

Mental Health Should Be Part of Health Education Classes

By Heaven Wong

Mental health is a big deal. Physical education and health classes are important, but they are not enough. Learning about cancer and alcohol and drugs are very important, but we need to give our students more. Mental health is such a relevant topic in adolescents' lives and our education system should recognize it as a necessary topic to be talked about in the classroom. Mental health should be a mandatory component of health education in all middle and high schools.

This past fall, a new law went into effect in New York, making it the first state to require mental health as part of health education in schools. "The intention is to give students the knowledge they need to recognize in themselves and others when they need help" (<https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/fall-all-new-york-students-will-be-learning-about-mental-ncna911031>). How beautiful is that. Our education system has the potential to give support to students and encourage students to give support to each other in light of the rise of mental illness. Other states need to follow in New York's footsteps to support the well-being of all students.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, "fifty percent of mental illness begins by age 14" (<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/warning-signs-of-mental-illness>). Many challenges arise during middle school and high school, such as attending a new school, trying to fit in, maneuvering through friend groups and family issues, thinking about college, and much more. By implementing mental health as part of health education, students across the country will be able to learn about what they or people around them might be dealing with at the moment or in the future and be able to make decisions or ask for the necessary help to improve their mental health. These are tools that I do not think students have because they ultimately do not know.

There is a rise in mental illness and a rise in technology and social media use. Whether or not that's a coincidence, technology will not stop growing, and students will continue to spend a lot of time on social media. A mental health component will allow teachers to help their students make sense of what they see on social media and what is going on in the world. One recent tragic event that occurred in early September of 2018 was the death of the famous artist, Mac Miller. This story blew up on all media outlets. He struggled with substance abuse and depression and died of a drug overdose. According to the New Yorker, prior to his death, Miller expressed, "I really wouldn't want *just* happiness. And I don't want just sadness either" (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/the-tragic-death-of-mac-miller-a-musician-who-never-stopped-evolving>). Depression is real. Mental illness is real. Adolescents are being more

and more exposed to mental illness whether in their own lives or through social media and the lives of others. Schools need to help them understand what is going on. After Mac Miller's death, students might have concluded that depression is the same as sadness. The term depression is very loosely used, but there is so much more to depression that schools can teach students about through mental health education classes.

The addition of a mental health component in health education classes will also be a reminder to students that they are not alone, and they do not have to walk a path of mental illness alone. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, people usually wait up to 10 years before asking for help (<https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>). We can create an environment in schools where students learn to communicate what they're feeling and have the opportunity to do so. There will be a layer of authenticity brought to the classroom if mental health education becomes implemented, and it has the potential to bring schools together, connecting all levels, from principals to teachers to students. This seems to have been one of schools' biggest goals for a long time, because there is often a disconnect between at least one of the three. There will need to be a high level of trust between all levels at schools because mental health is not a joking matter. Once that level of trust is achieved, mental health education will create positive change in adolescents' lives, and we will start to see a decrease in mental illness.