

## **Campaign Goals:**

- **Demystify misconceptions about mental health**
- **Break the stigma associated with seeking help**

## **Cause: What is mental health?**

Mental health is the collective emotional, psychological, and social well-being of an individual. It determines how people act, think, feel, and make decisions. And affects how they handle stress and relate to others in their community. Poor mental health can be the result of various individual experiences, biological factors, or a family history of conditions. Mental health issues may vary in degree, but do not discriminate. Intervention by behavioral therapy or medication is a critical part of overall wellness, prevention, and identification for people struggling.

According to the CDC, poor mental health and mental illness are not the same. Mental illness refers to conditions like anxiety, addiction, bipolar disorder, depression, PTSD, schizophrenia, or suicidal thoughts. Trauma, childhood abuse, other chronic conditions, chemical imbalances, loneliness, and isolation are all valid contributors to poor mental health and mental illness. Poor mental health can also increase the risk of physical health problems. For example, according to the CDC, depression can increase the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

According to Mental Health America, 1 out of 5 Americans are affected by poor mental health each year. Forty-six percent of Americans meet the criteria and half of which show symptoms by age fourteen. The number of adults struggling with poor mental health has reached 44 million, growing exponentially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. According to the Washington Post, more than half of people struggling with the mental health crisis avoid getting the help they need in fear of being treated differently or losing their jobs. We must confront these misperceptions in order to define the fact that a person is not their illness.

First, a common misperception about mental health is that it is uncommon. Considering 1 out of 5 Americans suffer, the statistics show otherwise. Another is that poor mental health is easy to recognize.

However, most people suffering are usually high activity and productive members of society. Others commonly assume that these people are lazy or weak minded. In reality, most need professional intervention or medication to get better, it's not just a mindset. This does not mean that poor mental health should be ignored by friends and family. For they are some of the most important influences on getting necessary treatment or services.

Society has created a certain stigma associated with being 'abnormal.' Treatment facilities are commonly referred to as "looney bins" or "insane asylums" in films and shows, contributing to the misperceptions and negative attitudes about people who struggle with mental illness. As well as the institutions and practices intended to help them. Ultimately, the language surrounding mental health can feel shame-inducing, contributing to the lack of acknowledgement and intervention.

#### **Audience: Who are today's college students?**

Majority of today's college students are between the ages of 18 and 25. Students are practicing independence, balancing busy schedules, reliant upon social media and socialization, and suffering from pandemic anxiety. Today's college students are more familiar with mental health and mental illness due to increased exposure and various "Mental Health Matters" campaigns. College students are more likely to suffer from poor mental health; however, they are less likely to seek help. Whether from their inability to see the importance of mental health or the fact that this generation is more insensitive to struggle, college students need help.

Two categories of college students the campaign could focus on are those working part or full time to pay for bills and/or tuition, and students that smoke nicotine. Statistics show that sixty percent of students work part or full time. Food and rent being their top two financial needs. Eight out of ten students stated they still feel the effects of the pandemic related to academic success, even as classes have returned to in-person. Since 2019, first-year enrollment for high school graduates has gone down thirteen percent. A lot of students are struggling to balance their educational aspirations with work, family, and financial needs. Only fifty-six percent of college students believed they were getting the education they were

paying for throughout the pandemic while only online courses were offered. Twenty-two percent of students are reliant upon unemployment benefits. And, forty-six percent have changed career paths due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conclusively, many students are struggling with executive functioning, imposter syndrome, and a variety of learning disabilities. Multiple factors have increased anxiety, depression, and stress among college students. Living in a state of worry about the physical health of themselves and family, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleeping patterns, decreased social interactions, and increased stress about academic performance. Most students have not been seeking mental health services or intervention, rather developing both good and damaging coping mechanisms.

One damaging coping mechanism that often results in addiction is smoking nicotine. The use of nicotine and tobacco products is strongly associated with increased anxiety and other disorders. Nicotine users are more likely to struggle with psychosis or other psychological distress. With the emergence of new vaping technologies over the last few years, more younger people are falling into nicotine addiction. Although research does not prove a lasting relationship between nicotine use and poor mental health, it has concluded a relationship between binge drinking behaviors and electronic cigarette use. Those more likely to be involved in risky drinking behaviors, like college students, are more likely to suffer from substance abuse and addiction. These statistics provide insight for potential repercussions of getting the full college experience, and if nicotine use has any influence on overall well-being.

### **Best Practices: What can we learn from current campaigns?**

National Alliance on Mental Illness - offer support groups, counselling and resources for those in crisis, educational resources, advocate opportunities. An association of more than 500 affiliates that work to raise awareness, provide support, and educate. Their campaign, "Creating Positive Change and Back to School Mental Health Tips" is a successful way to reach college students faced with the anxiety of the pandemic and remote learning.

Mental Health America - dedicated to helping people of all ages live mentally healthier, provide education about conditions of poor mental health, online testing, and how to reduce barriers to getting

treatment or services. Their Twitter campaign, “2021 Back to School Toolkit,” helps students and universities understand how feeling unsafe throughout unprecedented times can impact mental health, as well as offering methods to cope.

National Institute of Mental Health - lead agency for mental health research. Their Instagram campaign was a live event with one of their clinical psychologists. Dr. Lewis discussed stress triggers and how to reduce back to school anxiety with coping mechanisms. The live event focused on coping with the pandemic and re-entry into the stress of school.

### **Conclusion: What have you learned?**

One communication challenge that may arise is that college students prefer concise, valuable information. While mental health matters are valuable, communicating a concept this intricate may be difficult. College students like to save time, they have shorter attention spans due to the pandemic. Another challenge is that we are dealing with latent, aware, and apathetic publics. Meeting students where they are requires conveying a variety of messages depending on how much they already know or have experience with. Most mental health findings are relatively new, breaking the stigma and normalizing fluctuating mental health states may be hard to understand. Additionally, for the past couple years dealing with the pandemic, society is even more separated than pre-pandemic. Challenges may arise in getting students to talk about and relate to mental health awareness, and may be less likely to share personal details or feelings. Ultimately, the question is not how many interventions can we create to help college students, but what has caused a whole generation of people to need help regulating their emotions.

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