

**Youth Mental Health First Aid Certification: Providing Resources for Preservice Teachers**

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### **Introduction/Need for Idea**

Youth in the United States are experiencing mental illness more frequently and severely than in the past. This is coupled with a low rate of help-seeking and treatment resulting from factors such as stigma related to mental illness (McLain, 2021). Lack of mental health literacy could be one reason the stigmatization of mental illness is so pervasive and why help seeking behaviors are low among those who need it most. Mental health literacy is defined by Wei et al. (2013) as “[Encompassing] knowledge and skills that address the biological, psychological and social aspects of mental health.” Mental health literacy programs have positive results when it comes to increased literacy and more positive attitudes toward mental health, building a case for these types of programs (McLain, 2021). Teachers who are well-educated on mental health topics can support student understanding related to mental health disorders, symptoms, and intervention programs (Miller et al., 2019). Given the growing need for mental health literacy, the lack of mental health education in preservice curriculums, and the unique relationships students develop with school-based agriscience education teachers, a Youth Mental Health First Aid certification program was implemented with preservice teachers entering the student teaching field experience at The Ohio State University. The objective of the certification was to utilize an existing resource to better prepare preservice teachers to manage mental health situations involving middle and high school students and to build preservice teacher confidence levels to act appropriately in a mental health crisis.

### **How it Works**

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a national curriculum created in 2000 and adopted in the United States in 2008 by the National Council, Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Missouri Department of Mental Health. The curriculum is a public education program that teaches participants how to recognize signs and symptoms that suggest a potential mental health challenge. The curriculum has four courses: Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA), Adult Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Teen, and Workplace (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2023). The youth program teaches participants to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges in youth, to apply the appropriate steps to the YMHFA action plan, and to choose appropriate methods for self-care following the application of mental health first aid.

The Youth Mental Health First Aid certification training is a two-part program with part one taking place via asynchronous instruction and the second part taking place in-person. Participants complete the asynchronous instruction on their own prior to the in-person training. The asynchronous instruction includes two hours of self-paced content organized in modules. Module topics include a pre-evaluation of knowledge, awareness of self-opinions, defining mental health, identifying risk and protective factors for experiencing mental health, and an introduction to the steps of the YMHFA action plan. The in-person component is six hours of training with two certified instructors. The in-person component reviews the asynchronous content and further develops skills for managing mental health situations through discussion and role play.

### **Results to Date**

To date, 13 preservice teachers at The Ohio State University have completed the Youth Mental Health First Aid certification. Following certification, participants were asked to reflect on their training as a preservice teacher preparing to enter student teaching. Feedback from the

preservice teachers was largely positive. Feedback included these selected comments from participant self-reflections that captured the sentiment of the overall group feedback. One preservice teacher shared, “Today I learned truly how important training on this topic is and why teachers should be trained.” A second preservice teacher expressed, “My views of being an Ag teacher have been reinforced. My own mental health is why I joined FFA and I think this training will be really beneficial when I become an Ag teacher.” Another preservice teacher commented:

Some of the topics were challenging to talk about, some of it was pretty heavy stuff. But what I learned will help me as a future educator. Being an Ag teacher you are often a confidant for students, they are likely to open up to you rather than other teachers. We need to be prepared for anything.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

The 13 participants are currently student teaching. At the completion of the student teaching experience, there are plans to collect additional feedback on the perceived benefits of the training after the participants have been immersed in a classroom environment with students, and potentially applied the training in real situations. This feedback will be taken into consideration for implementing the certification program with future preservice teachers.

Other future considerations include implementing the Youth Mental Health First Aid training for junior cohorts of preservice teachers and implementing the Adult Mental Health First Aid training for senior cohorts of preservice teachers. The youth training focuses more on the introduction of mental health and the action plan to follow when assisting with a mental health challenge. The adult training goes into more depth with the training and scaffolds from the youth curriculum to provide more comprehensive content and training exercises. Providing more opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with mental health literacy may enhance confidence and skills of future educators.

It is recommended when implementing the Youth Mental Health First Aid training with preservice teachers, that the facilitator discloses to participants prior to the training that some content and discussions may be triggering. Additionally, introducing the topic of mental health and the impact of mental health on students would be helpful to set the context for the importance and need for the training. Lastly, providing an opportunity for reflection is critical. Due to the sensitive and heavy nature of the content, an opportunity for reflection, both individual and group, may help students process the experience.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

The cost to register for the Youth Mental Health First Aid is \$75 per person; Adult Mental Health First Aid registration is \$115 per person. The costs for the certified instructors and curriculum resources for participants in this situation were covered for the teacher preparation program through a collaboration with Ohio State University Extension. OSU Extension received a grant to provide trainings across the state. Dinner and snacks were provided for the preservice teachers during the in-person trainings by the teacher licensure program. Additionally, a room is needed for the in-person training that is conducive for active learning strategies and role play.

## References

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