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Addressing Life Stressors in High School

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**Abstract**

The Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD) Wellness Center at Alisal High School meets each student's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs to achieve their aspirations. Many students are experiencing mental health challenges during this period in their lives. Staff shortages, lack of family support, and lack of healthy coping mechanisms lead to increased needs of mental health resources. This project addresses students' lack of resources for life stressors and addresses the need for more resources. The project consisted of implementing short presentations on communication, healthy/unhealthy relationships, and self-esteem to about 470 students. The findings from this project showed that 71% of students found this information helpful and that the information they received increased their awareness about identifying potential stressors and ways to practice self care. It's recommended that the agency continue to provide students with these PowerPoints to promote healthy coping skills and allow for student engagement.

*Keywords: Mental Heath, Resources, Youth*

### **Agency and Community Served**

The Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD) Wellness Centers are centers on school campuses to meet each student's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs to ensure the achievement of their aspirations. The Californian states, “The centers are intended to act as mental, social-emotional and medical health resource hubs, whether a student needs to speak with a therapist or intervention from disrupting class” (Cuevas, 2019). The Wellness Centers were created to incorporate restorative practices when intervening in students’ misbehavior in class as opposed to having suspension be the first resort. SUHSD’s mission is to provide a comprehensive and rigorous learning experience that prepares students academically, socially, and emotionally to be productive citizens in a global society. Furthermore, their mission is to have an exemplary learning community where PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support) supports students to be successful in schools by having proactive procedures and practices to prevent behavioral issues for all students and improve school culture and climate. The centers offer therapy, counseling, snacks, a calming room, and resources to improve well-being. In the 2018-19 school year, Alisal High School reported 97.9% Hispanic or Latino students and 88.20% socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Alisal High School SARC, 2019). According to the US Census, 30.8% of the population for those 18 and younger (2021).

### **Problem Description**

Many students are experiencing mental health challenges. According to the JED Foundation, administrators at schools with a high proportion of students from lower-income households reported higher student suicidal ideation (2019). Many of them are not aware of healthy coping mechanisms they can do to deal with their emotions. According to the American Psychological Association, “Students who are better able to understand and manage their

emotions effectively, a skill known as emotional intelligence, do better at school than their less skilled peers, as measured by grades and standardized test scores, according to research published by the American Psychological Association” (APA, 2019). Not only are the number of youth searching for help with their mental health increasing but throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, youth ages 11-17 have been more likely than any other age group to score for moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression (MHA National, 2019). More than 1 in 3 high school students had experienced persistent sadness or hopelessness in 2019, a 40 percent increase since 2009. In 2019, approximately 1 in 6 youth reported making a suicide plan in the past year, a 44% increase since 2009 (CDC, 2022). These reports validate the need for more mental health resources at school sites.

### **Contributing Factors**

#### **Staff Shortages**

Staff shortages highly impact students. Students often don't know how to manage their emotions and need support staff readily available. They need to have resources to help them gain the tools necessary to be able to deal with high emotions and ways to be able to cope in a healthy way. School counselors are committed to supporting student's social/emotional needs. As advocates for students, school counselors promote a positive environment that enhances students' ability to manage the social/emotional demands of their lives properly. School counselors use appropriate appraisal methods to promote a school environment that propels students toward positive mindsets and behaviors, supporting social/emotional development through direct and indirect services (ASCA, 2017). The Wellness Center at Alisal High School has one school counselor, one social worker, and one behavioral health counselor to support walk-ins. There are over 3,000 students at Alisal High (I. Mancera, personal communication,

September 28, 2022). Reaching every student with only 3 staff members at the Wellness Center is impossible.

According to Lieberman,

When schools lack adequate staffing, students who need the most support suffer the most. Students with disabilities and English-language learners lose out on or have less access to specialized services. Students from poor families, and rural students who live far from their school building, lose convenient free transportation and crucial learning time in school. And all students who need extra academic help miss out on instruction when teachers and support personnel are stressed, demoralized, and absent. (2022)

Integrating social-emotional learning, creating safe and supportive environments, and engaging students in healthy decision-making can decrease mental health issues. However, without staff availability, accessible materials need to be implemented throughout campus.

### **Language Barriers/Lack of Family Support**

At Alisal High School, most of the parent population is primarily Spanish-speaking. It's crucial that students and parents can communicate and have accessible resources in their spoken language. Researchers found results about Latino children and their experiences with declining well-being in high school. The survey showed that Latino high schoolers were most likely out of all racial/ethnic groups surveyed to experience poor or declining mental health. "Latinx youth were 60% more likely to report feelings of poor or reduced mental health than white youth," according to the report (McCormack, 2021). It's important to highlight the need for bilingual materials to engage parents or family members in preventing more risky behaviors in their children by providing an accessible webpage. It's important to have parent support to understand what's happening and how to help the student and address their needs. A student's lack of family

support can increase classroom misbehavior. Parent involvement activities such as volunteering have been associated with a reduction in the number of students disciplined in school, fewer detentions, and a reduction in the number of students receiving multiple disciplinary consequences from one year to the next (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

### **Lack of Coping Mechanisms**

In 2019, the CDC reported that the percentage of high school students with persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness was nearly 40%, up from 26% in 2009, and almost 20% of students in 2019 had seriously considered suicide. Two years later, in 2021, 44 percent of high schoolers felt sad or hopeless. And suicide is now the second leading cause of death among children 10 to 14 years old (CDC, 2021). Students don't know how to cope with their emotions. According to a psychologist, "Most parents spend a lot of time talking about homework, chores, and sports, and much less time talking about feelings" (Morin, 2020). Since students are being suppressed from their feelings, they aren't taught positive coping skills. Often times parents or caregivers shield kids from pain to toughen them up. This causes kids to not know how to face rejection, failure, or push through hardships. As parents console their children when something bad happens, this teaches them that the parents are taking responsibility for their feelings, not themselves. As students develop and attend school, emotional levels can be high.

## **Consequences**

### **Substance Use**

Drug use in high school can seriously impact teenagers' developing bodies and brains. According to a survey, approximately 17% of high school students say they drink, smoke, or use drugs during the school day. 60% of high school students say drugs are available on school grounds, and 44% know a classmate who sells drugs at school. (Partnership, 2012). It is essential

to target students who are at high risk and intervene where needed to get them on the right path to avoid the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs to numb their pain. According to the CDC, 15% of high school students reported having ever used select illicit or injection drugs (i.e., cocaine, inhalants, heroin, methamphetamines, hallucinogens, or ecstasy, and 14% of students reported misusing prescription opioids (CDC, 2022). About half of the 9th-12th grade students reported ever having used marijuana. Students have more access to these substances due to friendships, siblings, and family members. Teens often experiment with drug use due to peer pressure and academic pressure. Approximately 20% of high school students have encountered drugs on school property. High school students use alcohol more than any other illicit drug.

### **Low Grades and Dropouts**

According to the suicide prevention resource center, mental health problems can affect a student's energy level, concentration, dependability, mental ability, and optimism, hindering performance. Research suggests that depression is associated with lower grade point averages and that co-occurring depression and anxiety can increase this association (SPRC, n.d.). Some reasons students get poor grades include external factors, such as the subject being too hard and the teacher being hard to understand. On the other hand, the students have poor attitudes because they didn't do homework and couldn't get the support they needed to complete their work. Instead of communicating with teachers, they distance themselves. When a child is not feeling like themselves, is lost, or are simply having a hard time, it can be challenging to focus and want to do assignments, leading to failing grades. Guilt over poor performance coupled with already existing mental health issues can lead to a tumultuous environment for the child that does not allow them to succeed and does not allow them to flourish the way that they should be able to.



(McCullough, 2021). These students suffer without knowing how to cope with anxiety, stress, or problem-solving.

### **Proposed Solutions**

Students need to be able to have resources at hand, as well as electronic access, to be able to have independent support if needed. Many students are afraid to ask for help, and having a one-stop shop for all things mental health related would be beneficial. The proposed project is to create a brochure for students to engage in healthy relationships and a presentation with information they can access at their convenience. The project aims to reach as many students as possible to bring awareness to address coping mechanisms.

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Language Barriers/Lack of family support	Many students are experiencing mental health challenges.	Student drop-outs/Low grades
Staff shortages		Substance use
Lack of coping mechanisms		Detachment from support systems

## **Capstone Project Description and Justification**

### **Capstone Project**

The capstone project includes creating a PowerPoint presentation highlighting different life stressors in high school such as healthy/unhealthy relationships, communication, self-esteem, and anxiety. I will supplement a slide dedicated to self-care to provide information on healthy coping skills to use to approach these issues when they arise. The PowerPoint presentations will be available to students through their Google classroom, and will be presented by the last week of March, or the beginning of April. Arrangements to present this presentation will be made by collaborating with the AVID teachers and the Wellness Center team to provide time slots to for each classroom.

### **Project Purpose**

Many students face challenges while attending high school. Students lack healthy coping skills, often don't know how to manage their emotions, and need support. They need resources to help them gain the tools necessary to deal with high emotions. To address this issue, I will create a PowerPoint presentation with the most important topics that are stressors for students. Students can walk in or be referred to the Wellness Center by staff or teachers during school hours, but many don't know what resources they offer. Most students who struggle with mental health do not get the help they need because of the way society reacts to it. Many who struggle with mental illness are discriminated against, or their culture does not allow them to get professional help. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "Stigma around mental illness is an issue in some diverse racial and ethnic communities and it can be a major barrier to people from those cultures accessing mental health services." (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Being

mentally healthy means students are reaching developmental and emotional milestones and healthy social skills when coping when issues arise. In the presentation, I plan to highlight the resources available in school and out of school. Students can pick up handouts that provide healthy coping mechanisms at the Wellness Center or log on to our website for online support if they are not ready to talk to someone. They will also be able to access the presentation at any time if they want to go back and review the material shared or the resources discussed.

### **Project Justification**

Although students have access to the Wellness Center, and can reach out to their counselors, oftentimes they stay quiet and don't reach out for help. On average, about 206 students walk in to the Wellness Center to receive support per month, but more outreach needs to be done (Wellness Center, 2023). According to the CDC, "Mental health disorders among children are described as serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions, which cause distress and problems getting through the day" (CDC, 2023). Integrating social-emotional learning, creating safe and supportive environments, and engaging students in healthy decision-making can decrease mental health issues. This can be accomplished through a presentation on these topics.

### **Project Implementation**

For this implementation, I will first research and determine the top issues students face at Alisal High School to make the presentation. I will talk to random students and teachers about what they think the biggest issues are that students deal with. I will also ask teachers what they see triggers may be in the classroom setting. I will take notes and keep track of the responses. From that information gathered, I will then put similar topics together depending on the number of responses I receive. Once that's complete, I will start researching data and effective coping

mechanisms for each topic and include that information on the slides. I will create a rough draft of how I want the presentation to look while also being mindful of visuals and verbiage. I will be updating the information on the webpage to match what's being said on the brochures so there's consistency throughout the distribution of information. Once that's finalized, I will finalize the presentation and meet with the Wellness Center team to get their input. I will create a post survey for students to take after each presentation to assess their understanding, and to see if they were able to create their own self-care plan. I will analyze the data and report to my mentor with an analysis to conclude my capstone project.

A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

### **Assessment Plan**

Effectiveness will be measured through pre and post surveys. Through these surveys I will be able to gauge whether or not this information was impactful to students. I will also be asking students about the Wellness Center webpage to see if they knew they had that resource available to them. I will ask questions on the surveys to determine success, challenges, and improvements for future presentations.

### **Expected Outcomes**

I expect these presentations to enhance students' well-being and mental health. Students should have readily available resources when they don't want to share or talk to an adult about the issues they're going through. They also need a place to find resources outside of school hours. Providing healthy coping mechanisms to address students' issues can decrease classroom stress levels. The expectation is that the students gain positive coping mechanisms to encourage them to express their feelings and learn how to deal with their emotions. Coping skills can help them tolerate, minimize, and deal with stressful situations, guiding them to have the skills needed

to enter adulthood. I will analyze this information through a post survey which asks students whether they found the presentation helpful or not, whether the information increased their awareness about identifying potential stressors and how to practice self care, to provide strategies that may be helpful to them, and to provide any feedback.

### **Project Results**

As a result of this project, 392 out of 463 students agreed that the information increased their awareness of life stressors and ways to cope with self-care. Over 60% of those students also stated ways they would practice self-care, and provided strategies that would be helpful to them such as having good hygiene, meditating, exercising, or listening to music. I did achieve my expected outcome because I was able to provide information to students to help them become more aware that it's okay to have life stressors. Providing healthy ways to cope with those stressors, can lead to healthier relationships and boundaries with others. It also brings awareness to students about being able to ask for help instead of bottling it up within themselves.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Throughout this project, I learned to be adaptable and flexible with what the agency was able to give out to students. I learned that although I wanted to supplement the presentations with a flyer or brochure, that I wasn't able to due to not having admin pre-approval to do so. I found that having these presentations in the classrooms were helpful and beneficial to students. The agency should continue to provide similar presentations at least once a year. I also think that it should be expanded and presented at all grade levels. Many students expressed how great this information was for them, and how they were able to create their own self-care plan designed to meet their own needs. The more information students are able to get in terms of mental health, stressors, and triggering events, I believe the more positive and healthy relationships can be built

throughout their time in high school, going into their adult lives. It will also help encourage students to not be afraid to ask for help, and to use the Wellness Center as a resource when they're having a difficult time.

## Appendix A

## Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Discuss capstone project ideas	Brainstorm and agree on my project	November 2022	Mentor/School Social Worker
Research healthy relationships/coping mechanisms	Gather information on coping skills	February 2023	Mentor/Counselor
Figure out how to obtain brochure material	Meet with mentor for support	Februart	Mentor
Make a rough draft of brochure	Collaborate with office team to get feedback	February 2023	Office Team
Make material available in Spanish	Meet with mentor to ensure content is translated correctly	February 2023	Mentor
Brainstorm visuals to use	Meet with mentor to get feedback	February 2023	Mentor
Create Pre & Post Surveys	Make surveys accessible to students	1st March	Mentor
Develop a draft for Wellness Center Webpage	Post coping mechanism and get feedback from counselors and teachers	March 2023	Office Team
Finalize brochures	Place 15 brochures at Wellness Center	March 2023	Intern
Monitor how many brochures have been taken	Count how many brochures are left after a week	April 2023	Intern
Create a short survey for students and teachers on brochures	Post a QR code on bulletin board	April 2023	Intern/Mentor
Analyze feedback received to implement any necessary changes	Determine any challanges	April 2023	Intern
Prepare for capstone	Final presentation	May 2023	Intern

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