

Creating Safe Zone/Hope Zone

For any student, college is a time of transition. Many students are away from home for the first time, academics become more rigorous and there are new financial pressures and extra-curricular activities. The pressure of college life can be overwhelming at times. One factor that contributes to an increased risk for the development or triggering of pre-existing mental health issues and possible suicide is isolation.

As Gary Pavela (2006) details in his article *Mental Health Intervention: Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students*, “We know isolation is a factor in ongoing depression and suicide. We cannot solve all problems by building communities on campus, but we must not foster isolation.” Pavela notes how college campuses sometimes inadvertently reinforce isolation in subtle ways, even in the new “fast food” approach of many dining halls. Today, many students do not join a group of their peers for meals, thus reinforcing possible social isolation.

A creative and effective way to promote mental health awareness and increase success is through the establishment of a Mental Health Awareness Safe Zone/Hope Zone. Similar in concept and design to GLBTQ Safe Zone programs, a widely visible and recognizable symbol is used to identify areas of mental health awareness and support. As a campus community or mental health awareness coalition, it is necessary that interested individuals come together to develop and discuss strategies to encourage help seeking behaviors in students experiencing mental health challenges.

- Considerations for the development of a Mental Health Awareness Safe Zone/Hope Zone include the following:
- Creation of an image that identifies an area as a safe place for students to receive mental health information and support. (See sample image below)
- Development of a mission and goals for Safe Zone/Hope Zone areas.
- Identification of target areas on campus to display Safe Zone/Hope Zone signs.
- Development and distribution of a resource list and educational materials for individuals wishing to display the Safe Zone/Hope Zone sign.
- Training of individuals participating in the Safe Zone/Hope Zone can include education on:
 - What mental health concerns students may face
 - Diversity and culturally sensitive practices
 - How to speak with students about mental health concerns
 - Suicide warning signs
 - Available resources
 - How to make a referral, and confidentiality.

A Mental Health Awareness Safe Zone/Hope Zone program will provide several benefits to a campus:

- Increased campus visibility and support for students struggling with mental health issues or individuals at risk for suicide.
- Promotion of help seeking behaviors and increased knowledge of the benefits of receiving help.
- Increased success through the publicizing of available campus and community services and resources.
- Decreased isolation of students.



Providing Opportunities and Outlets for Support

In order to promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma, it is necessary to establish opportunities for support and encourage help seeking behaviors. As previously discussed, the first step in campus mental health awareness is providing education for key personnel on what to look for when exploring a student’s risk for mental health difficulties and possible suicide. Next, campuses should inform their employees about currently available resources and emergency response procedures. Additionally, members of your campus mental health awareness coalition or other interested individuals can explore the creation of additional opportunities and outlets for support. These support efforts may include:

- Campus Mental Health Awareness Safe Zones/Hope Zones
- Student Peer Health Education
- Educational programs presented in classes or residence halls to increase mental health awareness and promote available resources
- A student group for individuals seeking support for their own mental health issues
- A student group for individuals who have been impacted by suicide
- A Mental Health Awareness booth at orientation and other student gatherings
- Distribution of giveaway materials with mental health resource information



The goal for providing these opportunities and outlets for support is to increase education, empower students, and promote help seeking behaviors.

Receiving Help Increased Likelihood of Success

By promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma on campus, help seeking behaviors and success can be increased. One way to promote help seeking behaviors is to educate students about available services and provide an environment of acceptance and support. In addressing these issues, consider the following:

- Among 18–25 year olds, the prevalence of serious mental health conditions is high, yet this age group shows the lowest rate of help-seeking behaviors. One of the most important factors in recovery is the understanding and acceptance of friends. Friends can make a difference by offering reassurance, companionship, and emotional strength.
- People with mental illness can recover or manage their conditions and go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives. They contribute to society and make the world a better place. People can often benefit from medication, rehabilitation, psychotherapy, group therapy, self help or a combination of these.¹
- Most individuals who complete a suicide attempt give some warning of their intentions. The most effective way to prevent a friend or loved one from taking their life is to recognize when someone is at risk, take the warning signs seriously and know how to respond. The depression and emotional crises that so often precede suicides are, in most cases, both recognizable and treatable.²
- Depression is among the most treatable of psychiatric illnesses. Between 80% and 90% of people with depression respond positively to treatment, and almost all patients gain some relief from their symptoms. But first, depression has to be recognized.³

An important step in your campus mental health awareness efforts is brainstorm with key stakeholders about ways to increase help seeking behaviors among students. Some suggestions on how to accomplish this goal include:

- Educate students, resident assistants, staff and faculty about stigma and the role it plays in reducing help seeking behaviors for mental health assistance.
- Inform students, resident assistants, staff and faculty about currently available services.
- Provide information to students on how they can gain support through more anonymous forms of support, such as, toll free helplines.

By encouraging help seeking behavior on your campus, students will be more likely to receive the assistance they need when dealing with mental health issues. In addition, educational efforts to help raise consciousness and reduce stigma will positively benefit the entire campus community. Overall, as students and informed allies begin to more fully understand the vital role that mental health plays in their lives and the lives of others, it is more likely that students will seek out mental health services for themselves or refer friends and family to helpful resources.

References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association. *What a difference a friend makes*. Brochure. Retrieved from <http://www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov/docs/NASC.pdf> on August 4, 2007.
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3. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2007). *Facts and figures*. Retrieved from http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=050FEA9F-B064-4092-B1135C3A70DE1FDA on August 4, 2007.

