

MENTAL HEALTH

In High School, the Kids Are Not All Right

With social and academic pressure mounting, a teacher shares what he's learned about tracking his students' mental well-being.

By *David Tow*

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I lost my first student to suicide not long ago. The student was no longer in my class at the time, nor even at the school, but I was flooded with the expected surge of feelings: overwhelming sadness, periodic despair, compulsive frame-by-frame replays of our every interaction. I felt the loss deeply. It was unspeakably tragic—for the student's friends and family, for me, and for the world I'd hoped the student would help shape.

I was haunted, too—I still am—by the fear of a similar tragedy among my raw-nerved and anxious students. And ***the recent spike in teenage suicides*** (<http://www.marini.com/general-news/20171222/marin-teen-suicides-prompt-workshop-on-prevention-grief>) in my area has underscored this fear sharply.

Based on my observations, the lives of the high school students I teach are hemmed in everywhere by social pressures and expectations: high-stakes testing, the looming shadow of college admissions, the fiercely competitive school system, the painful process of figuring out who you are, and the ubiquitous desire for peer acceptance. Add to this the unseen pressures—fractured or fragmented home lives, emotional or physical violence and abuse, struggles with substance use, legal problems, and the wide range of issues borne by the many immigrant communities across the country—and it makes for a period of unsustainable emotional distress. In recent weeks the constant pressure has meant dealing with student depression almost daily, and helping support those who I feel might be toeing the line of self-harm.

There are plenty of resources for dealing with student mental health issues, of course—though most of them are geared either toward college kids or, more tragically, toward elementary and middle school-aged children. The sources that do offer strategies tailored for high school students tend to be either excessively academic or so general as to be useless. Reviewing my notes from my joint credential and master's program, I find inconsistency and a frustrating lack of clarity. The strategies include things like teaching positive management strategies and promoting emotional competency, or educating staff on mental health issues and encourage social supports.

As a practicing teacher, I don't find that very helpful. And in my day-to-day work life, I see two common—and mostly inadequate—mental health strategies deployed to help high schoolers who look like they might be struggling: First, take some time, and second,

get caught up. Even if the advice is phrased differently, it's usually a variation on the same theme. Students are advised to take the adolescent equivalent of a personal day, and then complete their work accordingly. I'm not pointing fingers. I've done it myself.

In my case, frustration drove me to seek some better answers. In a series of recent conversations with the mental health professionals I trust, with colleagues who have a long history of putting students' mental well-being first—and of course with students—I've assembled a list of strategies for classroom teachers to implement that might help not just treat the symptoms but also address the underlying issues.

5 STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING HIGH SCHOOLERS' MENTAL WELL-BEING

1. Ask “How are you doing?”—and mean it. For the past six years, I've stood at the door and welcomed my high school students in with a handshake and a variant of that question. If I sense any problems, I might ask “Really?” or “You sure?” I think it's reassuring to students to know that an adult in their life cares about their well-being, and *the research*

(<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2013.866148>) strongly *supports that position*

(<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-Results-Students-Well-being-Volume-III-Overview.pdf>).

Student responses, even if they don't answer honestly, can reveal volumes about their actual mental and emotional status. In my class, as students complete the warm-up, I go to my roster and note which students seemed upset or otherwise off.

Over the course of an average month, I think it's a good goal to seek out one substantial check-in with every student, no matter how they seem to be doing. The teacher will have made a meaningful one-on-one contact, and the student will know that the teacher has their well-being at heart. Furthermore, it's easy and cheap in terms of time invested, but can yield important insights.

2. Set office hours. This is a policy I've borrowed from some of the best teachers I've worked with: Set formal office hours and use them to meet with students about more than just academic concerns. For example, I'll try and meet with each of my students once per semester at some point outside of class time and use the conversation to learn more about who they are, what their academic goals are, and whatever other concerns they have. More often than not, these conversations move into more meaningful territory—most of my students just want or need someone to talk to. The primary objection is that this costs a great deal of time, and I agree. It's time intensive, but I think it's worth it.

3. Remember your Maslow. It seems trite to point this out, but in the midst of all the testing and the grading, we need to remind ourselves that mental health trumps academic performance every time. Students who don't feel grounded or safe or healthy cannot do their best work. Instead of constructing a classroom environment that operates at 100 percent difficulty all the time, consider alternate models that allow students to feel supported and competent first—and then consciously and explicitly ratchet up the difficulty and complexity as appropriate. I try to practice a type of curricular minimalism: lots of guided and independent low-stakes practice, culminating in a manageable set of summative exercises.

4. Consider what matters. I have often spoken with both past and current colleagues about makeup work. Many are of the belief that if a student misses an assignment, they should be—and often must be—responsible for timely completion upon their return. Others tend to recommend a gardener's approach, pruning the material to its most vital branch. More specifically, when a student is out, it's important for teachers to consider what work, what skills, and what benchmarks are actually important for outcomes.

When a colleague suggested to me that not all assignments matter, and those that do matter don't all matter the same, I balked—but there's plenty of wisdom in the idea. When a student falls behind, consider dropping assignments or editing down the work and, most importantly, explain to the student why that exception is being made. They will appreciate the clarity and the empathy, and most respond by working with greater discipline toward more manageable outcomes in the future.

5. Use the professionals. The best attempts of teachers pale in comparison to the support, resources, and guidance of professionals. I cannot advocate enough for teachers and all school staff to get to know your on-site school psychologists or mental health counselors (if you are so lucky), or to find those very important names and numbers immediately. Every mental health professional I've met in education has impressed me with their sensitivity, care, and ability to identify underlying issues well beyond my knowledge, and they explain the connection between a student's case history and my observations in a way that is both useful and crystal clear. Although teachers tend to try to be self-sufficient and eschew asking for help from those outside the classroom, we aren't mental health professionals—and this sort of assistance is necessary.

And don't forget to talk to someone yourself. This last strategy emphasizes self-care. I've seen teachers look just as punch-drunk as students, sometimes suffering from the same anxiousness and depression. It's important that teachers make an effort to talk to

someone else—especially since the old truism that each classroom is its own kingdom is generally still true. A teacher who is burdened with the trials and tribulations of their hundred-plus students—and their own struggles to boot—won’t have the headspace to be a humane, observant, and effective shepherd.

Whether it’s in small doses with a spouse or significant other, structured sessions with a therapist, or even informational conversations with colleagues, getting those feelings and thoughts out of your head will make you more capable of responding to the needs of others.

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MENTAL HEALTH

Responding to Students With Addiction

Supporting students with drug and alcohol dependency isn’t easy—but some strategies are more helpful than others.

By *Emily Donahoe*

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Young people who repeatedly get caught using alcohol and drugs are often labeled as “troubled,” “bad influences,” or “kids who are making bad choices.” Maybe an adult in the picture recognizes that a student might have a problem, but it can be difficult for that adult to understand why the student doesn’t seem to want to get better.

As educators, we have a job to do—and not many options for helping students like these without also having to punish them. How can we better support students who might be struggling with alcoholism and addiction?

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