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Reducing the Stigma Surrounding Mental Illness in Box Elder County

April Litchford

Abstract

Targeted efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in Box Elder County provided education and resources to identify and treat individuals suffering from these issues. Utah State University Extension's efforts to address mental health reached thousands of individuals and generated new partnerships with county organizations.

Introduction

The state of Utah reported a higher rate of anxiety and depression among adults at 40.6% when compared to the national average of 30.1% (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2021). The rate of major depressive disorders is also high in Utah, with 17.8% of adolescents 12-17 years and 9.8% of adults 18 years and older reporting at least one episode in 2019 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2021).

In Box Elder County, 25% of county residents report experiencing poor mental health, which may have contributed to a suicide completion rate of 30.1 per 100,000 people in the county (Yaughner et al., 2020). While psychotherapy has been shown to help individuals change their emotions and behaviors (Parekh & Givon, 2019), less than half the number of individuals in Box Elder County with mental illness sought treatment (DeMoss, 2022). To reduce the stigma of mental health issues in Box Elder County, Utah State University (USU) Extension worked to educate the public about mental illness and connect individuals with available and appropriate resources and services.

Response and Target Audience

There are two populations at high risk for suicide attempts and completions in Box Elder County. The first is adult males ages 35-44. This population had the highest suicide completion rate in Utah from 2018-2020, with 46.6 males per 100,000 completing suicide (Utah Department of Health). The second at-risk population is youth. Suicide completion is the leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 in Utah (Utah Department of Health, n.d.). A series of activities were held to educate the public about mental health needs in the county and to connect individuals with local resources and services.

To reach the first at-risk population, adult males, Box Elder County Extension partnered with several community organizations including county commissioners, law enforcement officers, educators, and local businessmen to create short informational videos. Each video included lived experience with mental illness and ended with a message to connect viewers to local mental health resources. The videos were shared on the USU Extension county website and social media outlets. In addition, a community trap shoot event was held in partnership with a local suicide coalition and health department.

To target the second at-risk population, youth, training was provided to local 4-H leaders on the warning signs of mental health issues in youth. Leaders also received a list of resources to connect youth to local services. At a community pumpkin walk, a resource list was provided to youth and families. In addition, a women's conference was held to educate mothers and daughters on the necessity of communication in treating mental health issues. Finally, Box Elder County Extension partnered with local libraries to provide an emotional wellness workshop to children ages 2-6 years. The workshop taught children to recognize and manage their emotions by talking to a trusted adult.

Outcomes and Impacts

The desired short-term outcome of these activities was to increase (a) at-risk individuals' literacy of mental health issues in Box Elder County, (b) individuals' willingness to talk about these issues, and (c) connect individuals with available resources. Table 1 shows the reach of activities hosted to address mental illnesses in Box Elder.

Table 1: Reach of Mental Health Activities in Box Elder County

Activity	Reach	Description
Stigma Reduction Videos	6,601 total views 4,689 views Facebook 1,695 views Instagram 217 views YouTube	Views were tracked regularly on all sites. Highest number of views were during the initial launch of the videos (2-week period) and during the pumpkin walk.
Trap Shoot	45 adults and youth	Total amount of participants in the activity
4-H volunteer training	95 adult volunteers	Total amount of participants in training
Pumpkin Walk	2,500 views	Average amount of viewers at this community event based on student population and family attendance.
Women's Conference	20 women and girls	Total attendance
Emotional Wellness Workshop	26 children and caregivers	Total attendance and child/adult response at the end of the workshop.

The informational videos increased the public's awareness of mental health issues by generating 6,601 total views through Facebook, Instagram, and the Box Elder County YouTube channel. These views generated personal comments and discussion in social media posts. Some comments were, "Mental health care is just as important as any other type of care and these discussions show this. Thanks for speaking up." Another viewer said, "Great videos, thanks for being brave neighbors, faces for our own community." One individual stated, "The struggle is real! But talking is so important! We need to have more open conversations about this topic. Thank you!"

The videos also motivated eight (8) at-risk individuals to contact Box Elder Extension faculty for recommendations on services, which led to a mental health presentation at a local middle school. Additionally, three (3) male adults that viewed the videos reported having personal conversations with several at-risk individuals in need of mental health services.

The Trap-Shoot and Pumpkin Walk activities resulted in five new partnerships for Box Elder County Extension. These events led to positive outcomes by encouraging personal conversations with 25 individuals during the trap shoot activity about available mental health services. The training for the 4-H volunteers increased their willingness to talk about mental health issues with eight (8) individuals. In addition, 60 individuals took the offered resources to connect with the youth they work with to mental health services. Three additional individuals contacted the local Extension office or Box Elder County 4-H Coordinator to inquire about specific services for youth in their 4-H club.

Outcomes were measured for the women's conference through an exit survey given. Survey respondents ($n = 12$) indicated that they were satisfied (92%) with the information provided, and 75% indicated they would use the information they learned to change how they interact with others. Additional comments suggested a willingness to improve communication with others.

Finally, the results of the emotional wellness workshop were communicated verbally because most of the participants were too young to fill out a survey. All children participants demonstrated an understanding of concepts by verbally identifying each emotion and demonstrating breathing exercises to help calm strong emotions. Parents/caregivers also participated in the breathing exercises, demonstrating an ability to use these exercises to help their children deal with emotions.

Public Value and Next Steps

Educational campaigns can be effective in reducing the negative public stigma surrounding mental health issues (Norms et al., 2016). Too often, the anxiety, depression, and emotional struggles experienced by many individuals go untreated and unnoticed because people are afraid of how friends and loved ones will react. Continuing efforts to educate the public on mental health issues can normalize the struggles of others and create an open environment for individuals willing to talk about their experiences.

Efforts by USU Extension in Box Elder County will continue to address the needs of all residents, and specific programs will also be implemented for agricultural producers. A recent study suggested that two in five agriculture producers have experienced an increase in stress and worry over the past few years (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2019). Targeted efforts will decrease stigma concerning mental illness and increase access to mental health services and support in this population.

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