

How can teen librarians promote mental health?

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Teen mental health is an important issue, especially in library settings. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) states that for youth ages 13-18, roughly 20% will live with a mental health disorder (NAMI, n.d.). Teens may be quiet about what challenges they have, may not receive a diagnosis or adequate treatment, or face other barriers that prevent them from addressing a mental illness or challenge. Teen librarians are uniquely positioned to help their patrons access information or services that they may need or be unaware of. Although teen librarians are not mental health professionals and should not be expected to provide those services, there are ways librarians can help. Some of these include receiving mental health first aid training and helping teens find materials through reader's advisory interactions.

Mental health first aid

Mental health first aid training can be a valuable resource in promoting mental health in teens. Mental health first aid is designed to provide support for those who are in crisis or who need assistance until appropriate help is found or no longer needed (Mental Health First Aid



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Canada, 2017). The training is aimed at giving individuals they need to listen and respond to those who may need help, as well as to promote an understanding within the community about the realities of mental illness (MHFAC, 2017). For teen librarians, receiving mental health first aid training can have a lasting, positive impact on their patrons. Understanding the signs of mental health crisis, receiving training in how to respond or listen to patrons who need help, and learning how best to engage with teens who may be going through a difficult time is immensely valuable (Throgmorton, 2017).

For teen librarians in Canada, Mental Health First Aid Canada (MHFAC) and St. John's Ambulance have partnered to provide training throughout the country. They offer different courses, including one that focuses on the needs of youth ages 12-14. In addition to receiving mental health first aid training, interested participants can become certified trainers to help share their knowledge (Throgmorton, 2017). Mental health first aid training could become a vital form of professional development or basic training offered by libraries, giving staff the resources they need to help their patrons.

Reader's advisory

Another valuable tool for teen librarians in promoting mental health is effectively using the reader's advisory. Teens who may have a mental illness or who may know someone with one may turn to books to find solace or understand what is going on. Youth librarian Stephanie

Loiselle, in conjunction to using her mental health first aid training, uses reader's advisory to help teens locate books that may mirror their own situation (Thorgmorton, 2017). Books that showcase teens with mental health challenges can help reduce stigmas, while also opening up new avenues of conversation. However, teens may not feel comfortable talking with librarians, so other steps should be taken to connect them with books that may be helpful to them. Creating book lists in the online catalogue or creating physical list to display in the stacks or at the help desk could be a useful alternative.

Additional steps

Other steps libraries can take to promote mental health include:

- Programming focused on promoting mental health tactics, such as stress-management, building resiliency, and building self-esteem (Takahashi, 2016).
- Creating bookmarks, flyers, or pamphlets that list mental health resources, including hotlines, resources within the community, and the locations of non-fiction materials within the library (Takahashi, 2016).
- Partnering with local mental health organizations to offer support groups for those who may need them (Takahashi, 2016).
- Prohibiting words or phrases that are harmful to teens from marginalized communities (Abron, 2016).

Conclusion

Teen librarians can play a vital role in connecting the youth they serve with the resources they need, as well as serving as a first provider for mental health services. In addition to what was outlined in this article, there are other ways librarians can promote mental health. The website, *Teen Librarian Toolbox*, has dedicated much of 2016 to highlighting mental health in YA literature, both from an author and librarian perspective. The Young Adult Library Services Association, or YALSA, also has valuable resources available for librarians who may be unsure of where to start. Mental health awareness is not a one size fits all model. It may take time to find the right combination of programming and resources to make an impact on the youth you serve. This article can serve as a starting point in creating a space where teens feel supported through what mental health challenges they have.

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