Mental Health Messaging to College Students

Three Arts-Based Approaches

BY GARY CHRISTENSON, MD

University students are bombarded with information. Thus, reaching them with messages about mental health can be challenging. Rather than using the traditional channels to share such information, the University of Minnesota’s Boynton Health Service has turned to the arts in recent years. This article describes how it used three arts events during the 2014-2015 academic year to increase awareness about mental health, reduce stigma around mental health problems and promote open discussion about mental health.

We are increasingly bombarded by messages. Whether on brochures, flyers, posters, billboards or television or in emails, texts, tweets, banners or pop-up ads, everyone seems to be competing for our attention. College students especially are targeted by those trying to sell, convince and inform.

This presents a challenge for those of us trying to reach young people with messages about mental health. In recent years, staff at Boynton Health Service, the student health service on the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus, have turned to the arts to promote mental health services.1

For the past three years, we’ve sponsored a daylong event called Cirque de-Stress, which uses the circus arts to increase awareness of mental health issues and resources available on campus. We did this knowing that the start of college is a time when young people must contend with increased academic challenges, new living arrangements, different social support systems, new food options, peer pressure, romantic relationships and financial responsibilities—all of which make them vulnerable to stress. According to the 2013 College Student Health Survey Report, more than one-fourth (29.3%) of students on the Twin Cities campus reported that they are unable to manage their stress. Furthermore, 29.9% reported having been diagnosed with a mental health condition during their life (14.3% reported having been diagnosed within the last 12 months).2

We reported on our first experience with the event in 2013.3 The success of our initial efforts led us to do a repeat performance during the next academic year and then to branch out with other arts-based programming.

Thinking that we needed to reach students more than once a year with messages about mental health, we developed three art-themed events for the 2014-2015 school year. This article describes our approach.

Circus

Cirque de-Stress is a day of circus performances held in the Great Hall of Coffman Union.4 Although we held the initial Cirque de-Stress in the spring of 2013, we decided to hold the second and third circus events in October, as we wanted to inform students of resources earlier in the school year.

In circus, we find natural metaphors for life. The balancing, juggling and spinning required for the high wire, trapeze, juggling and acrobatic acts that were demonstrated throughout the day help convey ideas about finding balance in one’s own
life, juggling responsibilities and avoiding spinning out of control.

Between acts, students visit stations where they can watch and participate in additional circus and carnival-themed activities and learn about such things as counseling services at the university, online stress reduction courses, and mental health advocacy and promotional organizations such as the campus chapter of Active Minds.

Our most recent Cirque de-Stress event included a number of new acts. The de-stress student group made their first public appearance in anticipation of providing peer-to-peer “stress check-ins” (consisting of stress assessment, advice for stress management and referral to other resources as needed), which they began offering during the spring semester. The Amazing Hondo, a magician whose performance was sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, did card tricks and used the con game three-card Monte to raise awareness about problem gambling. The University’s recreation and wellness program put up a slack line to promote the importance of exercise to both mental and physical health. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota provided a bicycle-driven blender; attendees could ride the bike to produce nutritious smoothies. Melrose Institute staff promoted awareness of eating disorders and the Minnesota chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) promoted its own resources as well as the “Make it OK” campaign (makeitok.org), which encourages people to talk about mental health and illness.

About 3,000 students and staff attended the 2014 Cirque de-Stress. In surveys about previous Cirque de-Stress events, we found attendance was associated with acquisition of new skills to manage stress, increased awareness of resources and decreased stigma related to mental health. In 2014, we surveyed attendees both at the time of the event and two months later. At follow up, respondents reported feeling stressed (as it was close to finals) but described using some of the coping strategies introduced at Cirque de-Stress (eg, interacting with animals, using aromatherapy, talking with a counselor) to manage it.

Music

On January 28, 2015, during the second week of spring semester, we held an event called Finding Harmony: Music and Mental Health. This was a more intimate event that was held in the coffee-house-like setting of the Whole Music Club at Coffman Union. It featured a panel of popular local musicians who shared their personal experiences with mental illness. The panel included Charles Bothwell (AKA Astronautalis), Claire Monesterio from GRRRL PRTY, and John Solomon and Molly Moore from Communist Daughter. The discussion was moderated by Honeydogs’ front man Adam Levy, who organizes an annual program called Dissonance, Mental Health...
Visual Arts

In mid-spring, a call went out to the university community to submit artwork for a juried exhibition focused on destigmatizing mental health. The selection committee was composed of students and staff from mental health and public health programs, as well as art programs on campus. Seventeen works were selected based on their artistic merit, relevance to the mental health theme, representation of different experiences and balance in relationship to the overall exhibit. The pieces were created by three undergraduate students, two graduate students, six staff members, one former staff member and one faculty member. The artwork was displayed along with the artist’s explanation of the work. The exhibit was displayed in a gallery space within Boynton Health Service from April 20 to May 14.

The title for the exhibit, Multiple Layers, was taken from architecture student Zhezi Yang’s reference to the “multiple layers” conveyed in her collage, The Sensitive Poet. The artist described the work as “A story about a poet with a complex psychological condition. The poet’s emotions of depression and solitude, eagerness and nostalgia, romance, understanding, sympathy, and spirit of truth, simplicity, goodness and sacrifice are all rendered.”

“Finding Harmony was so real and powerful. Everyone there just started joining in, sharing their stories about their own mental health. There was laughter, camaraderie, empathy and hope, all presented in a way I have never seen before. This is the way we should talk about mental health.”

(Finding Harmony was recorded. The video can be viewed from the Art Program page of the Boynton Health Service website, www.bhs.umn.edu.)

More than 50 students attended Finding Harmony. Because of the smaller audience, attendees had the opportunity to participate in an honest exchange with the speakers. As such, we felt the event furthered the goal of the Make it OK campaign to normalize conversations about mental health. Dave Golden, director of public health and communication at Boynton Health Service, summarized what occurred during the evening this way:

and Music for students at McNally Smith College of Music. Levy has been a mental health activist since the loss of his 21-year-old son to suicide in January of 2012.

Throughout the evening, each musician performed a song and shared their own experiences with mental illness, touching on anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, alcoholism, Tourette’s disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and grief following the deaths of friends and family members from overdose and suicide. They also told inspirational stories of healing through psychotherapy, medication, self-discovery, writing and performing music, and other means. An open discussion followed the presentations.

A participant adds comments about one of the pieces on display at Multiple Layers.
Several pieces depicted mental health themes more globally and metaphorically. For example, design professor Kate Maple’s painting Wabi Sabi depicted a cracked bowl repaired with a mixture of lacquer and gold. The piece is in the Japanese tradition of Kintsugi, which respects the beauty and value of objects even when damaged. A related theme was captured in Kay Kirscht’s “3/4 of her paint chipped off; she is still a doll,” a photograph of an aged Minerva tin doll head. “She is still a doll and a valuable antique (one that I cannot restore without diminishing her value),” the author wrote. Michael Schmidt’s Chop Wood, Carry Water was composed on a rustic plank using wood burning and colored pencil. It spoke to the need to focus on accomplishing simple daily tasks, even when feeling overwhelmed. The title refers to the Zen proverb “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”

Several other pieces were notable. One graduate student, who asked that her name not be used, submitted two paintings. Her Portrait of an Internal Battle was done in a mere 15 minutes during a hypomanic episode whereas Portrait of Euphoria took four years to finish. A monster’s multiple eyeballs, described by the artist as a “personification of anxiety disorder,” surround the self-portrait within Kit Leffler’s multimedia work I Don’t Do Crowds. Another piece by the same artist, Procession with Worldly Belongings, was reminiscent of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. However, the artist’s burden includes both objects she owns and images representing her family history of anxiety disorder.

We invited viewers to interact with the artists and other viewers by writing comments on sticky notes and affixing them near the artworks. Some expressed appreciation for the exhibit, and others reflected about the imagery and/or offered critiques. We surveyed attendees at the opening. Among their comments were the following:

“Attending Multiple Layers helped me better understand my stress.”
“It was very therapeutic! Great community-building event.”
“The personal stories were eye-opening, touching, relatable, helpful.”
Respondents unanimously recommended repeating the mental health art exhibit the next year. (Photographs of the artwork can be viewed on the Boynton Health Service website.)

**Conclusion**

Through Cirque de-Stress, Finding Harmony and Multiple Layers, our university health service has aimed to raise students’ awareness of mental health resources at key times during the academic year (the start of both semesters and the end of the school year). All components of our programs were well-received and appear to have contributed to the goals of normalizing conversations about mental health and raising awareness of preventive strategies and mental health resources on campus. We believe other arts-based approaches, including comedy, spoken word, theater and dance, also can be harnessed to improve mental health on campus. In the age of information overload and with an audience that is targeted with messages of all types, the arts are effective ways to draw attention to important health concerns and deliver crucial messages.

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**References**