

MENTAL HEALTH MODEL MESSAGING GUIDE

WHY THIS GUIDE MATTERS

Background

Suicide rates have risen nationally and in Washington over the past 20 years.¹ In fact, approximately 8,000 higher education students in Washington attempted suicide in 2018-19.² This alarming figure shows a definite need for mental health awareness among the student. The percentage of students with mental health needs that receive professional support is low.³ Mental health issues can lead to poorer performance at school and work, fewer employment opportunities, and increased risk of suicide.

We encourage students and wellness/counseling centers to take steps to raise mental health awareness on their campus and motivate students to seek help for mental health issues. This will improve and save numerous lives and positively impact academic success.

A significant number of distressed students do not seek help from mental health providers or other supportive adults.⁴ Multiple studies have shown that students will first seek help from friends, family, or a significant other, much more often than first seeking professional help. Students often get health-related information from their friends, although friends have not been seen as a believable source of health information by most.⁵

Many campuses are engaging in strategies to increase the likelihood that a student who needs supportive services or counseling will seek out and secure assistance. Creating mental health messaging campaigns for your campus that is tailored to your students' needs can steer them in the right direction. Providing on-time care is critical for students' wellbeing because delayed treatment of mental issues typically results in more severe conditions, which may require more extensive treatment.⁶

Recent findings suggest that the relationship of stigma to help-seeking in college students is also complex. While half of college students would encourage a friend to seek help for emotional issues, fewer than one-fourth would seek help themselves.^{5,7} Students may feel that asking questions about mental health will receive negative reactions. Also, many students believe their mental health experiences in college are "normal" and do not feel inclined to seek help.^{8,9}

Strategic and educational mental health campaigns attempt to increase knowledge and acceptance of mental health concerns.⁸ Many campuses are using communication campaigns that include brochures, posters, and a variety of web-based content to address specific facilitators and barriers to help seeking.

The mental health messaging campaign stems from the statewide higher education initiative (SB 6514) now under implementation by Forefront Suicide Prevention. The initiative is to be known as Innovative Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Education in Postsecondary Education (INSPIRE).

Steps To A Successful Mental Health Messaging Campaign

Collaboration

There are several health promotion guides that highlight the importance of cross-collaboration to improve effectiveness of a campaign. Gaining insights from various stakeholders across campus will ensure a more well-rounded approach and content. This holds true for a mental health messaging campaign as well. Using a strategic planning process to create a campaign, informed by campus-specific data if possible, will focus the campaign goals and identify specific target audiences.⁵

It's always good practice to consult with your intended audiences, in some capacity, to ensure you are including appropriate themes and topics, and to make sure your content resonates.

Focus Groups

Holding focus groups with students helps build an understanding of their mindsets, how they're feeling, what motivates/demotivates them, and any other topics you may be interested in learning that may aid in creating your mental health messaging campaign. You can also gain insight about best locations and time for running the campaign.

Focus groups allow for the acquisition of first-hand stories and opinions that you might not gain through a simple survey. It is often easier to gain qualitative data through the use of focus groups.

Focus Group Tips

- Include 6-10 students that represent a diverse demographic segment.
- Hold a few focus groups with various student populations to gain as much information as possible.
- Offer food or snacks and modest incentives to participants of the focus group. This is important because participants should be compensated for the time and energy spent.
- Prepare questions to foster discussion on mental health attitudes, awareness of resources on campus, and related issues.

Surveys

A campus wide survey can allow for insights on students' thoughts, behaviors, levels of understanding of mental health. This can help when designing your messaging campaign to ensure the information you're sharing will actually be helpful and effective.

It is often easier to gain quantitative data through the use of a survey. You also may use the data to compare results over time. Surveys are also typically less time consuming and easier to distribute than a focus group, and can be done in various formats.

Conduct a campus-wide survey to assess:

- Mental health awareness among students
- Knowledge of the available on-campus and off-campus resources
- Gather data around self-stigma on mental health.
- Understand the impact of public-stigma on seeking help for mental issues
- Significant barriers to accessing behavioral health services

Choosing The Right Messaging For Your Campaign

Students will have various levels of understanding and comfortability surrounding mental health topics. This is an important consideration when developing a mental health promotion campaign, as students who are not engaging in help seeking behavior may be missed if they cannot relate to the content of your campaign.

Surveys and Focus group can also help in assessing the awareness level in the students and in determining whether the objective of the messaging should be on creating awareness, raising awareness or resilience.

Mental Health messaging should always be as inclusive as possible, which is another reason why focus groups and/or surveys can be very beneficial. Bringing in the voices, ideas, suggestions, and opinions of under represented groups (e.g. LGBTQ community, students of color, student veterans, etc) will help to better inform your campaign.

Topics can include:

- Information about mental health illness (depression, anxiety, etc.)
- Information about common feelings experienced by students (stress, anxiety, loneliness, etc)
- Various resources available on campus
 - Consider the different resources that certain student populations may want to utilize depending on their identity
- Counseling center information
 - Location

- Hours
- Services included
- Any subjects that may come forth from your focus groups and/or survey

Campaign Audience, Timeline, Strategic Locations, And Materials

Target Audience

As previously mentioned, it's important to establish a target audience before designing your mental health messaging campaign. Your audience can be broad or it can be specific.

Population characteristics you may want to consider:

- Gender and sexual identity
- Racial identities
- International students
- Age (i.e. older vs. younger students)
- Veteran status
- Full time or part-time enrollment status
- Existing knowledge of mental health issues

First-year students may be an important population to target because they are often experiencing a lot more independence. They are typically excited yet nervous, may be missing home, or even facing culture shock. As if college were not difficult enough, more than one-third of first-year university students report symptoms consistent with a diagnosable mental health disorder, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.¹⁰

While focusing on the first-year student, others cannot be ignored. One way to categorize students is by segmenting them into three different categories:

1. The school-oriented students
2. The socially-oriented students
3. The uninvolved students

Best Time To Get Students' Attention

Timing is critical. The campaign should be launched at a strategic time so that it does not overwhelm the students.

Strategic launch: A campaign may not make a full impact if it is launched simultaneous to information sessions or new students' orientation.

Use the school calendar or schedule to plan the timeline of the campaign, identifying opportune moments for your message to get through.

Strategic Locations To Get Students' Attention

Physical locations

Choosing strategic locations will ensure that your campaign is being seen. Examples of strategic locations include:

- Entrance of activity centers or union buildings
- Yard signs outside of common areas
- Entrances of sports facilities or cafeterias
- Common areas in dormitories
- Consider some private locations such as posting inside restrooms stalls or locker rooms
- Depending on your target audience, you can tailor your strategic locations.
 - It can be helpful to ask about strategic location ideas during a focus group or survey.

Digital channels

- Meeting the student where they spend a lot of time is an excellent way to get their attention.
- Consider social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to spread the word more quickly.

Recommendations For Designing Campaign Materials

A campus campaign should prepare to engage, surprise, entertain and stir its targeted students. If possible, reach beyond posting banners, print ads, and flyers around campus. Organizing an interactive campaign that is centered in a populated hot spot on campus or incorporating social media into your campaign can help create buzz or get your message out in a more widespread manner.

- Spend time on developing creative ways to shape your messaging.
- Adopt a positive and uplifting approach to reduce the stigma of mental health.

Examples of Different Messaging Campaigns

You'll find some sample materials on the INSPIRE website and here are some other examples of mental health messaging.



**YOU MATTER, AND
YOU ARE NOT ALONE!**

If you are considering harming yourself, please get help by:

- Calling 911.
- Texting HOME to 741741.
- Calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.8255.
- Telling your instructor, friends, family or counselor immediately.
- Calling LWTech Campus Public Safety at 425.739.8224.



**LAKE WASHINGTON
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

The following is a mental health messaging success story from Lake Washington Institute of Technology.

*[A while back], a student was in our parking lot feeling overwhelmed and contemplating suicide by walking into oncoming traffic in front of the college. Then she noticed a sign near her that said “You matter, and you are not alone!”. She called the number on the sign for our campus public safety office and our security officer immediately went to her location and escorted her to our student development office where the director of the office and I met with her. We decided to call 911 for police assessment and transport to a local hospital; all of whom responded promptly. **I believe this sign saved this student’s life.***

Things to Avoid

Focus your campaign *around the solution*. It is better to avoid using terms, names, and images that reinforce the existence of the problem or that may be triggering for some individuals.

Avoid the following:

- Terms: Mental illness, mental problem, mental disease
- Campaign name: Let’s end stigma, Fight mental illness
- Hashtags: #suffering, #mentalillness
- Avoid Images that may raise negative emotions and ideas (see below)



Launching a Campaign

Physical materials: Materials such as yard signs and posters are effective in getting students’ attention. Be thoughtful about the amount and quality of text on them. Include contact information to lead students to the right location.

Display at various locations: Place yard signs and posters in the strategic sites where students can easily see and read them.

Digital content: Publish the digital content on the social media platforms. Include the web link of wellness or counseling center in the post. Select the quotes and images carefully. Refrain from using images that you feel may increase the stigma.

Call to action: Include a specific call to action in your materials. Some example are:

- *Come meet us* - add details of wellness centers to lead the students to reach out to wellbeing center.
- *Learn more* - add links of the wellness webpage to direct students to online resources
- *Join us* - add peer group meeting location to inspire students to engage in peer to peer counseling

Evaluating Success

After running the campaign for a set duration, a survey or other evaluation tool will help in assessing the impact of the campaign.

Including the same pre-campaign questions will help in determining what percentage of students have the awareness of resources and mental health wellbeing before and after the campaign. For example:

- Awareness of resources and services available for behavioral health
- Mental health attitude and related issues
- How did they learn about the on-campus or off-campus mental health services (It will help you in assessing which channel is the most effective)

Implementing some kind of evaluation will help you determine what adjustments should be made for following campaigns, which populations you are best reaching, and where gaps may lie.

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