

Mastering Mental Health: Students host mental health first aid training

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"If anxiety has taught me anything, it's that I'm not alone. There are others out there who share my desire to sucker punch our anxiety so it knows it doesn't control us."

This quote was posted on the Shake the Stigma Facebook page as part of the Truman Speaks Out event, one of the many events that happened during Shake the Stigma Week April 11-16.

Seniors Katie Larabee, Dominique Boesch, Laura Kim and Jenny Lowe said they decided to do their senior capstone project about mental health and spearheaded this week for the first time ever on Truman State's campus.

The week started with a Treat Yo Self kickoff event on The Quad with performances by Truman a capella groups Minor Detail and Sweet Nothings. Joe Hamilton, assistant director of University Counseling Services, spoke about combatting mental health stigmas. Another event was a showing of "Inside Out," as well as screenings for anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder in the Student Union Building. Other events included Yoga on The Quad and two sessions of mental health first aid training, a tutorial for students to learn how to approach and help people with mental health disorders.

Larabee said while only 20 Truman students were allowed to go to the training because of limited resources, more than 75 reached out and asked to take the class. Larabee said this shows how important mental health is to Truman

students. Larabee said while doing research for the project, she discovered not only are people interested in taking mental health training classes but there is also a desire from students to seek assistance for their mental disorders.

"UCS is under represented," Larabee said. "I have recently learned they have over 600 clients, and they're only staffed enough to provide services for under 600. For a while I knew people who couldn't get in for three-plus weeks. To accept the fact you want to get help for your problem and when you're told you have to wait a month or so that's hard, especially if it's an emergency."

Lou Ann Gilchrist, vice president of Student Affairs, taught the mental health first aid training. Gilchrist said she has a background in mental health because she used to be the UCS director and taught counseling at Truman before that, which made her qualified to teach the class.

Gilchrist said the class especially benefited college students. She said some mental illnesses and symptoms do not appear until late teens to early adulthood. This could cause confusion for students who might not understand what is happening.

"There's many reasons for mental health first aid training," Gilchrist said. "Part of it is to reduce the stigma, so it's important and appropriate that it would go along with [Shake the Stigma Week]. But mental health first aid goes beyond the reduction of stigma to give people an understanding of what causes mental illness and how they can assist someone experiencing symptoms of mental illness."

Boesch said the class was beneficial for Truman students because it helped them help their peers. Boesch said all four of the women involved with the project invested about 50 hours planning events and researching for their mental health awareness capstone project. Boesch and Larabee said they found out in their research that USC will hire a new case manager and counselor next year and 49 percent of Truman students had anxiety in the past year.

"Mental health first aid is something anyone can benefit from because if you have some sort of mental health issue or crisis you're probably going to go to your friends first," Boesch said. "The more people trained, the more and better help someone can get."

Boesch said she feels passionate about mental health awareness because she often has anxiety. Boesch said showing people they can talk openly about mental health is important to her. She said she also plans to pursue a career in occupational therapy, and having good mental health and thinking positively has a profound impact on someone's recovery process.

Kim said she also feels strongly about the subject of mental health and thinks talking about it will reduce the stigma. She said the media tend to portray mental illness as crazy or violent.

"I personally think everyone has mental health issues at some point in their life, and this is not only a particular group of people — it's everywhere," Kim said. "It's time to allow people to speak and to hear their stories."



Submitted photo

Students participate in yoga on The Quad for Shake the Stigma Week. The purpose of the event was to help students relax and have a positive outlook. The week was part of a capstone project by a group of health science students.