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YouBeYou campaign empowers kids

Mental health program helps teens from JoCo
to Lee's Summit 'just talk about things,' PAGE 2



SNARKY IN THE SUBURBS

HEY, PEOPLE, THIS ISN'T 'THE HUNGER GAMES.' WAIT YOUR TURN FOR VACCINE, PAGE 6



Courtesy photo

Students at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School participate in a mindfulness lesson with JFS therapist John Pryor prior to the pandemic.

Mental health program helps metro teenagers 'just talk about things'

BY BETH LIPOFF
Special to The Star

Many mental health campaigns focus on solutions to specific problems, such as anxiety or depression. The YouBeYou campaign from Jewish Family Services and the Greater

Kansas City Mental Health Coalition, however, has chosen to zero-in on empowerment and developing coping skills that can apply to a multitude of situations for teens.

With a large boost from Bernstein-Rein Advertising, these groups have

worked together since 2017 to convey the message of "progress not perfection; really that idea of meeting kids where they're at," said Sondra Wallace, YouBeYou coordinator at Jewish Family Services. None of us is perfect, she added.

What makes it different,

too, is its focus on reading kids to deal with difficult problems before they ever encounter them.

"When we think about mental illness or suicide, we have historically been in a sad shock trauma space. We are shifting that narrative to hope and health and strength. We

are giving our students and the adults tools to access strength and bring hope into their daily activities, rather than being reactive to the sad shock trauma," Wallace said.

One of the eight strengths they teach is family support — but the group's definition of family is wider than you might think.

"We have born-in family, we have our live-with family and we have our chosen family. For some students, they rely on their chosen family, adults and other kids they can rely on that will always have their back," Wallace said.

Establishing that support network is one key to strengthening mental health before a crisis situation happens. Having a safe, non-judgmental space also makes it easier for kids to have conversations about issues or problems they might otherwise keep to themselves.

"(We're) teaching them those strengths before they ever need them, so when they're in a situation where they didn't get a grade they wanted on a test or they had a really hard conversation with a friend, they have strengths and tools they can access to work through and navigate that situation," Wallace said.

Schools throughout the metro have implemented the program, including some in Olathe, Shawnee Mission, Blue Valley and Lee's Summit.

Sara Whelan, school psychologist at the Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy, said she's seen the difference the program makes in the students at her school.

"What I found is that it really focuses on mental health as something that's just part of our health and really debunking stigma

and giving space for teens to just talk about things. I haven't seen programs do that before, where they actually give them permission to feel like not everything has to be OK," she said.

Whelan said she especially likes that it's largely a student-driven enterprise within the school. At the Academy, students propose programs, plan and do research for them and communicate with peers to make events like Kindness Week happen.

"It gives the peers who are involved the chance to be good role models for their younger peers in the school," Whelan said.

The frank discussions also serve as a way to include many different people.

"It gives them a chance to be with other peers and not feel so isolated at times. There are people who participate, maybe they're not experiencing mental health difficulties, but they may have a peer or a family member and so they're learning to be supportive people in those people's lives. That gives them a sense of control. 'This is something I can do,'" Whelan said.

To remove transportation and time obstacles, YouBeYou has also started offering counseling services in the schools.

Usually, YouBeYou works by going into the schools to do programming, but this year, it's been all online. To accommodate the need to be virtual this year, they've added various local resources to their website, YouBeYou.us. Sponsor teachers also have access to a Google classroom for materials they would normally get from an in-person presentation.