Unpacking Mental Health Awareness and Supports in Scouting

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**Program Context of Mental Health Awareness in Scouting**

What were the odds, with all the advancements in medicine and technology, that a little over a century after the Spanish Flu Pandemic ended, another pandemic would basically shut the entire world down and turn the entire way of life as everyone knew it on its head? The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) motto is “Be Prepared.” However, no one fathomed or had truly prepared for a pandemic of such a global scale and all the impacts its aftermath would have on human beings worldwide. Some of the impacts have been positive because we have advanced communication through expanding virtual and telecommunications technology, found new ways to create flexible working and academic environments, and developed advancements in medicine and vaccines. The secondary impacts also included alternative ways of doing business, academic disruptions, family losses, ongoing physical health issues, and changes in socialization rituals. The secondary set of impacts are more about what this report is on because they can impact mental health tremendously and this is something individuals and leaders in scouting need to be aware of in our changing world.

The following excerpt to show the dramatic impact the pandemic had on the population and the importance of mental health awareness is from the Washington Post in an article posted on September 29, 2022:

““In 2021 after two years of decline, the U.S. suicide rate resumed its upward climb, with young people and men hit hardest, according to [CDC data](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr024.pdf). The 4% increase almost wiped-out modest decreases in previous years, with 47,646 suicides in 2021. During the pandemic in 2020, suicides declined, only to increase in 2021 with available COVID vaccines available and many people returning to their pre-covid lives. Experts say an explanation for the increase is still unclear. “The tale of this pandemic in terms of mental health is going to be many, many years to process,” said **Hannah Wesolowski, NAMI CAO**. The new data also revealed an unusual monthly pattern in 2021 with the largest increase in suicides occurring in October with 11% more than in 2020.””

“Why should I be concerned about mental health? It does not relate to scouting. There are professionals that handle those situations.” These are things you may be saying to yourself. However, mental health and the challenges that arise when someone is experiencing a mental health issue is a worldwide occurrence and the scouting programs within BSA are not immune to these challenges. In fact, the actions you do or do not take could be vital to the barriers or successes the individual may experience in their scouting activities and especially in their life.

The world today, especially post Covid-19, and our younger generations are acknowledging the importance of being more transparent, more aware, and more accepting of people experiencing mental health related situations. It is built into the BSA’s scout oath and law to “Help other people at all times. Keep myself physically strong, morally straight, and mentally awake.” Lord Baden Powell did not intend for these words to be recited and not be taken to heart or have action taken behind them. He envisioned worldwide change where the humans of the world would be at peace and support one another. What better way to live out his vision than to embrace mental health awareness and help support those experiencing mental health concerns or challenges through support and offerings of the BSA scouting program? After all the multitude of programs, activities, and locations offered today in scouting offers opportunities for people of any ability to participate in scouting and to be included in a way to fit their needs.

Returning the focus to the effects of the pandemic and how this relates to mental health awareness in scouting, think about when the world stopped turning for about a year in 2020. Where were you and what were you feeling? Perhaps a little lonely and cut off from your supports? Maybe a little blue because you felt a loss from the activities, work, socialization, etc. you so enjoyed? Was there fear of the unknown with a scary virus that appeared uncontrollable and endangered you and your loved ones? It is possible some of you were already dealing with mental health concerns you were previously working through. Maybe the pandemic only exacerbated them because your coping mechanisms, supports, therapy, or medications were disrupted or not available to you. Thoughts you may have had may have been fleeting and you may have had the skills to adapt and overcome without any additional help from someone.

Possibly the skills you learned in scouting were involved in helping to weather the pandemic storm. Please think of these moments when you are approached to be a champion in mental health awareness or when you encounter those who need someone to reach out and recognize when they may need a little extra kind word, support, modification, or connection to help them through their day or life. Sometimes all it takes to be a champion of mental health is not the knowledge of an expert. Instead, it is just that one moment in time where you are doing your best to focus on that person, their need, and showing the individual you truly hear them. Again, living out scouting’s values to “Do your best.”

In the past, most people would just turn away and mind their own business because mental health was considered a secret or something people did not think they should call attention to. In today’s world this is not the case. All generations have a responsibility to reach out and help others they see who may be struggling just like it says to do in the scout oath. Also, just as the scout oath mentions, all leaders and scouts in the BSA program need to recognize when they need help and seek support to keep themselves “physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.” Just as you should not tell someone to shake off a major injury, such as a concussion, the world is now aware mental health concerns also should not be shoved under the rug. Taking additional steps to become aware of the signs of mental health challenges, resources available, and supports available to assist yourself and those you encounter in scouting will allow you to “Be Prepared.”

One cannot truly meet the demands and challenges of effectively coaching, mentoring, and advising our youth leaders if one does not have mental health awareness as a part of the training received. BSA’s programming is demanding and challenging, not only for the youth, but adults as well. BSA programs require individuals to face their fears, both big and small, such as those of the dark, bugs, heights, water, being away from home, hiking in mountains for a week, traveling in a boat or canoe over long distances, public speaking, and so forth. Not everyone has the same experiences or fears in life so one cannot base someone else’s fear of a little spider in their tent on their own experience and just tell them to suck it up.

Acknowledging that person’s fear, helping them to relocate the spider if you can safely do so, and providing them education on spiders will be more beneficial to the spiders and the person, for future spider encounters, than ignoring the concern which could lead to mistrust and further trauma. By building trust and acknowledging the fear a leader can also teach the youth it is okay to reach out for help and there are individuals which can be depended upon in life. Self-awareness and self-control could be obtained through that process and are an important building block for social-emotional learning which is vital for effectively learning to meet life’s challenges.

In addition, it is important to note many times experiences such as summer camp, high adventure, national training forums, and national or worldwide events lead to complete exhaustion, compounding emotions with confronting new situations or fears. The state of exhaustion alone could cause short term mental health issues to arise. One such example would be issues of loss of emotional control or mental fog occurring due to lack of sleep for both youth and adult scouting members. It is important to be aware of when and where this is happening and to plan prior to those events what everyone should look for and what to do.

Thankfully, one of the resources the BSA often provides at summer camp, national high adventures, national jamborees, and other such large-scale events are staff who are trained in mental health awareness. Sometimes even licensed mental health professionals are on staff in some of those settings. An example of where mental health awareness and the planning by the BSA would be effective during a scouting event would be the following: If a youth begins to show signs of being suicidal while on a mountain campsite at National Jamboree the other youth and leaders present with that youth may recognize the signs. Those present can make sure that youth is not alone while sending someone to alert the staff, or medical experts, of the event about this individual’s possible needs. The staff would then ensure the safety of that youth and determine what that youth may need while the rest of the contingent is able to continue to their activities and journey without having to have their complete focus on one individual.

It is important to know that the youth and leaders are not expected to and are instructed to not act out of their scope of expertise. Their expertise, learned in the first aid merit badge, is to provide a safe environment for the person, if it is safe to do so, and call for help. Any actions taken or plans to act should never involve anyone acting outside of what their training is. Just in BSA Youth Protection Training it is important to be aware of your surroundings and provide a safe environment for everyone. To enhance their knowledge and skills regarding mental health awareness and how to provide that safe environment, the adults and youth in the program do have numerous resources available through scouting resources, national resources, and local resources. Again, the best way our leaders and youth can help in situations where mental health issues may arise is to be prepared, be aware, and ensure self-care. All three of these can be accomplished by increasing personal mental health awareness and knowledge of resources through the various programs, trainings, and materials available to all.

**Mental Health Materials, Trainings, and Resources**

In order to increase mental health awareness, the subject is now being seen as a more evident part of the BSA related training programs. For example, in the Developing Youth Leadership Conference held in March of 2023 by BSA Order of the Arrow near St. Louis the trainers discussed some about the importance of mental health awareness in the first night’s session with the leaders present. Various websites in the councils throughout the BSA programs nationwide are also posting more materials and training videos to assist with increasing mental health awareness for adults and youth, such as those found with the Youth Protection efforts. As mentioned above, efforts have been being made to ensure staff are prepared not only for the physical medical needs of campers and participants in various BSA programs, but also for the mental health needs of those individuals.

One of the first items easily found to utilize to enhance your mental health awareness would be resources available on the [www.scouting.org](http://www.scouting.org) website every registered scout has access to online. By going to this site and googling “mental health” one can access current articles and resources about mental health awareness. Current articles even discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon individuals and videos which can show examples of how to handle situation such as homesickness, fear of leaving home, stress, and so forth. It is important to ensure when you are searching for materials to educate yourself that you utilize credible sites such as this and articles that are peer-reviewed if searching a site through a library. Local sites through your council such as [Mid-America Council (mac-bsa.org)](https://mac-bsa.org/) , <https://overlandtrailscouncil.org> and <https://www.cornhuskercouncil.org> will often have links to mental health resources or trainings as well. For example, the council sites all link to the guide to safe scouting. One of the links included in the guide to safe scouting is [Youth Suicide Prevention | Boy Scouts of America (scouting.org)](https://www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/safety-moments/youth-suicide-prevention/). This link gives great insight into the warning signs to look for in individuals who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts or ideations and where to call.

One of the resources that the BSA sites often references to call is the “suicide hotline.” You can also still call 911, go to an emergency department, or call other previous used numbers at this time. However, there is no need to memorize or look up these long numbers any longer. In July of 2022 these lines have been converted to one that is similar to and easier to remember like the 911 number we all know so well to call in case of medical emergencies. The new nationwide number is 988. Instead of having to wait for 911 to sort through whether the needs are physical, mental, or something else the 988 line helps directly with situations involving mental health needs such as someone contemplating or actively carrying out a plan of trying to die by suicide.

However, this line is not only for situations of suicidal ideation. The line is also for other mental health and substance abuse needs. Calling it will result in a connection to someone to talk with or through about whatever that person who calls is experiencing with mental health needs or stressors. That person will also determine what ongoing resources could help with the situation and help the individual connect to those for ongoing support. Many of the calls can be handled through the phoneline as a crisis intervention so that a major medical, law enforcement, or other intervention is not needed. “Less than 2% of lifeline calls have led to the involvement of emergency services,” according to Hannah Wesolowski of NAMI CAO (CBS News, 2022). The individuals on the other end of the line are trained professionals who are prepared to handle any need someone calls in with. It is important to note there is a small delay at the beginning of the call where the person calling must work through the voice prompts to get a live person. Within a few minutes of the prompts they will get a live person according to Michelle Nunemaker of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services’ Behavioral Health Division (March 2023).

 The area’s local Health and Human Services Department, or whatever the area’s department may be named, or Public Health Department are great entities to reach out to for current resources and training materials or programs on the subject of mental health. Many areas offer “Mental Health First Aid Training” which can be age focused for the age of individuals you will be mainly working with. There are adult versions and youth versions of this training which can be accessed through these local agencies which are connected through the Division of Behavioral Health. Sometimes your local Red Cross may also offer this training. This training helps individuals to be able to recognize situations which could escalate and how to respond to individuals who may be experiencing a mental health related situation or crisis.

Some additional resources which may be accessed are:

* Clergy or Charter Organizations Representatives or local churches
* Mental Health First Aid Training <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/youth/>
* NAMI <https://naminebraska.org/mental-health-first-aid/>
* Local medical clinics or hospitals
* 988 Nebraska Suicide Hotline <https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/988.aspx>
* Local colleges or universities
* American Camp Association <https://www.acacamps.org/> (MESH: Mental, Emotional, Social Health)
* American Psychological Association <https://www.apa.org/>

Mental health resources and professionals are not only psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and therapists. Professionals, although in short supply, could be social workers, school personnel, nurses, clergy, staff of youth programs, and other professionals who have mental health training. When you are reaching out for resources and materials consider including such individuals in your pursuits to increase your mental health awareness and to provide supports in the various activities and programs offered to all individuals and families participating in scouting. Another example of how increasing one’s mental health knowledge can assist would be when a youth has been given a break by their parents or doctor from a medication for the summer or is trying different medications to manage a condition. Being able to explain to the parents and youth how important it is for collaboration and open communication about those medical needs could be vital to understanding why that youth may be acting in a way that is not how they had acted before. The communication can also allow everyone, including the youth, to plan for what would be the best actions to take to help if any concerns should arise.

By increasing the awareness and individuals trained in mental health it will provide safer and more effective programming for all involved. This point is best expressed by a quote from Jason Baldridge, Director of Safe Scouting and Support, from Atlanta: *“Every youth is unique and has needs we should be prepared to serve if we want to provide a memorable, impactful outdoor experience.  While some needs are easy to see on the surface, others are hidden, like mental, emotional, and behavioral conditions (collectively “mental health”).  Creating a camp culture that encourages open conversation about mental health, creative solutions to meet youth where they are, and acceptance of all results in a camp being the place and time where youth can be their full, unrestrained and unabashed self.  Camp can be the place where they flourish, build confidence, and derive maximum joy if we are prepared to meet their unique individual needs.  I’d challenge all camps to strive to be that place just as we are striving to be here in Atlanta.”*

Jason’s quote specifically mentions the camp programming, however what if this acceptance, collaboration, and awareness was applied to all areas of scouting? How amazing would that be? The challenge of doing just that has been accepted and embraced by those of the Admonition Team of the National Order of the Arrow program within Boy Scouts of America. It is a part of the vision of the community they are striving to create where everyone is welcome and included in the scouting family by ensuring the inclusion of all cultures, races, religions, beliefs, ages, needs, and so forth. Bullying and exclusion are clearly not to be a part of the BSA programming and the Admonition Team is a part of people helping to change and challenge the patterns and narratives that have tolerated or allowed their existence in contradiction the Scout Oath and Law. By not allowing bullying and exclusionary actions of any type, no matter how small, it decreases the situations which lead to mental health concerns and issues for individuals. In fact, a welcoming, open, and safe environment can provide the opportunity for healing and learning new coping skills in a safe place.

The team’s resources also include self-care, which is also vital to mental health wellness and awareness, and how to be more open about discussing tough topics, which could include mental health. A great connection to find out more about the Admonition Team’s mission and Order of the Arrow is your local Lodge Advisor of your Order of the Arrow Lodge in your area or member Samuel Aronson at aronsonsmuelj@gmail.com. The Admonition Team can help with resources for those individuals experiencing Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and other mental health related diagnoses. Although it is important to note they help also with resources for all needs, not only mental health. For example, they have connections to various toolboxes of resources such as those experiencing barriers due to developmental delays or other medical conditions. Samuel presented information about the Admonition Team at a training in St. Louis (March of 2023) and shared his vision of everyone being welcome in the scouting family.

Throughout the adult and youth trainings in Boys Scouts of America you will find the “Power of One” mentioned (Wood Badge C5-326-14-1) and National Leadership Seminar (St. Louis, March 2023) often. Mental health awareness within the BSA programs and activities is very much dependent upon the power of one. What can you do to “Be Prepared” to lead the youth and adults in the BSA programs. To become more inclusive and aware of the needs of others? To reduce barriers to being able to participate in programs? To overcome whatever stressors or mental health challenges which may be encountered? How can you better take care of yourself to better serve and mentor those individuals putting their trust in your guidance and leadership? Finally, how can you step up to becoming a champion in raising mental health awareness and education of others of the need to do the same in order to help move towards the vision of Lord Baden Powell of worldwide peace and inclusion? You have the “Power of One” to create ripples that reach thousands. You just need to be “Brave” and take that first step.

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