



MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH



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Mental health impacts thoughts, feelings, and actions. When a person has positive mental health they are better equipped to handle stress, increase productivity, and realize their full potential. It is impossible to do this alone and we need each other to heal. I often remind students, that if we could think our way to better feelings or situations we would have gotten there by now. Positive mental health does not happen by accident. We need to create intentional time and space to feel feelings and think thoughts. The best version of this full potential exists within the context of the relationship and the truest version within empathic relating. Empathy offers understanding and sharing of feelings with another without owning that feeling personally. Here are a few specific thoughts on how to engage and develop this type of relating:

Attunement

When we notice and engage children in their thoughts and feelings we can help grow empathy and increase their sense of self. This can begin in early childhood, and benefits can transcend through adolescence and into adulthood. If we are willing to be present with them in their feelings, it helps give permission to feel and heal. In their book *The Power of Showing Up*, Drs. Siegel and Bryson refer to this presence as attunement. When a child is in a state of internal distress, that negative experience can be shifted by an interaction with a trusted adult who attunes to and cares for them. We will all suffer, but at least we do not have to be alone in our pain

Seen and Soothed

When you identify your child/student having a distressing thought or emotion, meet them there. This may look like naming a specific feeling and taking time to recognize and validate the emotion. Recognize when to draw close and when to give space. Resist the urge to correct, challenge or confront, rather offer, "I know this is really hard for you." If we can approach with understanding and be physically and emotionally available we can foster the kind of nurturing that lays a foundation for self-soothing and positive mental health.

Invited and Heard

Inviting each other to share stories helps develop empathy and secure attachment. This can be simple and is shaped one conversation at a time. A quick game of "would you rather" or asking some open-ended questions are two of my go-to's for entering story sharing.

Here are some of my favorites for younger children:

What was your favorite part of the day? What makes a nice friend? What magic power do you wish you had?

Here are some of my favorites for older children:

What is the most important thing you learned in school NOT taught by a teacher? Who is someone who looks up to you? Or if you're feeling really brave, What is something you wish adults understood about kids today?