to get there. One level that is often missing in the classroom is the mental component to achieving goals. Students have many stressors in their life that can attribute to their schooling, and oftentimes, they aren't always apparent. That's why we need to encourage positive mental health in our classrooms, so students can be aware of their own and others' mental wellbeing and maybe reduce the amount of struggle weighing down on them.

Thesis Statement: Providing students with mental health awareness in the classroom can promote better academic performance as well as produce a more empathetic culture within our schools.

Specific Preview: Today, I will be discussing why mental health in the classroom is important, warning signs and who to turn to if you notice something wrong, and what we as teachers can do to encourage stronger mental health awareness in the classroom.

Transition: Let's begin with why mental health in the classroom is important.

II. Body of the Speech

A. Mental health affects our younger students more than one might think

1. Suicide is one of the top causes of deaths for Americans between the ages of 10 to 24, according the CDC in a 2018 report. This is seen almost across the board except for African American students, where we see homicide and unintentional injury take lead for age groups 15-19 and 20-24 (CDC 2018).

2. Shockingly, in North Dakota and Minnesota combined, ages 15-19, suicide is the leading cause of death for that age group (CDC 2018). We also see suicide being the leading cause of death in our Native American population for ages 10-14 and 15-19 (CDC 2018).
3. And for LBGQ youth, they are more than twice as likely to feel suicidal and over four times as likely to attempt suicide compared to their straight counterparts.
Additionally, transgender youth are far more likely than their non-transgender peers to experience depression. According to a 2016-2017 survey from the Human Rights Campaign, 28 percent of LGBTQ youth (including 40 percent of trans youth) said they felt depressed most or all of the time during the previous 30 days, compared to only 12 percent of non-LGBTQ youth (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2017). This doesn't even address race, which if we are looking at a well-known statistic, trans people of color are even more likely to be victims of suicide and homicide.

Transition: Now that we know the numbers, it's important to know what to look for.

B. Warning signs and symptoms of mental health issues and reporting potential issues

1. When it comes to our students, we want them to be in the best shape they can be so they can achieve their goals and dreams. Some signs they aren't in tip-top shape may not be physically apparent; some are much more subtle and a bit more severe than the outward indications. From MentalHealth.gov, they give a solid list that teachers can look out for in student's behavior, which I have combined some points and condensed:
 - a. Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks. (I would go as far as to say if they have a bad week and come back over the weekend just as bad or worse, I would intervene.)
 - b. Seriously trying to harm oneself or others or making plans to do so. Beginning to show signs of violent or out-of-control behavior that could cause harm to themselves or others or general increase of aggressiveness.
 - c. Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or fast breathing. Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities.
 - d. Not eating, throwing up, or using laxatives to make oneself lose weight.

- e. Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still that puts the student in physical danger or causes problems in the classroom.
 - f. Use of drugs or alcohol.
 - g. Severe mood swings or erratic behavior that cause problems in relationships.
 - h. Drastic changes in the student's behavior or personality (MentalHealth.gov, 2019).
2. As teachers, we cannot take on all our students' issues and problems as much as we would love to help every single one of them individually, one-on-one. We want to be there for our students, but to invest ourselves into helping every student of ours that needs help would be too much. As educators, we have different options to turn to, to help ourselves and our students. According to MentalHealth.gov, we can consult the school counselor, nurse, or administrator who we trust to help and provide additional care and resources for our students. They also suggest that we could turn to the students' parents, but I would approach this with care, as we don't always know if they parents are a source of issue for our student (MentalHealth.gov, 2019).

Transition: One place where we can start the encouragement of mental wellbeing is in our own classrooms.

- C. We can do our part as educators to provide mental health awareness in our schools and classrooms.
 1. We can directly address mental health awareness with our students. As English teachers, we have an advantage; we can provide books, stories, poems, projects, and other materials that discuss and teach themes about mental health, suicide, eating disorders, bipolar disorders, personality disorders, and so much more. (Look up Confessionalist poetry, like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, amongst others. They were pioneers in the confessionalism movement.)
 2. We can do small additions to our classroom as well to encourage a stronger community within our classroom. Madeleine Taylor, a people skills consultant, suggests the following strategies to try: Feeling of the Week to develop a stronger language of feelings, expecting children to notice and name empathy when demonstrated by others, developing games that build skills to read faces and body language, fostering cognitive empathy through literature and role playing, foster

multiculturalism, support children and the parent community to find what they have in common amongst all that is different, have jobs for children to carry out in the classroom, have rules of expected behavior and politeness, teach non-verbal cues, and report on empathy, persistence, and delayed gratification in school reports (Taylor, 2018).

3. We can also do activities with our classrooms to teach and build a stronger understanding of mental wellbeing and awareness. According to Everfi, a company that promotes real-world learning in our education system, there are several activities we can do, one of which we will do together.
 - a. Mental Health Dialogue – having an open discussion amongst the classroom can promote stronger mental health awareness and understanding as well as empathy.
 - b. Brain Breaks – Allow students a few minutes to close their eyes, do yoga, or meditate, breathe, etc. Whatever they need to relax and clear their mind.
 - c. Stopping the Stigma – Students create a colorful mini-poster with quotes on them that promote mental health awareness. Making art lowers stress levels. Hanging up the posters can create a positive environment as well as destigmatizing mental health.
 - d. Mental Health Check-in – Give your students the opportunity to express how they're presently feeling. They provide a poster (in multiple fashions and languages) and how teachers can do this activity. [I have sent the PDF to everyone.]
 - e. Mood Tracker – Students can start a daily mood tracker to watch the flow of their feelings throughout the week, month, or year. Tracking their moods and fluctuation over time creates awareness, which makes students more effective managers of their moods.
 - f. Positive Post-its (my personal favorite) – Have students encourage each other by writing positive messages on sticky notes that promotes positivity and mental health awareness, such as, "You got this!" or "Your smile makes others smile!" (Everfi, 2021).
4. I also found an article of virtual activities you can do as well, and we will be doing one of them: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/learning/7-activities-to-build->

[community-and-positive-classroom-culture-during-online-learning.html](https://www.ck12.org/learning-community/positive-classroom-culture-during-online-learning/) (Connecting with one another with blackout screen questions. Shows how much we are alike with our classmates.)

III. Conclusion

- A. When it comes to mental wellbeing, we all can benefit from understanding and promoting mental health awareness. In our lifetime, we spend about 15 percent of our life in school from Kindergarten until we graduate high school (Reference.com). As teachers, we can encourage students to take care of themselves and their mental wellbeing or find solutions if they aren't able to help themselves. We have an obligation to make sure our students feel safe, appreciated, and welcomed in our classroom. For them, knowing that their mental health is also taken into account could make the world of a difference.
- B. As we continue to push through this global pandemic, adjust and readjust to guidelines, and try to help our students achieve their dreams, our students' mental wellbeing has taken a toll, as with most people. Adapting the classroom to provide a secure and warm environment as much as possible may allow students to work through tougher times and come out a stronger human being and help them get that much closer to their goals.

Works Cited

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