Classroom lessons in mental health could save young lives

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By Terri Finch Hamilton | The Grand Rapids Press

Life is hard enough without having a label plastered to your forehead that reads “Treat me like I’m stupid.”

Eighth-graders at Grandville Middle School the other day wore that label and others, from “Ignore me completely” to “Laugh at all my ideas.”

Treat each other accordingly, the students were told.

After a while of this, a kid can get bummed out. Imagine feeling like this all the time — worthless, ignored.

What if, at the end of the lesson, you couldn’t peel that sticker off?

Thousands of middle and high school students in Kent County are learning about mental health issues — including how bullying and depression can lead to suicide — through a program called “Live, Laugh, Love: Educating Our Youth About Mental Health.”

Presented by the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, the program covers suicide prevention, depression and other mental illnesses. Students are screened on the spot. If they need to talk to a counselor right away, they can.

CHANGING OUR MINDS

Amid all the talk about health care, discussion of mental illness barely rises to a whisper. Yet in violence or in silent suffering, it often is a matter of life for death.
program’s main presenters. She’s wearing her “Be nice” T-shirt as she strides around the Grandville classroom.

“We stereotype people who have something going on with their head,” Buck tells the eighth-graders. “If people think everyone is gonna call them crazy or nuts or weird, they decide, ‘I’m not gonna talk about it. They’ll think I’m crazy.’

But we need to talk about it,” she tells the kids. “We need to talk about it like we talk about diabetes and cancer. Just like those things, mental illness is a sickness that’s treatable. It’s a disease of the brain, a chemical imbalance. People with mental illness can be moms. They can be good students.”

When Buck asks students what they think of when they hear “schizophrenia,” and they answer “nuts,” “crazy,” “psycho,” “murderer,” she knows she has her work cut out for her.

Only 10 percent of American schools have a mental health unit as part of their curriculum, Buck said.

So far, about 10,000 Kent County students have experienced “Live, Laugh, Love” from districts including Forest Hills, Grandville, Grand Rapids and Wyoming. The program, ranging from four to eight weeks, costs $3,750 for four sessions and $7,500 for eight.

Part of the program uses an award-winning curriculum called Signs of Suicide, S.O.S. for short. S.O.S. includes videos of real teens telling about their own struggles with depression. At the end of the program, teens take a screening to determine if they need to talk to someone, or if they’re worried about a friend.

Out of one district’s questionnaires last year, 56 out of 240 wanted to talk to a professional, Buck said. Of those, 40 needed help for themselves. Others reported classmates they were concerned about.

Those who asked for counseling got it, Buck said.

“The system worked,” she said. “That’s massive.”

All this year, The Press plans to challenge stigmas and myths, bringing into focus people and their problems — and hope for those who suffer. We are committed to providing tools for readers to deal with their own loved ones’ problems. And telling your stories.

Today, we look a program in local schools that shows students the destructive impact of bullying, how to recognize mental illness in their friends or themselves, and how to get help.

&bull **Complete coverage**

http://blog.mlive.com/health_impact/print.html?entry=/2011/10/classroom_lessons_in_m...
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 26.1 percent of American high school students struggle with depression and 13.8 percent of students have seriously considered attempting suicide.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death, after accidents, for teens in Kent County, Buck said.

Sitting in her Grand Rapids office, Buck pulls out a stack of obituaries — all young men who died by suicide.

“This one, this one, this one,” she says, flipping through a pile of obits that feature young, smiling faces.

Learning what to look for

Back in the Grandville classroom, half the class reports being verbally bullied.

“People are killing themselves because they’ve been bullied,” Buck tells them.

The message seems to sink in.

Ashley Force, 14, heard the program last year as an eighth-grader at Grandville Middle School and says she has used the information ever since.

“It helps you see signs of people who are depressed,” Ashley said. “If they’re not acting like themselves for more than two weeks, you tell an adult.

“You learn not to judge people,” Ashley said. “Kids don’t understand how they can affect someone’s life with one thing they say.

“It makes me sad to think somebody thinks they can’t live on,” she said.

What can one girl do?

“Just be a better person,” Ashley said. “Help people.”

IF YOU GO

Art auction

What: “Shining Through,” a juried art show and auction celebrating the work of artists with mental illness.

Where: The Goei Center, 818 Butterworth St. SW.

Common experience: Students raise their hands after Christy Buck, director of the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, asks them if they have ever witnessed someone being bullied.
The foundation started the program six years ago with one psychology class at Forest Hills Eastern High School.

The teacher of that class, Sara Ahmicasaube, said parents were apprehensive at first about a program that talked to their kids about suicide.

"Until we had some kids attempt suicide who were successful," she said. "It became clear we needed some education.

"These teens will be going to college in a couple years, and with that comes the potential for depression and anxiety," Ahmicasaube said. "It’s important for them to be armed.

"It can be an uncomfortable topic," she said. "But Christy has a way of making it comfortable. She talks about something still pretty taboo in society and makes it safe."

Teaching kids to seek help for friends who are depressed is an important part of the program, Buck said.

Research shows more than two-thirds of young people will share their suicidal thoughts with a peer instead of a counselor, said Dr. Douglas G. Jacobs, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and founder and president of Screening for Mental Health Inc., which supplies some of the materials for Live, Laugh, Love.

"If somebody says, ‘I’m getting bullied online. I might as well kill myself,’ you listen," Buck tells students. "You pay attention.

"The big thing we want kids to know is that they’re not a social worker," Buck said. "You need to go somewhere with that information. Tell.

"I know I’ve saved lives with this program," Buck said. "I know it. Because kids have told me.”

For more information on Live, Laugh, Love or to schedule a presentation, call the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan at 965-8301 or visit themhf.org.

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