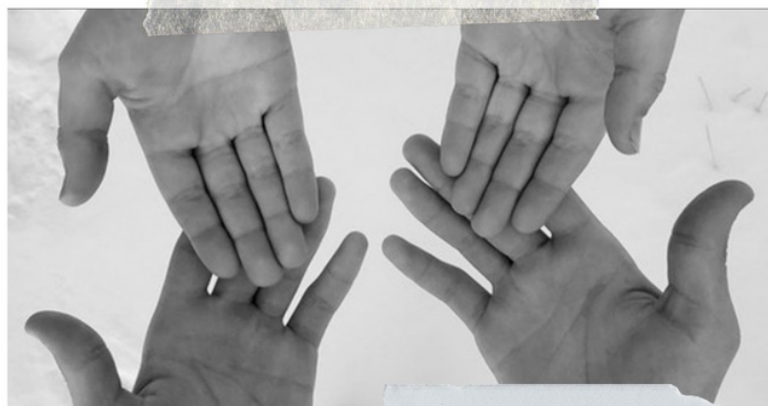


# THROUGH OUR EYES:

A PHOTOVOICE PROJECT ON STIGMA AROUND  
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Presented by the Behavioral Health Initiative Youth Task Force



- Featuring pictures and stories of Northwest Michigan youth on their experiences with combatting mental health stigmas



NORTHWEST MICHIGAN  
**Behavioral  
Health  
Initiative**



This is the work of the Reduce Stigma Against Youth Mental Health Action Team, one of the 12 Northwest CHIR's Behavioral Health Initiative (BHI) Action Teams. Action Teams consist of cross sector partners willing and able to take action collectively and supported by the CHIR BBO staff. To learn more about the CHIR and BHI, visit [northernmichiganchir.org](http://northernmichiganchir.org)

# An Introduction to the Project

Photovoice is a creative tool and research method that uses photography and storytelling to capture a particular audience's perspective on an issue.

These projects are often used as a way to encourage positive change within communities and educate decision makers.

For the purpose of this project, high school-aged youth from across 10 counties in Northwest Michigan were asked to share their perspectives and experiences related to the stigma around youth mental health. As you read through this inspiring work, you will see that participants define stigma related to youth mental health and recommend actions that can be taken within schools and communities to address this issue. No matter the role you play in your community, consider how you can take action around the recommendations the youth participants illustrate through their work to address the pressing issue of stigma around youth mental health.

Through Our Eyes: A Photovoice Project on Stigma around Youth Mental Health is a result of the Northwest Michigan Community Health Innovation Region's Behavioral Health Initiative. This project was led by the Behavioral Health Initiative's Youth Task Force and was made possible through funding by Rotary Charities.

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**ROTARY**  
**CHARITIES**  
*Resources for change.*

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



Mental health stigma is something that people try to get rid of but can't because of the mental state they're in. The impact is how it can lead to discrimination. The picture can represent OCD in a sort of way and I think that OCD is something that has to deal with mental stigma, I'm not really sure, but I took this picture to help with people who need something to look at when they need a mental break on things. So they can look at this picture and think "Wow, this picture looks great. I think I might want to become a photographer." That's what I think people would say when they look at this picture. Discrimination looks like something that people do that the other person doesn't want to do. I see that a few times at my school, but I don't see that happen a lot.

-Photo and story by Marisa

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like? What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



This tire swing looks ordinary, but I think the comparison to young teenagers' minds is accurate. The old tire hangs from worn ropes, attaching itself to the aged tree branches. I chose to represent the youth's stigma in this way because of the sadness the old swing carries. It lacks bright colors, and the ropes are starting to fall apart. In today's society, the youth's minds have been corrupted. Most people in the age group tend to hold onto one thing, until they aren't able to do so anymore. The stigma would be the way young people have little to nothing to grasp onto. This impacts the younger generation by causing them to feel worthless and alone.

I think most young people feel alone. High schoolers are more prone to suffer from anxiety and depression. Most students go untreated due to not feeling comfortable reaching out to their parents or teachers. Parents are normally oblivious to this because most young people are able to hide their feelings well. Especially towards the end of high school, students begin to feel more pressure about beginning their lives without guidance. I think young people have less to grasp onto because they feel as if they have no one to communicate their feelings with. I think stress and anxiety leads them to feel this way.

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



Stigma around the mental health of the youth looks like different things. The stigma is defined as “a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illness” while in the US people view mental illness as a “weakness”, other cultures and people believe it taboo to be diagnosed with a disorder or mental illness.

The impact of this on the youth, is that they are less likely to speak up about how they feel. Because they may fear that they will get picked on or bullied. So these people may become more isolated and not talk about it. Some do speak about their problems but may not get the help they need or their parents/guardians don't believe them. The stigma is seeming to have a very negative impact on the youth.

-Photo and story by K. Sexton

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



The assortment of cleaning products in this picture represent the impact certain forms of OCD, like constant cleaning, can have on a person's life. Dealing with mental health is a delicate thing and it can be especially hard when you have a personality trait or characteristic

about you that is different from other people. Many people do not accept things that do not conform to the social standard, so a person having a mental health disorder like OCD can be singled out by the stigma that comes from dealing with their mental health.

-Photo and story by Jürgen

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



I think a common stigma surrounding youth mental health is that if you don't have a mental illness or deal with issues like depression and anxiety, you must be a happy and sound person. This stigma makes a lot of youth feel invalidated when it comes to addressing their own mental states-- if they aren't mentally ill or diagnosed with mental health problems, they must be mentally healthy. In reality, mental health is a spectrum. We all have good moments and bad moments. Youth shouldn't be brought up to think that your mental health can only be in a "good" or "bad" state. Many times we deal with both emotions simultaneously.

-Photo and story by Paige

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



We are raised to conceal our feelings which leads to a society that is ashamed of seeking help. The hood represents the shame young people feel over their mental health and asking for assistance. I wanted to portray that we often put aside getting guidance until it is unbearable because of that shame. Youth are left feeling alone in their struggle for happiness and peace.

-Photo and story by Elke



# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like? What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



This is a picture of my dog Darcy. We named her after the character Mr. Darcy, from *Pride and Prejudice*. In the book this character is treated a certain way because of his looks and wealth, but when he is deemed unsociable he's outcasted and proclaimed rude and proud. In reality, he is simply shy, in a time period where if someone is introverted its read as disrespectful. Similarly, people have a predetermined view of someone based on their home life, looks, and personality. Like my dog for example, you may say she's cute and looks well behaved. But she is also crazy, super active, and nippy. You might think I'm over exaggerating because to you its just a cute puppy. I've been deemed perfect and unable to have problems by "friends" because I'm pretty, skinny, and have loving parents. When I told my toxic friends I had anxiety, they didn't believe me because I seemed confident and looked the way they wanted. But as well, they skinny shamed me and made me the blunt end of jokes because I was "nice" and "naive".

Just because you think someone's ok or looks fine, doesn't mean their feelings are dismissible. Everyone has problems, and its not your place to say whether someone doesn't/does have them, or bully them because they fit or don't fit social standards. If we treated all youth mental health with respect, the "depressed teen" or "pretty girl" wouldn't feel alone. Just like a "cute puppy"; We're living beings, not stereotypes.

**What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?**

**What is the impact of this stigma on youth?**



Mental health is messy. It can feel like a ticking bomb in your head. This room looks like a bomb of clothes exploded all over it. This is how some people who suffer from mental illness feel. A bomb, waiting to explode and when it does, it's messy.

-Photo and story by LJ

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?

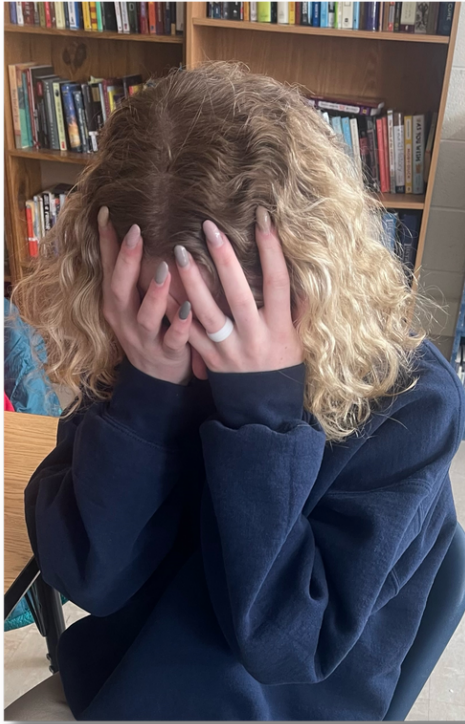


The stigma around mental health can cause us to be like this door. We keep people out to avoid the stigma and criticism. After keeping people out we start to break down. To me this represents the dangers of the stigma surrounding youth mental health.

-Photo and story by Alex

# What does the stigma around youth mental health look like?

## What is the impact of this stigma on youth?



Stigma around youth mental health can look like many different things. Some main things people can notice is talking down to people and not validating others emotions. Making others feel small and unworthy of attention can really hurt them which can lead to sadness and anger from inside.

-Photo and story by Elena

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?**

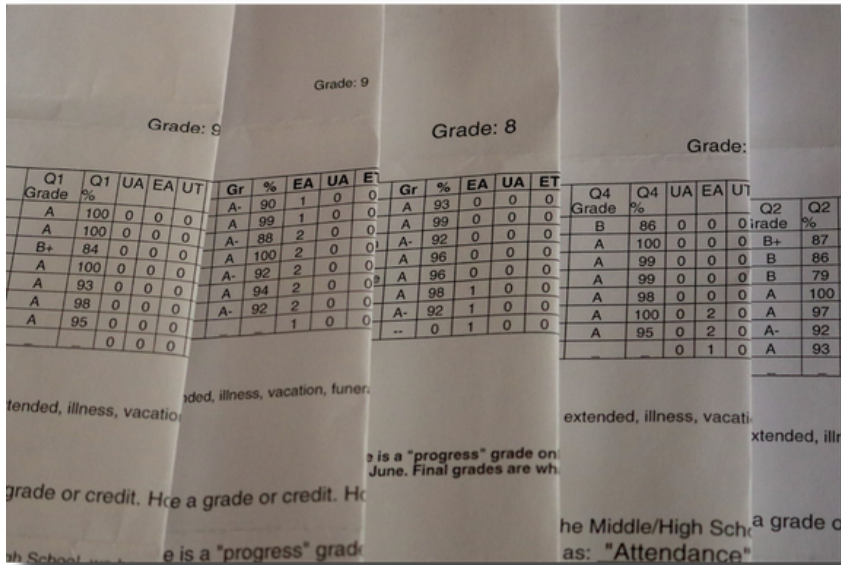
**What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



Being vocal majorly decreases stigma around youth mental health. Every time someone speaks up about how they feel or struggles they may be going through, people empathize and in turn feel more comfortable with sharing their story. Being honest and open about how you feel in turn helps others to come forward— they feel safe opening up, and are met with more support.

-Photo and story by Paige

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?  
 What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



Society can have us believing that we as individuals should be happy because we meet the credentials it's looking for.

Either grades, jobs, amount of money, or even relationships you are in. You can still be seen as "happy" and still suffer from mental health.

-Photo and story by LJ

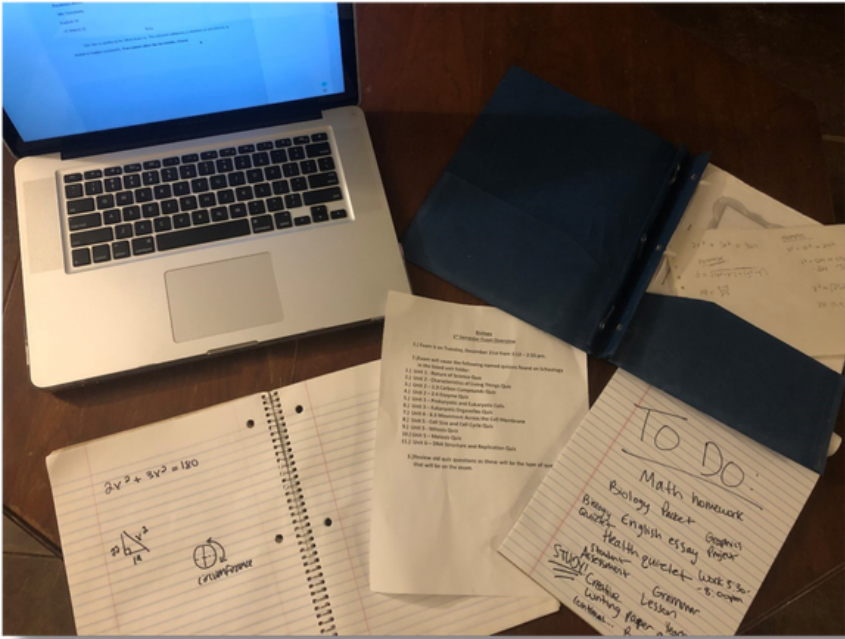
**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?**  
**What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



My community is decreasing the stigma around mental health by having a wellness center in the school which provides a counselor for those who need it. Though not every student who needs help goes here, due to the fear of getting bullied, being called an "attention seeker", or being told that it's "just a phase". This could be critical for those who are having thoughts of harming themselves after being told that they aren't really feeling what they say they are. Many of the adults in my community are ignorant and are starting to believe that all mental health looks the same. When in reality it isn't. The picture represents that sometimes allowing yourself to step away from a situation to find either what is going on mentally or just as a break from everyone while being alone is how some people cope best, while others cope better when around friends. We can't allow people to think that it all looks the same.

-Photo and story by K. Sexton

# What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health? What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?



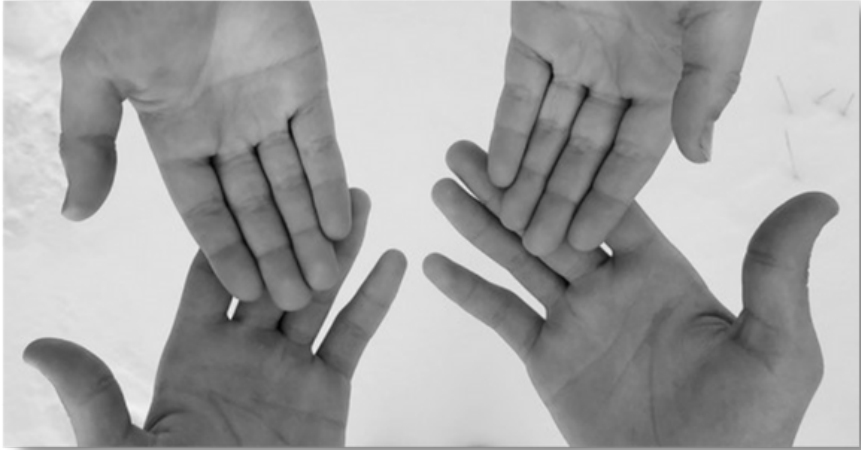
I chose this picture to represent how the stigma has increased in my school because I believe that schoolwork increases the stress among the youth. Teachers don't realize how much pressure students put on themselves throughout their high school years. Student's plates are always full, especially if they are juggling work with school work. A student's home life also has to do with the youth's stigma. I think the stigma decreases when students are with their friends or people they enjoy spending time with. It allows the student's mind to be sidetracked from their stress.

-Photo and story by Anonymous



**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?**

**What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**

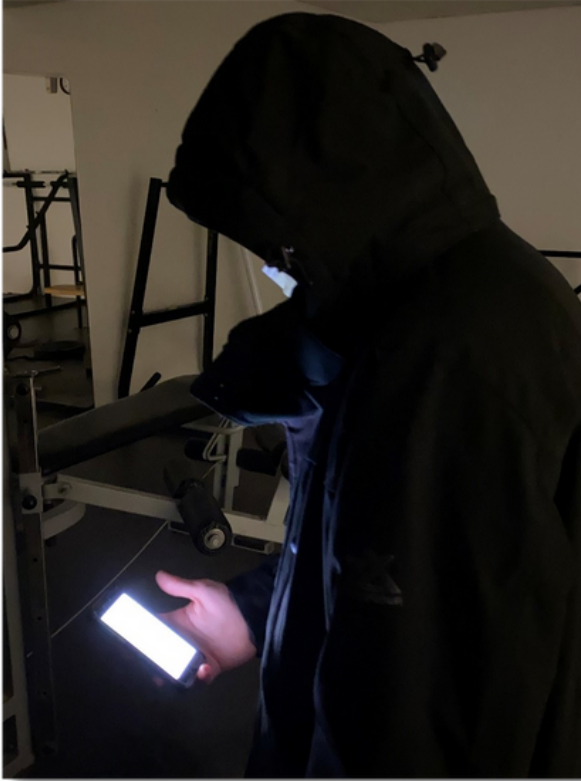


This picture represents that stigma is decreased when we listen to each other (friends, classmates, siblings, strangers) and tell each other our stories. Only then can we decrease the stigma around mental health and build better communities. We need to recognize that young people should feel comfortable talking about mental health and be supported when they do so. Our hands have wiped away tears and endured countless wounds; sharing their stories they hold will empower awareness and change.

-Photo and story by Elke

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?**

**What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



This photo represents how social media plays a big role on the impact of mental health stigma in my community. With cell phones being a normal accessory these days and all of the social pressures that come with them it can affect a kids mental health. In my community phones cause a major increase in this stigma because they can show misrepresentations of a person with a mental health problem and this causes the rise in stigma.

-Photo and story by Jürgen

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?**  
**What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



Something that can reduce the stigma around your mental health is to realize that you're not alone even though you may feel like it. Realizing the beauty in all situations and surroundings can help decrease the stigma around youth mental health.

-Photo and story by Alex

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?  
What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



GOSSIP! Gossip can increase stigma around youth mental health DRAMATICALLY. When you are always paranoid of people talking about you, it can really damage your sanity. It can ruin your confidence and even your life. By gossiping you can degrade someone mental health and create divides amongst peers.

-Photo and story by Elena

**What in your community or school increases the stigma around youth mental health?  
What decreases the stigma around youth mental health?**



This photo reminds me of when my friends and I talk about our stressors and how to cope with it. So for me, dealing with my anxiety involves a schedule I can follow and self care routines. This way I'm kept on track and not worrying if I have forgotten anything.

Same thing can be for others! What breaks the strand of mental health stigma is talking about mental health stigma. Its being brave enough to hear from others who may have the ability to help, or those who have a completely different mindset. For me, it was more refreshing to talk to my parents than it was to go to therapy. That was a decision I made for myself.

However my friend went to therapy and is very confident in who she is today. Eventually when I've healed enough I'll feel safe to talk to a therapist, but she and I both agree that a great stress deceiver on the mind is taking care of yourself! Treating mental health as just what it is, will help us clarify how to help others in the future.

-Photo and story by Miranda

## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



Providing youth with mental health education can be successful in reducing stigma, changing current attitudes and can affect access to care. You also have to be aware of your attitudes and behavior, choose your words carefully, focus on positive stuff, support people, and include everyone in everything you do.

-Photo and story by Marisa

## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



This picture illustrates how we often assume everyone else is happy with the exception of ourselves because we aren't "facing each other". Social media makes it especially easy to see the best moments in everyone's life and to hide the hardships we endure. When we only see the happiness that people show on the outside, mental health isn't normalized and many are left feeling ashamed or helpless. Because not enough experiences with mental health are shared, individuals who don't struggle with mental health disorders have a hard time understanding what it is like and the stigma around it increases.

I believe that as a community we must provide opportunities for people to come together and talk about their experiences with mental health. We could organize a chat group, welcome to anyone, where community members could share experiences. This would hopefully help people realize they are not alone in their struggle and help them understand the struggle others face as well. We also should provide safe spaces where people can be alone and reflect on themselves such as gardens, parks, and meditation spaces. We should have accessible, current information in buildings such as coffee shops that are frequently visited. This information could come in the form of a pamphlet or even a fridge magnet. After school chat sessions would be very beneficial. Students could get together after school each week and share their experiences. A guest speaker could be incorporated as well. One main goal would be to spread awareness to all types of mental illnesses, even if they seem less extreme or looked over.

-Photo and story by Elke

## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



One thing that decreases the stigma around youth mental health in my community is sports. This photo shows a boy playing basketball which is one sport that can decrease the stigma. Sports decrease this stigma by making youth work together as a team to win regardless of who your team mate or opponent is. The whole idea of sports is to build trust and loyalty and these qualities make all sports a great way to decrease stigma.

-Photo and story by Jürgen



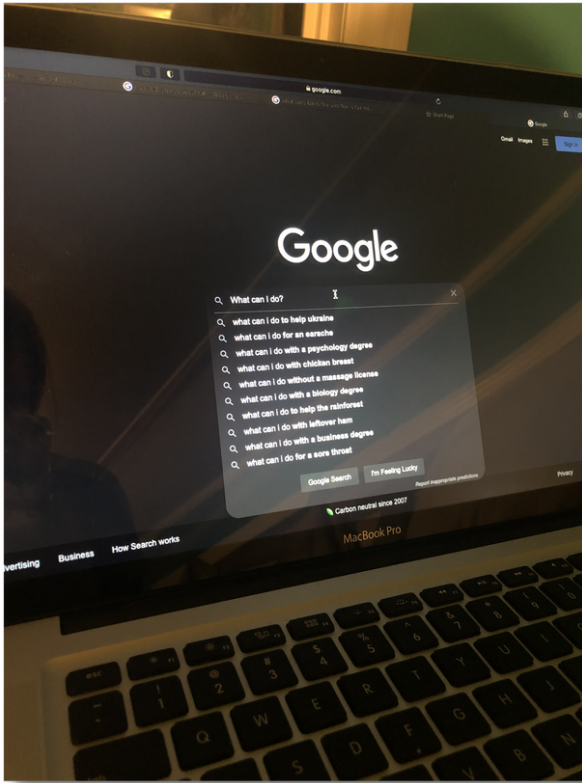
## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



My school can try to tell people around the entire school to not mess with anyone that has mental problems and physical problems because if people mess with people with those problems, it could cause that person to do something that they shouldn't do.

-Photo and story by Marisa

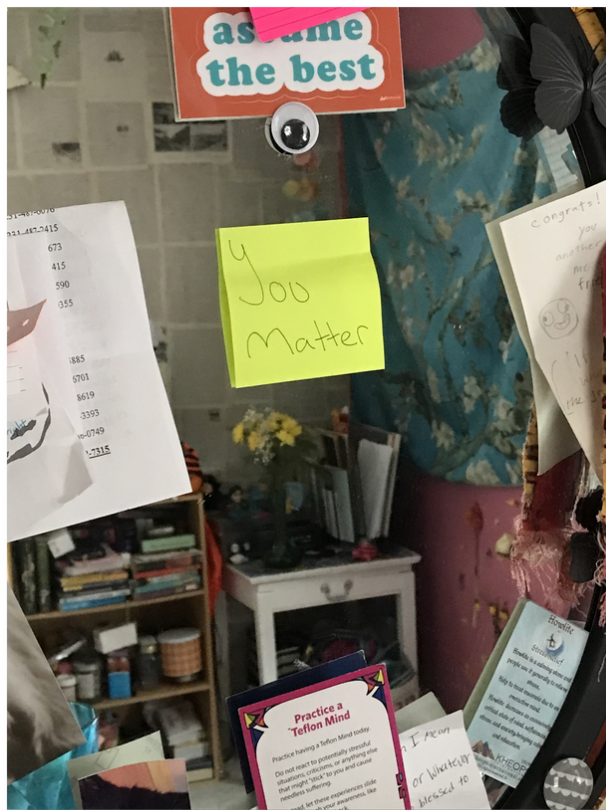
# What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



I think the best way to help decrease the stigma is by educating yourself on the common mental disorders that revolve around young teens. Things like anxiety, depression, OCD, and many others are very common for high school students. I think reaching out to your friends or classmates and making sure they're alright is the best thing to do. Being educated on how to help is very important and beneficial to everyone.

-Photo and story by Anonymous

## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



Words can make or break a person. We as a community need to be there and uplift each other and not tear each other down. If one of us began to be kinder this will cause a chain reaction, one who everyone will benefit from.

A kindness chain can happen in anyway either paying for a stranger's drink or complimenting someone on their outfit. In school simply helping someone when they've dropped something or including a classmate who isn't as involved.

Some steps people in the community can take to uplift each other are being patient with someone when they are taking a little bit longer at the stoplight or just being kind in general. These small things make such an impact whether we see it the influence or not.

-Photo and story by LJ

## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



Have some educational material available to those, who don't know about certain mental health issues. And then have a community meeting to talk to parents about what mental health looks like, and how they can recognize it in, students.

The photo represents the road to success and that it can be bumpy and look different on different days.

-Photo and story by K. Sexton

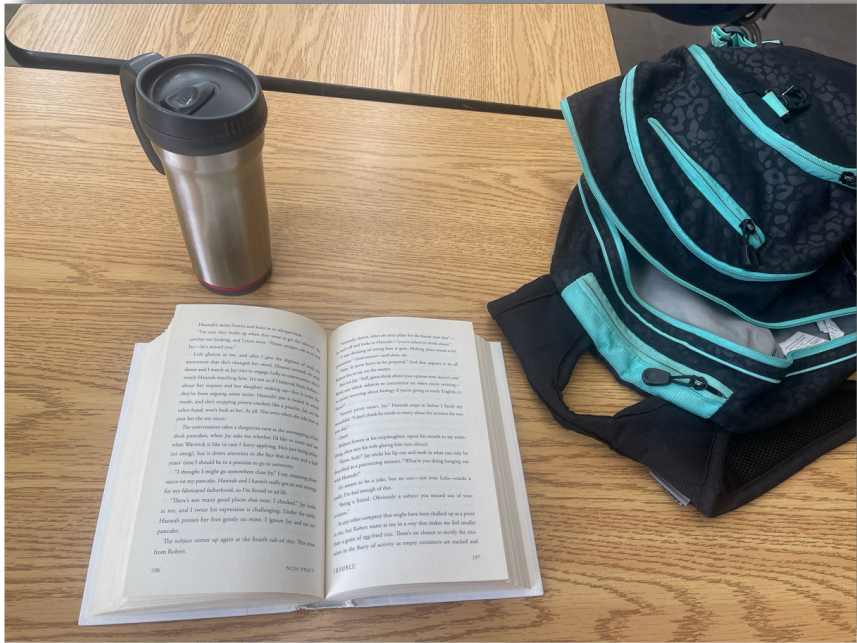
## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



These pictures represent that our community and schools need to hold events and opportunities for community members to learn how to see other people from another perspective. If we take the time to listen to each other and raise awareness then we can begin to see that maybe the person who is always bubbly and positive is really struggling with their mental health or that the person who is labeled antisocial and cold just doesn't feel welcome and appreciated. Our communities and schools need to spread the word that having mental illnesses does not make you flawed or defective. We need to encourage people to seek help but more importantly educate everyone on mental health in order to grow informed communities that respect and empathize, not dehumanize, people struggling with mental illnesses. We need to learn how to look through another lens when talking about mental health and give youth and community members valid information that can give them a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

-Photos and story by Elke

# What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



Schools can give students time to collect themselves. A few minutes of silence to let you calm down or prepare for the class. I personally enjoy taking the 10 minutes offered to me in the beginning of British Literature to read my book. Giving students quite time to prepare can increase mental health by understanding that students are people too and need time for themselves as well.

-Photo and story by Elena

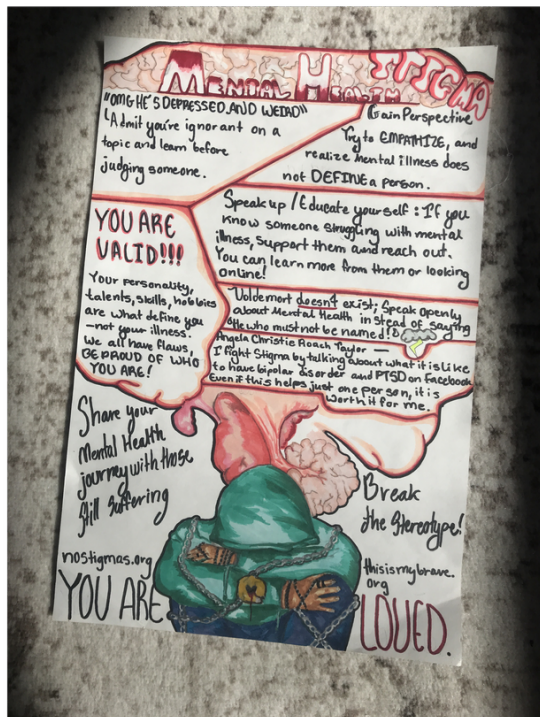
## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



A way our schools and communities can reduce stigma around mental health is through acceptance and respect of its people. We can grow our communities by encouraging our members and young people that they are in a safe place. We can ensure our communities are a safe space by encouraging empathy and support of others; and most of all, respect for each person.

-Photo and story by Paige

# What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



This was a project I did at the Career Tech Center in Traverse City. The health sciences class was having a competition to see who could make the best poster on mental health, and mine one! Basically encouraging others to speak about their feelings and keeping ignorant comments to ourselves is a start to making everyone feel safe, healing the social before the medical!

-Photo and story by Miranda



## What actions can your school or community take to reduce stigma around youth mental health?



Something our schools can do to reduce the stigma is not let us break down like this window. our schools are here for support but sometimes they let us crumple and fall. we need all the support we can get to not become like this window. Schools let us crumple and fall because many people don't realize the truth and reality of teen and youth stress. If you are having a lot of mental health issues and don't have the energy to come to school or do your homework, teachers push it off as you being lazy rather than a subtle cry for help. When teachers notice things, even just a little off and alarming, it is imperative that they speak out if they have reason to believe the child is struggling.

-Photo and story by Alex

## The Top 10 Recommendations for Reducing the Stigma around Youth Mental Health

This list of recommendations was shared by youth from across Northwest Michigan who participated in *Through Our Eyes: A Photovoice Project on Stigma around Youth Mental Health*.

1. Make sure school wellness centers, counselors, and community-based mental health supports are approachable and integrated into daily routines. Consider these supports an “opt-out” as opposed to an “opt-in” approach.
2. Increase youth-focused mental health education that is inclusive and destigmatizing. Validate and normalize that we ALL have mental health needs that require attention, just like with our physical health.
3. Recognize that school should be a safe place and is sometimes the ONLY safe place students have. Ensure ALL school staff are equipped to recognize and address mental health needs in students.
4. Normalize the understanding that mental health challenges are just as unique as the people they impact. Notice, without judgment, if there are changes in someone’s attitude or behavior and let them know what you are seeing and that you are there to help.
5. Increase safe and supportive connections between school staff and students - Recognize that school can be a lot of pressure and normalize students’ need to take breaks.
6. Prioritize yourself! Model positive mental health behaviors like taking a break when needed and normalize that self-care isn’t selfish.
7. Provide supportive and inclusive opportunities within your organization or community that allow people to come together to openly discuss mental health.
8. Establish designated spaces at school for youth to go to decompress and self-reflect when experiencing acute mental health challenges. Students need to find their “comfortable/safe” space at school, schools need to provide more of these.
9. Identify places within the community that youth typically gather and develop opportunities for youth to decompress and self-reflect in those places. Youth need more safe spaces in our communities to be able to “declutter” and self reflect.
10. Use social media as a tool for fostering open and inclusive education, communication, and connection around mental health. Normalize that often what we see on social media is not representative of someone’s whole self.

Scan the QR code to the right to view the Through Our Eyes Video and learn even more from the youth who participated in this project!



**Youth from across northwest Michigan say that a world that is free of stigma around mental health would look and feel:**



