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care/solace.

*Overcoming  
Mental Health  
Stigma in Schools:  
10 Simple Strategies*

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10 simple strategies to

# Overcome Mental Health Stigma in Schools

Despite our best efforts as administrators, teachers, and health professionals, many of our schools are still falling short of meeting our students' mental health needs. We've bolstered mental health services, expanded health professional staff, and implemented social-emotional learning programs — and yet the youth mental health crisis rages on within our walls.

Yes, we may still lack resources we desperately need. But we don't need to wait for bigger budgets to gain real traction — we can improve our students' health and well-being right now by shifting school culture.



School culture can even unintentionally keep mental health mired in judgment, prejudice, and bias.

On the other hand, when the entire community adopts the right mindset and the willingness to experiment with practical strategies, school culture has the potential to break down the stigma around mental health. And when stigma breaks, healing can occur.

As a school therapist, I've discovered that the most effective methods for addressing stigma aren't complicated. The strategies that work over time are practical and relatively simple. Here are ten strategies that meet these criteria — and appropriate regardless of your school's size, location, or student demographic.

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Strategy One:

# Inventory Your School Culture

If we genuinely want to know how supportive and inclusive our school culture is, we have to ask our students how they experience it. We owe it to our students to listen to their answers with a spirit of genuine curiosity, lack of judgment and defensiveness, and the intention to address their concerns

No matter what your role is in school, you can find ways to ask these questions. Ask in 1:1 and in group situations; ask informally in hallway and classroom conversations; ask in formal surveys. Gather data and use it to make incremental changes.



*How would you describe the school culture here?*

*What mental health activities would you like to see on a regular basis?*

*What school staff member, if any, checks in to see how you personally are doing?*

*In what spaces are your voices really heard?*

*How does this school deal with mental health?*

## Strategy Two:

# Create a Welcoming Wellness Space

Students need a physical place that offers safety, privacy, and an opportunity to be heard and supported.

My current school has been able to develop a Wellness Center in our library. This space serves as a place for students to take a brain break, access mental health resources, or speak to me directly and confidentially. The Wellness Center makes all mental health resources accessible in one central location. Students know exactly where to go, and talking with me builds accountability for them to actually use the resources.



No matter how small or humble the space, I encourage a wellness space layout that reinforces equality, not hierarchy. Hierarchy inhibits honesty and openness, so using desks as seats, for example, is a constant reminder that someone else has a higher status. Equality promotes trust and transparency. So using couches isn't a superficial decision; it quite literally puts everyone in the same position.

No wellness center? No couches? No problem. If your school is working with very little space, get creative with what you have.

## Strategy Three:

# Attend to Students' Most Fundamental Needs

To effectively support students' mental health, we need to ensure their basic needs are met. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the social determinants of health: these are different ways of talking about the same thing.



All human beings need their physiological and safety needs met before they can build a sense of love and belonging, fortify their self-esteem, and finally, self-actualize.

Our Wellness Center includes a “Kindness Connection,” which is a pantry of sorts for students with financial instabilities. Teachers have enthusiastically donated items like school supplies, backpacks, duffle bags, hygiene products, grocery gift cards, clothing, shoes, access to bedding and mattresses if needed. Students can anonymously take what they need. Your school should have its own version of the Kindness Connection if you truly want students to develop a sense of belonging at school.

## Strategy Four:

# Watch Your (Mental Health) Language

Destigmatizing mental health requires using destigmatizing language. Avoiding derogatory terms is table stakes; of course, we should strive to use respectful terminology. But we should also strive to normalize/de-pathologize mental health conversations.

Instead of saying “Let’s get you a session on my calendar tomorrow” I say, “Come hang out with me tomorrow.”

Instead of, “What do you need?” I say, “How can I show up for you today?” and “How can I best support you?”

Instead of “Let’s schedule another appointment,” I say, “I am wondering when we can connect again because what you have to say is so powerful.”

Language gives us the power to show up for students with our words. Rather than being formal, probing, or task-oriented, we ought to be casual, kind, and genuinely curious. Here are more statements and questions we can all offer students to normalize mental health:

“I’m wondering if something is up. You don’t seem like your regular self.”

“Is there anything weighing on your mind?” And if they shake their head, no, say: “Hey, I want to come back and connect with you during your last class. Does that sound okay with you?”

“What makes you excited to get up in the morning?”

Some students push mental health conversations away, while others are self-diagnosing and embracing pathologizing language. We all have endless opportunities to give our students language that is more neutral — and more empowering.



## Strategy Five

# Take Mental Health Messages to Classrooms

**Schools should have a designated wellness space, but we also ought to be taking wellness into each classroom.**

After all, we also don't want to compartmentalize mental health. We should strive for integration, so conversations about mental health can take place anywhere and everywhere.

School health professionals have a unique opportunity when they do thematic workshops for each grade level. We become familiar faces, educators, mentors, and part of school leadership.

For example, in Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, I show videos that play out social situations and elicit student participation afterwards. Hearing multiple perspectives is actually enjoyable for all of us — and the students have had the opportunity to experience my empathy and energy.

I've noticed a surprising side benefit to workshopping in classrooms. Teachers have consulted with me, asking how they might be more transparent with their students. Some have a genuine interest in getting real about their own mental health. Teachers want students to see them as real human beings, so they can work better together.



## Strategy Six

# Triage Student Mental Health Concerns

**Your school health professionals need everyone's support triaging student mental health concerns.**

If teachers send students down to the Wellness Center while the school therapist is doing workshops, the kids have to wait to be seen, and the therapist's calendar quickly fills. This is not a sustainable plan of action.

Referrals to the therapist may drop significantly as students feel a stronger sense of belonging. We can all participate in building that climate by assuming responsibility to check in with students. If you're not sure how to start checking in, do an inventory of your school/class culture. Ask your students how they are experiencing your class and the school as a whole. Use empowering language and weave it into all of your interactions with students.

Small efforts from all members of school administration and staff pay off big: students know they matter. And that can alleviate the burden on the shoulders of your health professionals.



## Strategy Seven

# Teach Students How to ACT

We don't need to teach our students how to be mental health experts — but we do need to teach them how to support each other and break the silence.

We need to address mental health welfare checks head-on. Students who are suffering are likely to go to their friends first, so we need to educate students about how to be a good friend. Good friends link the people they are about to appropriate support. And let's be clear students: this isn't snitching. This is saving a life.

### *We should teach students how to ACT:*

**A**cknowledge. Take the time to be present and truly listen.

**C**are. Offer your love and support.

**T**ell a trusted adult. Turn to an adult who can step in and help the student and their family connect to the right mental health resources.



Because we have created a Wellness Center and I've made myself a constant presence in school, students know they can come to me. But it need not be just the school therapist. Administrators and teachers who have dedicated themselves to creating a supportive school culture, attending to students' fundamental needs, and triaging concerns will earn students' trust as well.

## Strategy Eight

# Recruit Student Mental Health Advocates

**Nothing beats the power of peers when it comes to youth mental health, so we should train students as wellness ambassadors.**

The Youth Mental Health First Aid program is easy to implement. Willing students can transform into peer leaders who continuously engage in mental health conversations throughout the day — even at sports and academic club events.

Candidates for training don't need to be students who are working through mental health challenges of their own — they just need to be convicted about the importance of promoting mental health. I've found, however, that students who are working on their own challenges can find the Wellness Advocate role to be healing.



I have other students who are getting creative with their roles; for example, a student came forward with the idea about writing a script for a film on sexual assault and mental health. She's decided to use her voice through film.

Student mental health advocacy grows organically with the right kind of fertilizer. Once invited, supported, and trained, advocates treasure their role. Their participation may be the single most powerful way to destigmatize mental health in our schools.

## Strategy Nine

# Educate and Collaborate With Parents

When we have students struggling with their mental health, we also have parents who need education. We need to collaborate with parents to best support their child's mental health. When working with parents, it's crucial to:

### *Establish trust and accountability in our connections.*

Schools and parents have a shared responsibility to address the student's mental health concerns. Parents and students must find school staff worthy of their trust, and students must be held accountable to both school and their parents.

### *Emphasize the concept of protective factors*

Parents benefit from education about protective factors. Support isn't just about being physically present — it's also about not judging their child's emotions. They should give their child permission to feel and let them know they are there to connect and support — even if the child doesn't want to talk about their feelings immediately.

### *Empower the student to discover their goals, even if not career related.*

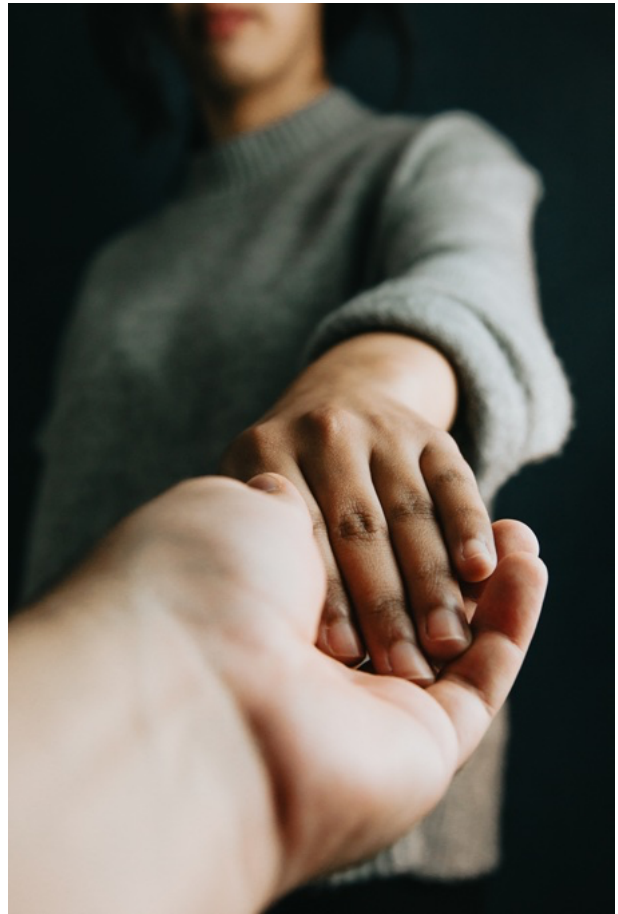
Parents need to understand that allowing the student to discover their own interests, connections, and coping mechanisms is essential for their well-being.

We can ask parents to look beyond the surface of their child's behavior and arm them with destigmatizing language. We can also encourage parents to take notes or even record sessions with the school health professional so they remember and apply what is discussed.

## Strategy Ten:

# Offer Safety Plans to Vulnerable Students

Our most vulnerable students need a safety plan and connection to resources outside of school hours.



Students experiencing homelessness near my current school, for example, can be connected to [Operation Safe House](#); you ought to have a strong relationship with a similar local organization. And if your city has partnered with [Care Solace](#), you can find solutions for families who qualify for social services quickly.

Teaching all students how to ACT — and training student Wellness Ambassadors to how engage and connect the school community in a holistic way — can help you identify

those in the most dire situations. As a whole, we should work diligently to communicate an important message to these students: There's hope and value in their life. Once you graduate from high school, you'll get to make more independent choices. Until then, let's build your future readiness with the fundamental resources you need.

On weekends, vacations, or holidays, those students need to know they can count on a resource that was given to them by an adult they trust at school.



# *Break the Mental Health Stigma By Weaving the Fabric of Change*

In their totality, these ten strategies make up a holistic approach to breaking down stigma in our schools by providing a shared vision and a myriad of ways to integrate mental health conversations. And with participation by all, we can bond more closely as a school community.

But we must bear in mind this one truth: the students themselves are the agents of change, not our strategies. It's the students who are the weavers of the fabric of change. Our job is to treat them as worthy and capable weavers — and prove to them that we will be right by their sides as they sit at the loom, interlace the threads, and learn to make their own internal and external systems of support.

When a school health professional has determined a student needs additional mental health support, Care Solace can take the reins. We will quickly connect the student and their family to an available provider, no matter the insurance situation. [Learn more](#) about partnering with Care Solace.



# About Care Solace

Care Solace is revolutionizing mental health care access, bridging the gap between social agencies and community-based mental health providers. Through a human-centered and technology supported approach, Care Solace navigates the fragmented mental health care system to match individuals with a licensed mental health or substance use provider. More than 500 dedicated multilingual Care Companions are available 24/7/365 to ensure the perfect fit for each person's unique care needs and insurance requirements. Care Solace has a network of 425K+ licensed providers, serving more than 850 organizations across the United States.

| *For more information, visit [caresolace.org](https://caresolace.org)*