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Building Awareness in 4-H Volunteers to Support Youth Mental Health

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Introduction

ADOLESCENCE IS A CRITICAL TIME for mental development, a period when teens undergo many experiences and changes that influence, for good or ill, their transition into adulthood. Unfortunately, throughout the country, youth are experiencing a decline in mental health. An estimated 49.5% of adolescents struggle with a mental health disorder at some point during this period (US Department of Health and Human Services–Office of Population Affairs. n.d.). For Idaho youth, the situation is even worse. According to Mental Health America, a national mental health nonprofit, Idaho ranks 47th, indicating high prevalence of mental illness amid lower access to care in the state.

Volunteers in 4-H can support the mental health of youth in our clubs and in 4-H educational offerings by adopting positive youth development practices (US National Library of Medicine n.d.). This bulletin discusses some of these concepts and strategies, including the effect of stress on mental health, the signs and symptoms of a mental health struggle, and basic advice about how to help those who are struggling. Other elements include a resource list that provides more information when professional help is merited and an offering of three activities to teach youth how they might manage stressful feelings.

Stress Versus Mental Health

Stress is a common human response. No one is free from experiencing it. It is common to try to eliminate stress or at least minimize it as much as possible. It is easy to focus on the negative aspect of stress, but stress can be positive. Stress can be useful in instances such as being motivated to study for a presentation or exam. Another benefit of stress is that it can alert of danger, known as the fight or

flight response. This response assists in keeping individuals safe and is important to survival. It should be noted that positive changes in our lives can also bring feelings of stress. New employment, new members joining families, and moving to new homes, for instance, can be positive developments, but adjusting to them can also bring stressful feelings.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress as “a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation” (World Health Organization 2023). Stress is generally a physical or mental response to an external cause or pressure (National Institute of Mental Health 2020). It is connected to a situation, and it generally ends when the situation concludes.

Over time, stress can lead to a persistent feeling that interferes with daily living. This is when action is needed to improve mental health. WHO defines mental health as the “state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (WHO 2022). Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

Mental health affects how we think, feel, act, make choices, and handle stress. Stress should come with the trigger or source and then go away when the situation is resolved, such as when the presentation or exam is complete. There can be times when the stress responses come and stay even though the stressor situation has passed. This can lead to individuals feeling overwhelmed and feeling they

are under too much pressure. It is important to learn healthy responses to stress as there is no way to avoid it. It is also important to recognize when responses are no longer healthy and to know what resources might help.

Signs and Symptoms

One of the first steps to help youth who are struggling with their mental health is to understand and identify the signs and symptoms. **Signs** are the visual of the issue. For example, a sign of a cold is a runny nose. **Symptoms**, however, are usually unseen. For example, body aches caused by the flu are felt but aren’t visual phenomena. Regarding mental health, often signs and symptoms can be correlated. For example, a negative facial expression (sign) may indicate that a person is feeling a particular emotion (symptom). Table 1 identifies some of the sign-symptom correlations commonly associated with mental health challenges (National Alliance on Mental Illness n.d.). Please note this is not a comprehensive list.

Note that youth might not necessarily be experiencing distress or a related mental health challenge even when they are exhibiting concerning signs and symptoms. The behavior may just be a normal expression of their growth and development. However, if the troubling signs and symptoms persist, lasting for two weeks or more, it’s worth investigating further. Learning about and understanding the causes of the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges are vital to helping youth respond in a healthy manner to stress.

Table 1. Signs and symptoms of mental health challenge or distress.

Sign (Visual)	Symptom (Can’t Usually Be Seen)
Negative facial expressions (frowning, clenched jaw, furrowed eyebrows)	Feeling strong emotions such as sadness, worry, anger, fear, etc.
Change in energy level (lethargy or hyperactivity)	Racing thoughts
Withdrawal from friends, family, and activities that used to be enjoyable	Thoughts about suicide
Crying	Confused thinking, inability to concentrate
Extreme mood changes	Feelings of guilt

How You Can Help

Supportive and trusted adult influences on youth have been shown to provide crucial benefits for better mental health in adulthood (VanBronkhorst 2024). Relationships with caring and trusted adults are a key component of Positive Youth Development (PYD), “a comprehensive approach to promoting learning and development” (National 4-H Council n.d.). It seeks to empower young people and help them cultivate essential life skills so that they can achieve their full potential. The programs seek to increase “protective factors” such as strong social connections and to support the development of “positive characteristics” in youth and from their youth community (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention n.d.). When youth feel connected to their surroundings, such as having a supportive and trusted adult, they increase their protective factors. The increase lessens the chance that youth will develop poor mental health. As a 4-H volunteer, you are an important part of providing a positive and supportive environment. Youth should feel a sense of connectedness, trust, and safety at club meetings.

One way to help youth is to set a strong mental health example. Tend to your own mental health by practicing healthy behaviors like getting regular exercise, eating more nutritious meals, engaging in relaxation and/or meditation techniques, and maintaining supportive relationships.

Encourage youth to develop the habit of speaking up about their needs and/or worries by asking open-ended questions. Use “I” statements so they do not feel accused or judged. Instead of saying, “You are sad and irritable, is everything okay?,” say “I notice you seem sad lately, and I am concerned and want to help, how can I help?” You might also acknowledge the stress that youth are going through such as, “I know that you’ve had a tough week. The <situation> must be hard. How are you doing with <situation>?” Acknowledging that tough things can be difficult to deal with helps youth regard stress as a more common experience that they need to learn how to work through and process as part of being an adult.

Volunteers can benefit from training provided about mental health. Two useful trainings include Youth Mental Health First Aid (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/youth/>) and QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) (<https://qprinstitute.com>).

It is important to be a trusted caring adult and make connections to your youth. It is also important to remember policies that keep you both safe, such as promising not to keep secrets; engaging appropriately with a struggling youth when you are both away from the large group but not alone; and involving parents or other caring adults when appropriate. Doing these things can help a youth struggling in a timely manner.

Additional Resources

Sometimes, a youth or their family may not know where to start when seeking help. Some resources you can offer them include the following:

- Primary care doctor. Doctors may have connections to mental health professionals or know how to access mental health care.
- Crisis Lines.
 - » 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline-call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. This resource is available 24/7.
 - » Crisis Text Line. Text HOME to 741741.
 - » Local hotline. Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline (208)-398-4357.
- Therapist. Locate a therapist directory at psychologytoday.com.

There may be other local resources in your area. Identify them so that you are better prepared when someone needs help.

Stress Management Skill Activities (with volunteer groups or at club meetings)

There are many activities to do at the beginning or end of a club meeting that teach about mental health. These are just a few to get you started.

Example 1: Stress Ball Fight

Materials: markers, paper, basket or bucket

Instructions:

- Ask for 2–3 volunteers to come up to the front.
- Give all the other young people a piece of paper and ask them to write about (identify) something that stresses them out. Tell them these won't be shared publicly.
- Invite them to crumple the stress page into a ball and *gently* toss it toward the volunteers.
- The volunteers try to catch as many “stress balls” as they can. Start out by throwing one or two, then keep throwing more. The more that are thrown, the harder it is to catch them all.
- After the volunteers try to catch the “stress balls” thrown at them, relate this to all the things life throws at us and talk about the objectives of this session.

Example 2: Breathing

Materials: bubbles or chewing gum (optional)

Instructions:

Discuss the importance of breathing. Share that copying a relaxed breathing pattern in stressful situations can help calm the nervous system. Lead youth through a variety of breathing exercises.

- Bubble- or chewing gum-blowing: Many people don't know what deep breathing is. Because it requires deep breath and concentration, blowing bubbles can help youth understand what deep breathing feels like. Blowing bubbles with chewing gum has the same effect because it requires the chewer to focus on using breath from deep down.
- Box breathing: Box breathing is a technique of breathing in, holding, breathing out, and holding. It is called box breathing because it is easy to keep the pattern when picturing a box. Hold up an image of a box or direct youth to follow a box pattern with their fingers (Figure 1). Count to four while completing each step.

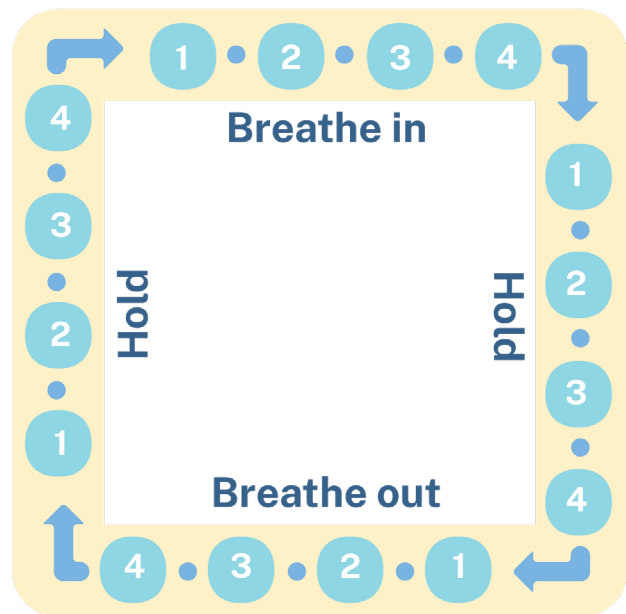


Figure 1. This box image schematic can help youth to visualize how to perform the box-breathing technique.

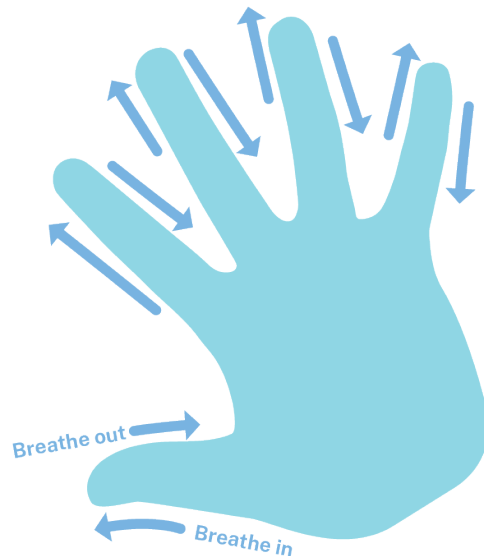


Figure 2. This drawing of an open hand can help youth visualize how to perform the five-finger-breathing technique.

- Five-finger breathing: This variation on box breathing uses someone's hand. Group members put their hand out in front of them. With their other hand, they trace their breathing pattern. For example, breathing in youth trace up to the top of their finger; breathing out they trace the space in between their fingers (Figure 2).

Example 3: High-Five Plan

Materials: Paper and markers or crayons

Instructions:

- Talk with youth about why they think it is important to take care of themselves. Once you have a few answers, use the example of “pouring from an empty cup” and how you need to take care of yourself before you are able to help with projects, do service work, and help others.
- After discussing the importance of self-care, give youth a paper and something they can use to trace their hands. Youth trace their hands.
- Youth write down places, people, or activities they can do to help relieve stress and take care of their mental health.
- If there is time, ask the group to share some of the places, people, or activities that help them take care of themselves.

Further Reading

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