

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS CLUB

The Mental Health Awareness Club (MHAC) at Spokane Community College (SCC) is a student-led organization whose mission is to eradicate mental health stigma and foster a community that exemplifies the true meaning of peer support - a community where fellow students can show up without fear of judgement and exist in a frequency in which they are allowed to shine. This organization aims to encourage open conversation amongst students and equity in access to mental health resources. It is no longer news that mental health issues are prevalent on college campuses. The question is, have college campuses been able to keep up with the increasing need for mental health resources? On a community college campus with limited funding like SCC, the answer is no. With only one psychiatric nurse practitioner who comes in once a week for a few hours, and two mental health interns, students are left stranded and frustrated having to wait for weeks if not months to get an appointment. Additionally, the mental health interns available can only provide 10 free sessions throughout a student's time on campus.

MHAC is compensating for the limited services by organizing Therapy Thursdays—a weekly themed group therapy free for students and faculty. Therapy Thursdays is interactive and has two main focuses: addressing the major risk factors of depression, isolation and loneliness, and providing opportunities for participants to develop life skills. We have seen that building supportive social relationships amongst students has reduced isolation and promoted a sense of belonging. Too often, mental health challenges are reduced to just chemical imbalances in the brain when in reality most college students are overwhelmed by stress, confusion, existential crises, financial problems, and academic responsibilities. For this reason, we devote one-hour sessions to learning life-coping skills like effective communication, dealing with stress, building healthy relationships, and conflict resolution. We also encourage students to attend other workshops on campus that focus on test anxiety, goal setting, and time management.

Statistics show that one in four young

adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a diagnosable mental illness. What is unique about this organization is that because it was founded at a community college, most of our members do not fall within this age group. In fact, the age of members range from 17 to 50 years of age and members have a unique lived experience that has shaped their lives in one way or the other. It was important that we catered to the needs of all our members and that we ensured vulnerability and made everyone feel heard and seen.

Due to the sudden loss of the local mental health help line, the club took on a project inspired by Active Minds to update the SCC student ID card with National Suicide Prevention crisis text line and the direct contact information of the health clinic. This update is set to begin in the fall of 2019 and will hopefully make mental health resources more accessible.

The club also represented students on the first-ever SCC Suicide Prevention Advisory Board.



FAST FACTS:

- MHACC Started a one hour weekly themed group therapy (Therapy Thursdays) to compensate the free but limited ten sessions available to students.
- MHACC's advocacy led professors to include mental health information in course syllabi and the school to include crisis lines on student ID cards.
- MHACC caters to the needs of men and women ranging from ages 17-50!



**OLUWANIFEMI
SHOLA-DARE**

**IT IS NO LONGER
NEWS THAT MENTAL
HEALTH ISSUES
ARE PREVALENT
ON COLLEGE
CAMPUSES. THE
QUESTION IS, HAVE
COLLEGE CAMPUSES
BEEN ABLE TO
KEEP UP WITH THE
INCREASING NEED
FOR MENTAL HEALTH
RESOURCES?**

GETTING STARTED

Having grown up with a brother who lives with epilepsy in Nigeria, I always had a connection to mental health advocacy; however, I did not feel the urgency to pursue this actively until I was faced with the idea of killing myself multiple times. For the first 18 years of my life, everything went according to my plan, everything seemed certain, and I felt completely in control of my life. That is until my life took a detour. From being temporarily homeless to dealing with the possibility of being deported back home, I was living with major depression and could not sum up the courage to seek help. For months, I contemplated killing myself, but I also knew I needed to get help.

With courage and shame at the same time, I decided to seek help. I made a call to the health clinic and was told that seeing the psychiatric nurse practitioner was on a walk-in basis only. A week later, I walked to the health clinic and was once again told that I needed to make an appointment. After having to wait a full month before my first appointment with the only psychiatric nurse practitioner on campus, I knew I needed to do something. I needed to draw awareness to the ways in which the school had been complicit in mental health stigmatization unintentionally, but impactfully. I knew I could not be the only student living with depression, so I did some research and found out that mental illness and homelessness are more common than I thought.

From there I started the journey of creating a club devoted to peer support and eradicating mental health stigma. I asked around and was dissuaded because “the school would prefer to avoid isolating a group of people.” I persisted and eventually was told to recruit five students and an advisor to become an established club on campus. After a week, I succeeded in recruiting seven members and two advisors and became an established club!

POTENTIAL BARRIERS

The biggest issue we faced was getting the school administration to overcome their fear of liability. Every time a peer-facilitated support group was proposed, we were often met with the question of what to do if a student ever mentioned killing themselves or someone else. This is undeniably an important question, so the club worked with the Suicide Prevention Advisory Board to provide mental health first aid trainings and suicide prevention trainings. Even with trained students, we were always required to have a mental health professional on grounds during our events. This was something we had to live with to make a compromise with the school.

Creating a sustainable program especially at a community college might be the hardest journey you will ever embark upon. Because almost every student has two to three other jobs besides school, it becomes difficult to get students involved in extracurricular activities, especially mental health awareness. Being persistent and showing other students how passionate you are about helping them and other students will help. Free food and drinks will also help!

Another issue a student might face is the feeling of inadequacy. There will be times when no student will show up to the club meetings and there will be times when many students will show up. There are times you will feel like giving up but be patient with yourself. Never be too critical of your work. Give it your best and trust that your best is good enough. I know I enjoyed Therapy Thursdays and I know my fellow students did too. I enjoyed the opportunity of nurturing and being nurtured by the MHAC community. I enjoyed walking my fellow students down to the health clinic to make appointments. These moments kept me going in my fight for mental health awareness on my campus.