



AIM Ideas Lab Youth Survey 2023

South San Luis Obispo County

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Supported By

Lucia Mar Unified School District

Arroyo Grande High School

Report Created by AIM Ideas Lab Participants April 5-14, 2023

Introduction

AIM Youth Mental Health invited high school student volunteers in San Luis Obispo County to take part in AIM Ideas Lab: a Youth Participatory Action Research project focused on mental health advocacy. This program ran from February 26 - April 13, 2023.

Eleven AIM Ideas Lab youth researchers from South San Luis Obispo County worked together to conduct youth mental health research and make recommendations to policy makers, researchers, and their community about how to address the growing youth mental health crisis. Over 100 hours of community service was invested by the youth participants in this program.

AIM Ideas Lab Program Objectives:

1. Discuss youth mental health, emerging issues, and brainstorm ways to address the crisis with teens from other high schools.
2. Learn about qualitative and quantitative scientific research.
3. Conduct peer-to-peer research mentored by youth mental health researchers and professionals.
4. Collect, compare, and analyze research with the findings of AIM Ideas Labs across multiple cities in the county.
5. Bring the youth voice to the table by presenting ideas, research, and recommendations via identified channels.
6. Drive the next phase of investments in youth mental health research by making recommendations to the AIM Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) for the most impactful needs.

Research Design: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to research and social change that encourages young people to utilize their own perspectives and strengths to identify, study, and address issues that impact them.

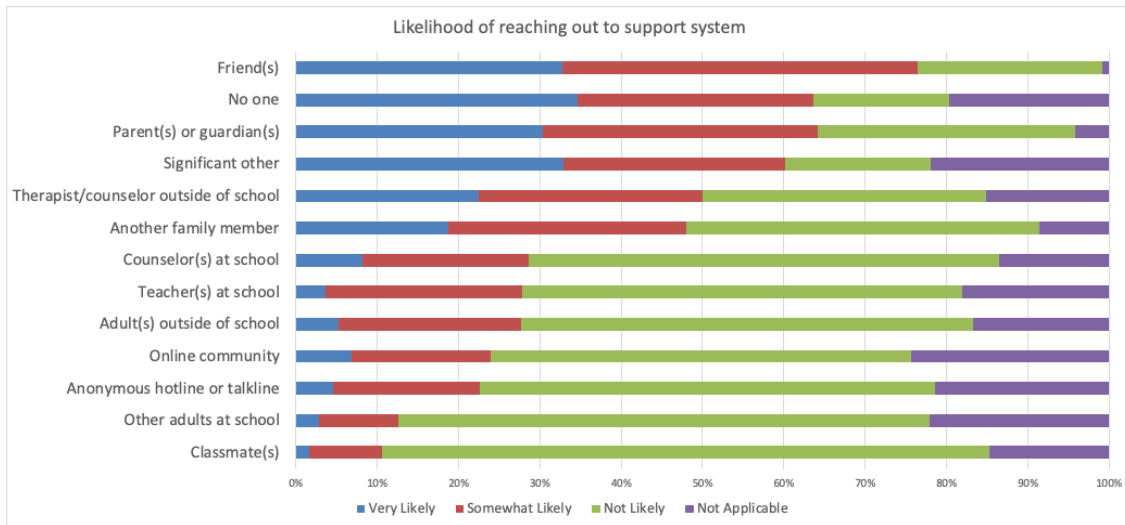
Research Objective: Survey a demographically representative sample of teens in San Luis Obispo County to discover the mental health challenges youth are facing and potential ways to address them.

Survey Distribution: The survey took about 10-15 minutes to complete. Questions included demographic information like gender identity, race, and age, as well as questions about youth mental health and support services. The survey was distributed March 20 - March 24, 2023, via a recruitment video shown during the Advisory period at Arroyo Grande High School, word-of-mouth, text message, and social media. 266 youth in South San Luis Obispo County completed the survey.

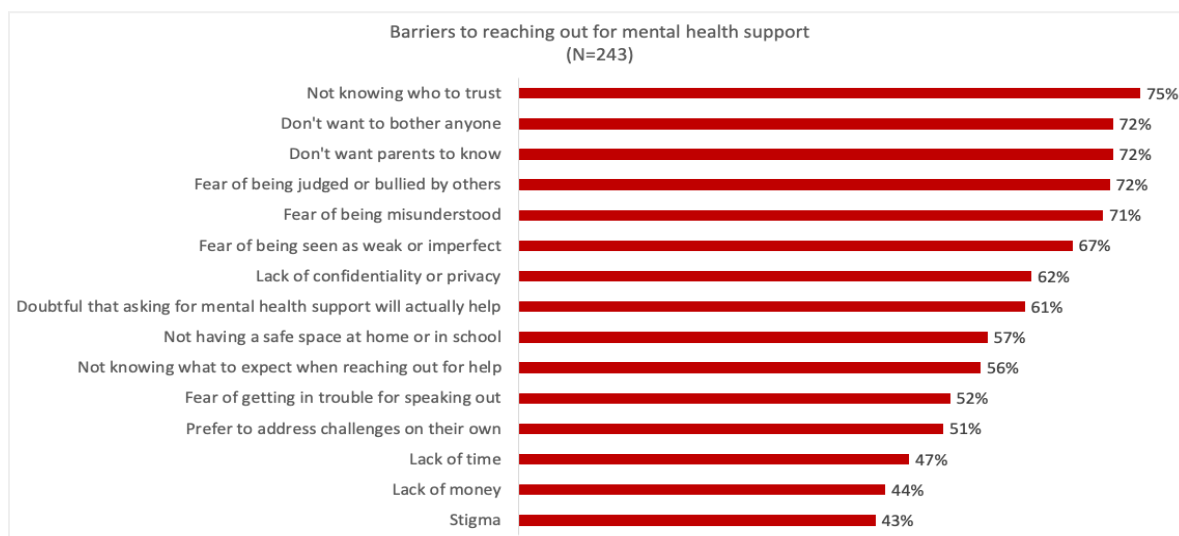
Mixed-Methods Approach: The survey consisted of 20 quantitative (frequencies, percentages) and 1 qualitative (open ended response) questions and were analyzed by the youth researchers to form conclusions and recommendations for youth and adult stakeholders in the community.

Executive Summary

1. Teens in South San Luis Obispo county should receive more psychoeducation about what helps mental health, available resources, and how to support their peers. When teens in the county are going through a challenging time, they are most likely to turn to their friends and family, or no one. Teens should be encouraged to speak out on behalf of their mental health and be made more aware of low-cost or free mental health resources available to them.

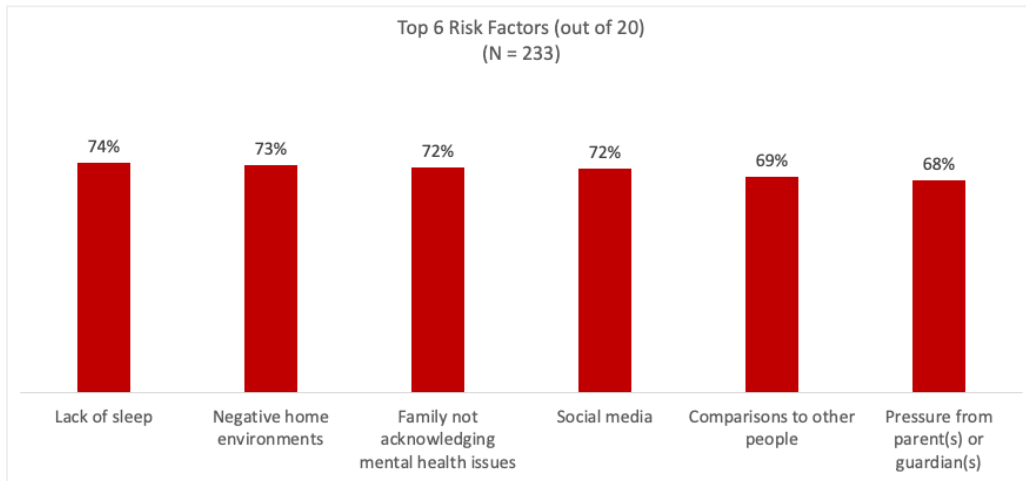


2. Adults and youth in South San Luis Obispo county should create spaces where teens can talk freely about mental health without worrying about being judged. In doing so, students are able to feel a sense of community and most likely be more encouraged in reaching out to resources and receiving the help they need. The data show many barriers to reaching out for help including not knowing who to trust and fears of bothering or being misunderstood by others.



Encouraging students to speak up about their mental health challenges and share their experiences may help create bonds between students with similar issues and reduce their feelings of loneliness and isolation with these experiences.

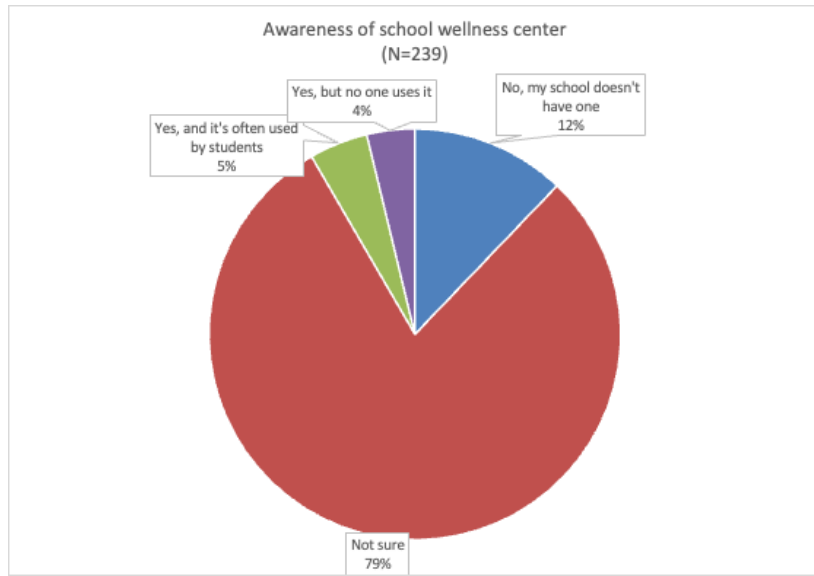
- Adults in the county need more psychoeducation about youth mental health and how to properly support the teens in their lives. The lack of perceived support from parents, teachers, and stigma prevents teens from discussing their mental health all serve as substantial barriers for students in achieving a healthy mental state. Schools should do more to educate their staff about youth mental health, especially since 84% of students believe it is important to have a trusted adult they can turn to at school.



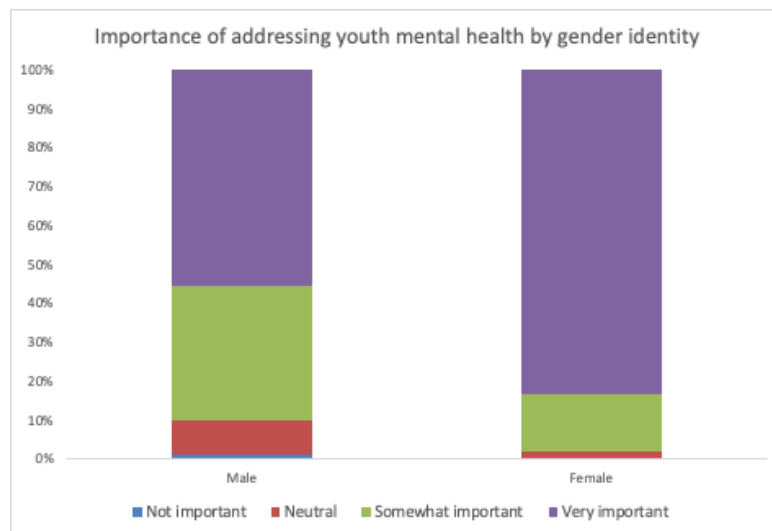
- The school district should take more systematic steps to provide mental health support for their students. For instance, promoting mental health education, providing effective mental health resources, and training staff to become more approachable are great first steps. Policymakers and the school district should provide schools with more resources to help student mental health e.g., counselors, mental health centers, more opportunities for community building.

Most helpful mental health support at school (N = 229)	
69%	Ability for students to take mental health days
69%	Free mental health resources
60%	Support that doesn't require parent/guardian permission
58%	Access to anonymous support
56%	Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health
56%	Educating teachers and school staff about youth mental health
56%	Educating students on healthy coping skills and self-care activities
52%	Wellness center and/or safe spaces in school

5. While Arroyo Grande HS offers a health and wellness center and provides mental health resources, a majority of students do not know about them. Therefore, it is important that the school staff, administrators, and teachers promote that there are resources that do not require parental consent or insurance. The Health and Wellness Center should not be limited to only receiving physical medical attention but mental health attention as well where students are able to freely talk to mental health professionals, such as therapists or counselors.

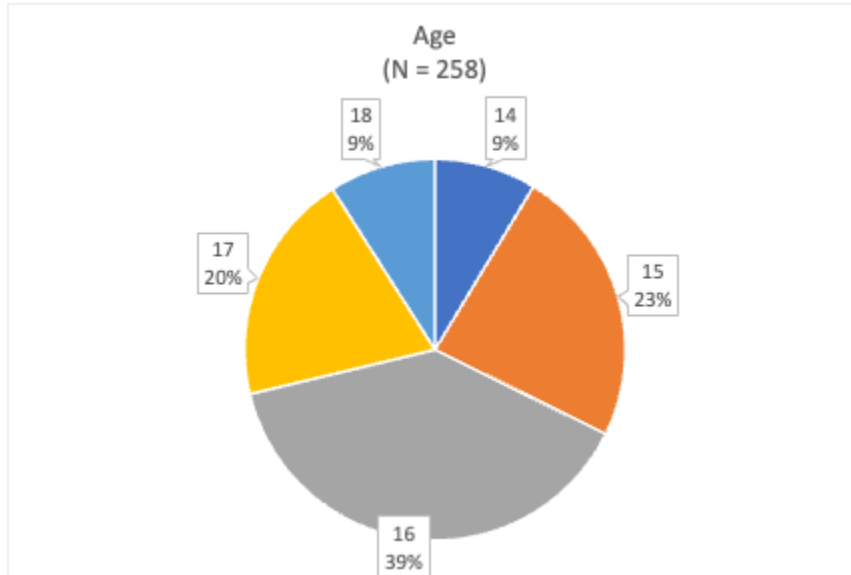


6. There is a need to normalize addressing mental health amongst all teens. Currently, there is a substantial disparity between genders, with males consistently viewing mental health as less important of an issue in comparison to their female peers. Taking our recommended actions will serve as stepping stones in achieving a healthier population of students who are better more engaged, equipped to learn, and perform.

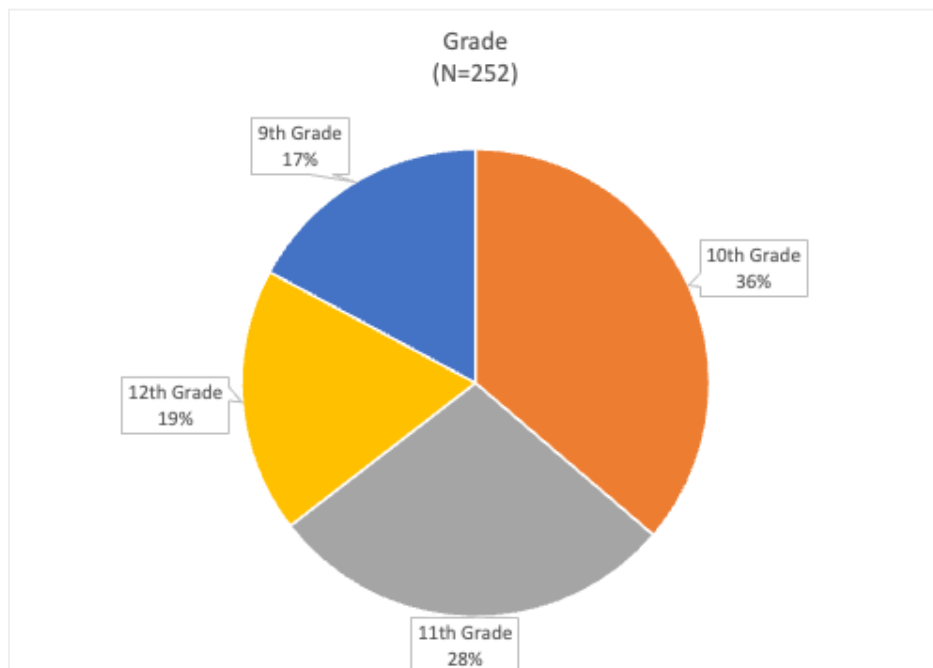


Respondent Demographics

What is your age?

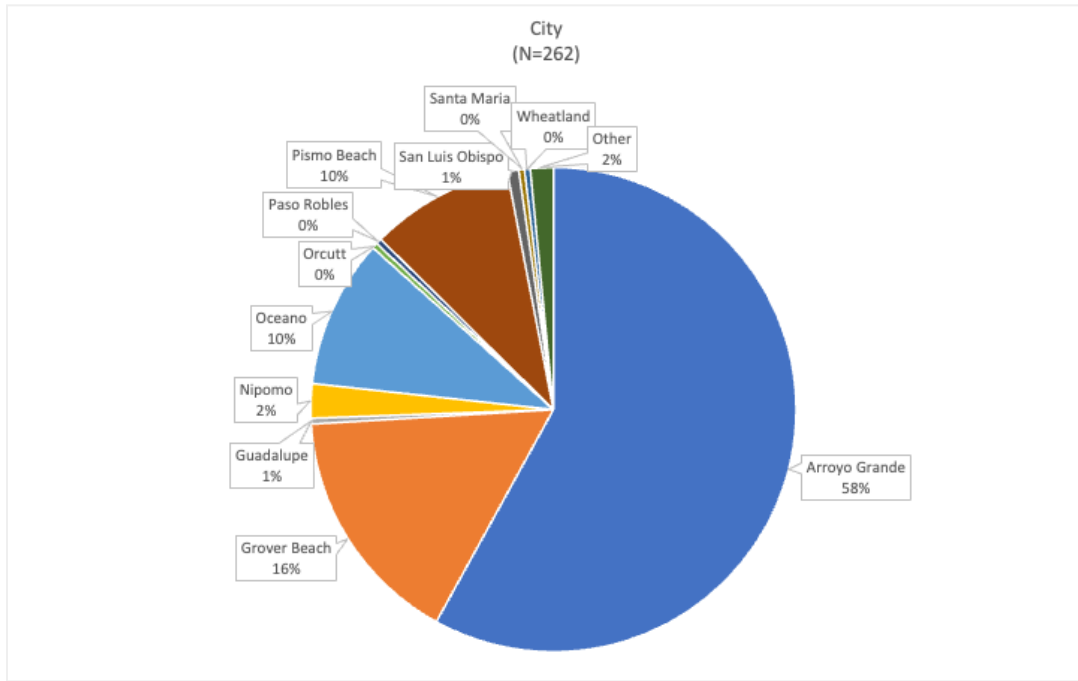


What grade are you in school?



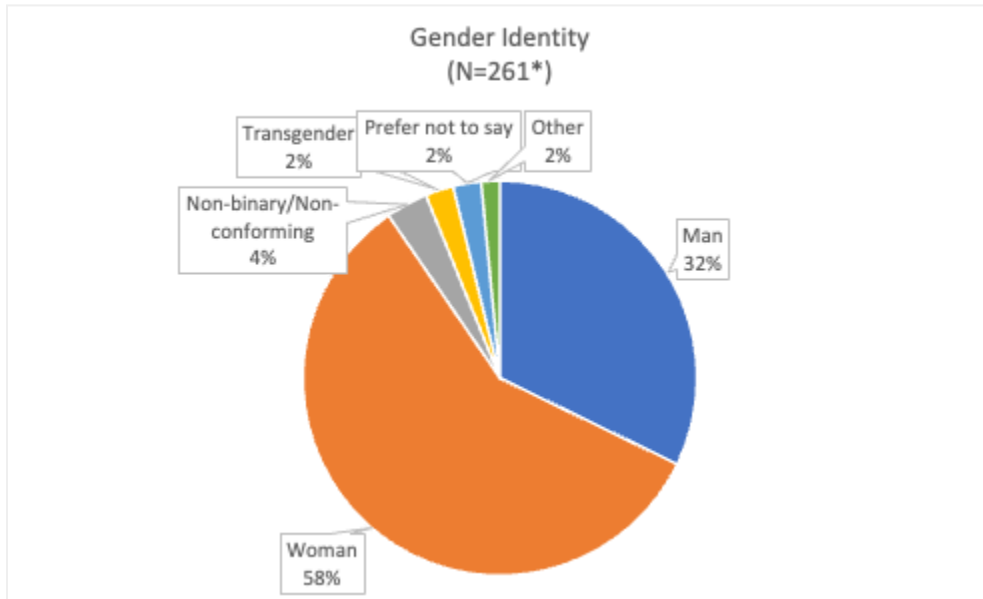
- Greater number of 10th grade respondents mirrors the greater number of 10th grade Ideas Lab participants

What city do you live in?



- The cities that survey respondents live in reflect the cities where Arroyo Grande HS students live, suggesting that the majority of respondents are Arroyo Grande HS students

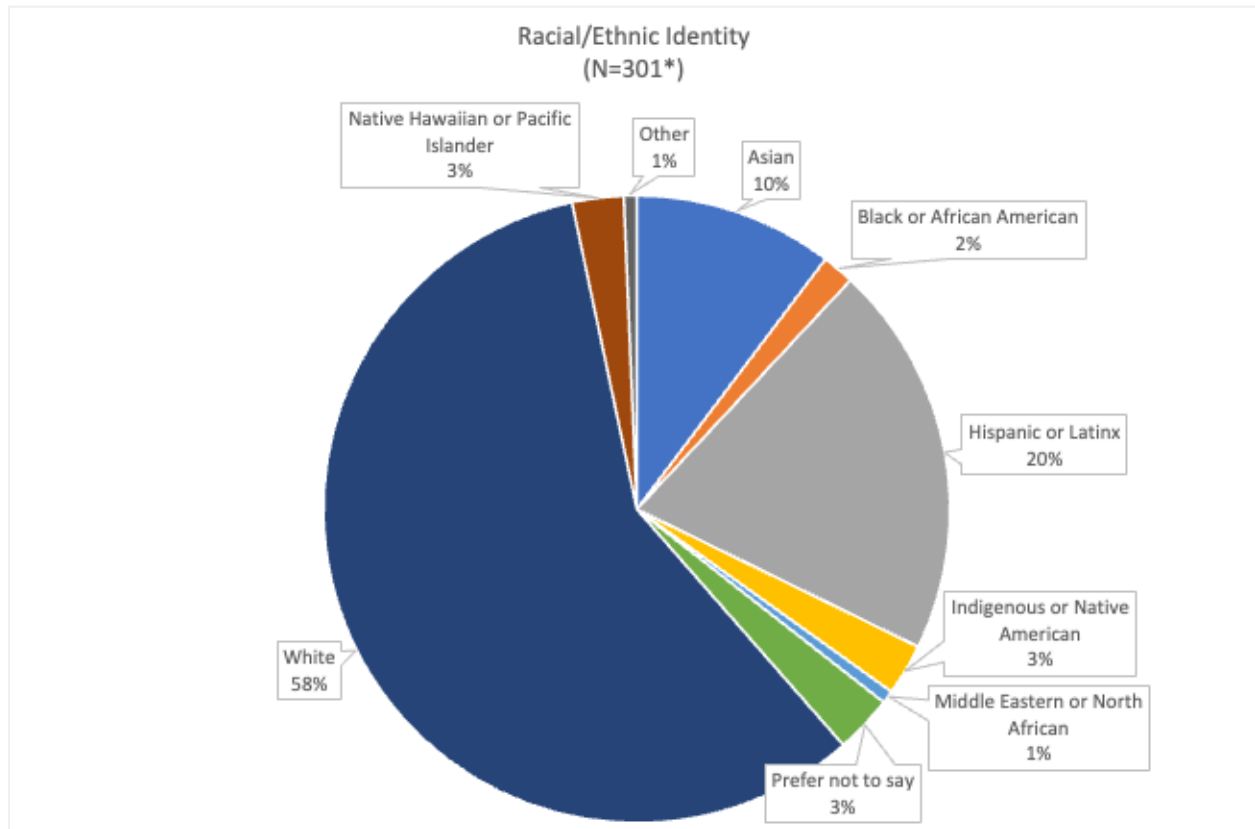
What is your gender identity?



*Includes 9 respondents who selected more than 1 gender identity

- Males are underrepresented in the survey sample, when compared to the population of Arroyo Grande HS students
- The overrepresentation of women respondents is not surprising to the Ideas Lab participants, given the conversations they've heard about mental health at school

What racial/ethnic group do you belong to?

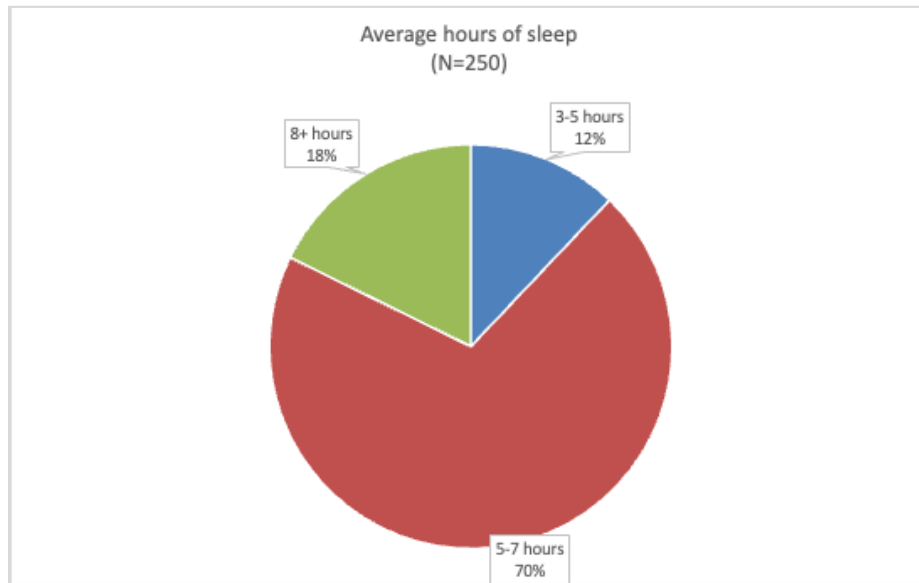


*Includes 43 respondents who selected more than 1 racial/ethnic identity

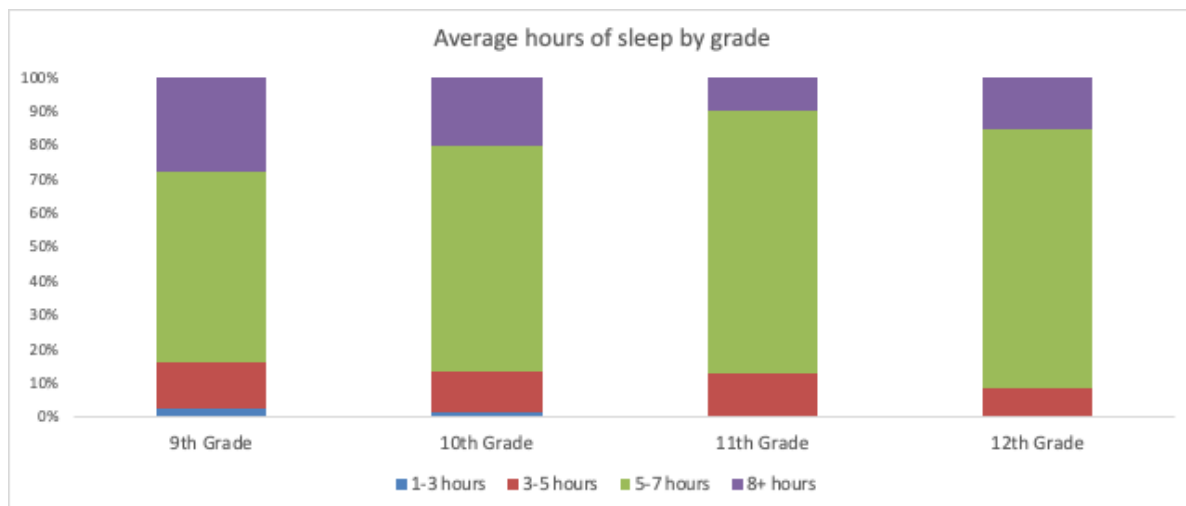
- Hispanic/Latinx teens are underrepresented in the survey sample, when compared to the population of Arroyo Grande HS students
- Overall, teens of color are underrepresented in the sample compared to White teens

Survey Results

Q1: On average, how many hours of sleep do you get on a typical weeknight?

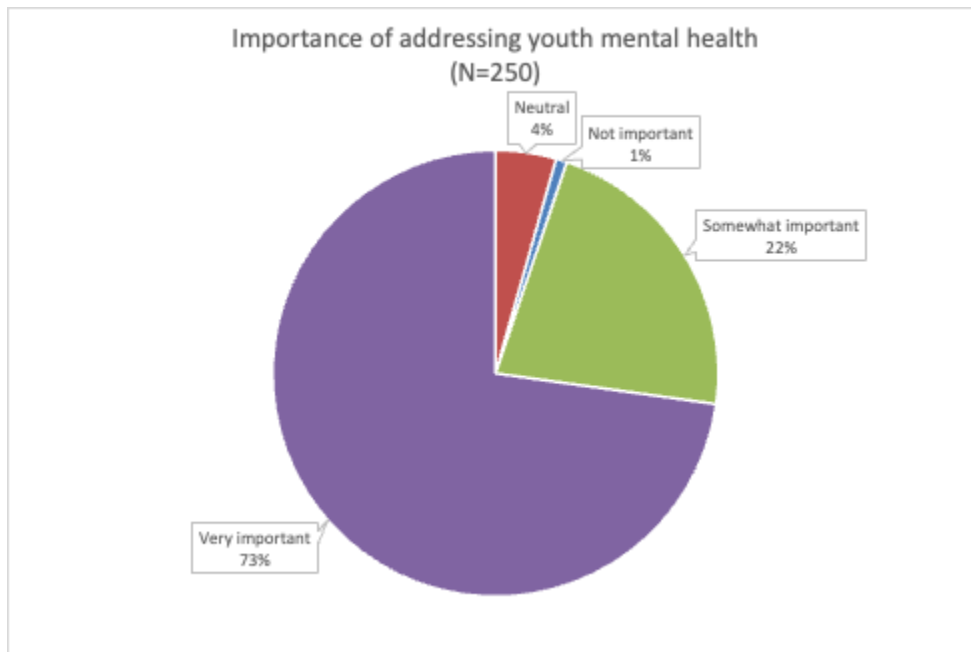


- Most students are getting 5-7 hours of sleep, which is below the recommended amount but not surprising, given the amount of homework and extracurriculars such as sports and clubs
- **Recommendation:** In future surveys, create a category of 12+ hours, which can indicate an unhealthy amount of sleep and other mental/emotional health challenges

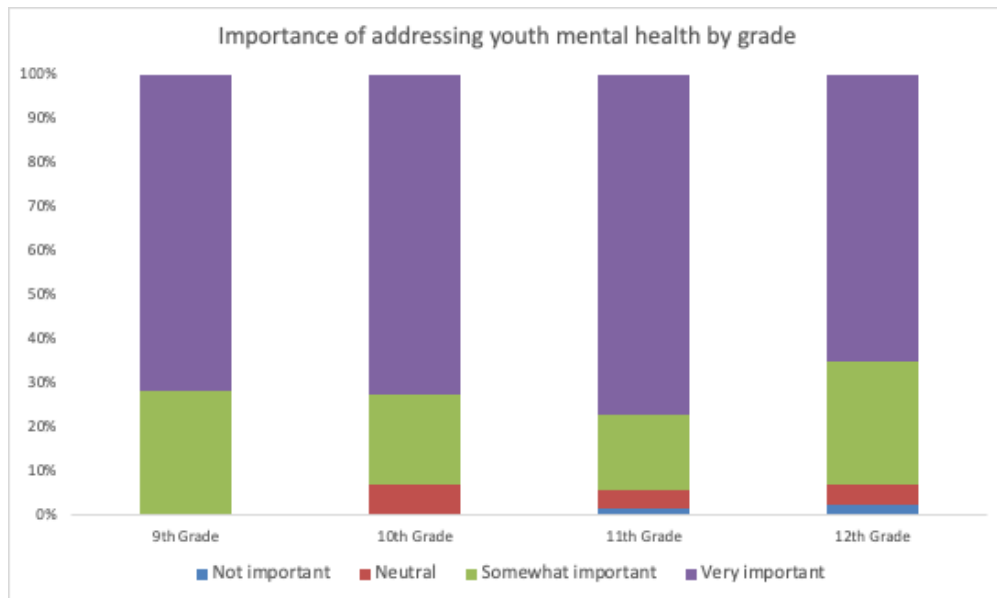


- More 9th Graders are getting 1-5 hours of sleep each night, but also have the highest percentage of 8+ hours, which may be due to the new environment of high school and still finding a balance between school and sleep
- Surprising that most Juniors are able to get 5-7 hours of sleep with their academic pressures
- **Recommendation:** In future surveys, probe into what students are doing instead of sleeping. Are they studying or spending time on recreation e.g., social media, video games?

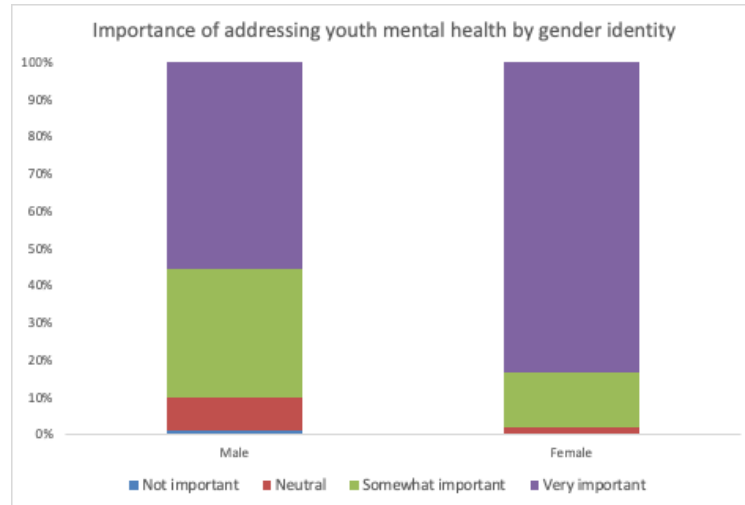
Q2: How important do you think it is to address the mental health of teens in SLO County?



- The majority of survey respondents believe it is important to address youth mental health, which could reflect the increased attention on mental health amongst Gen Z

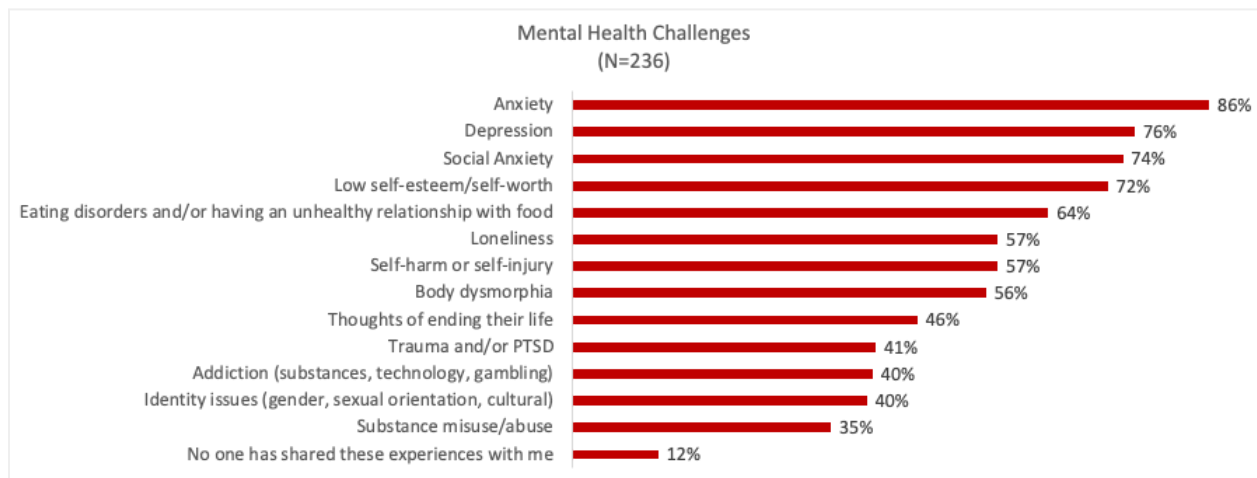


- It is surprising that 9th Grade respondents are finding youth mental health more important to address than 12th Grade respondents, since the Ideas Lab participants thought that mental health is an issue that becomes more important with age. However, some participants hypothesized that there may be greater awareness of mental health challenges amongst younger teens, given the growing crisis



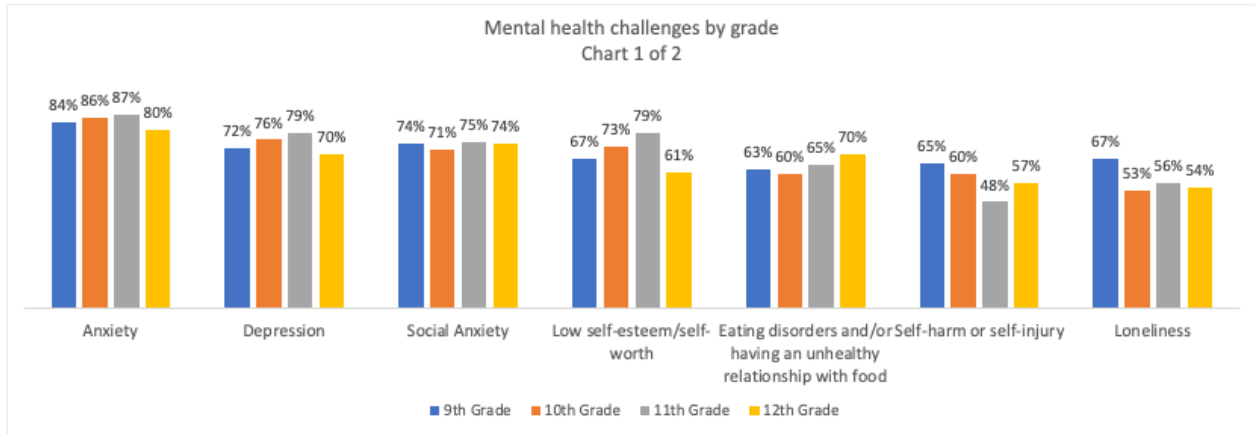
- Male teens are more likely to believe it is less or not important to address youth mental health than female teens, suggesting that there is greater stigma about mental health amongst male teens

Q3: Have any of your friends shared with you that they have experienced any of the following?

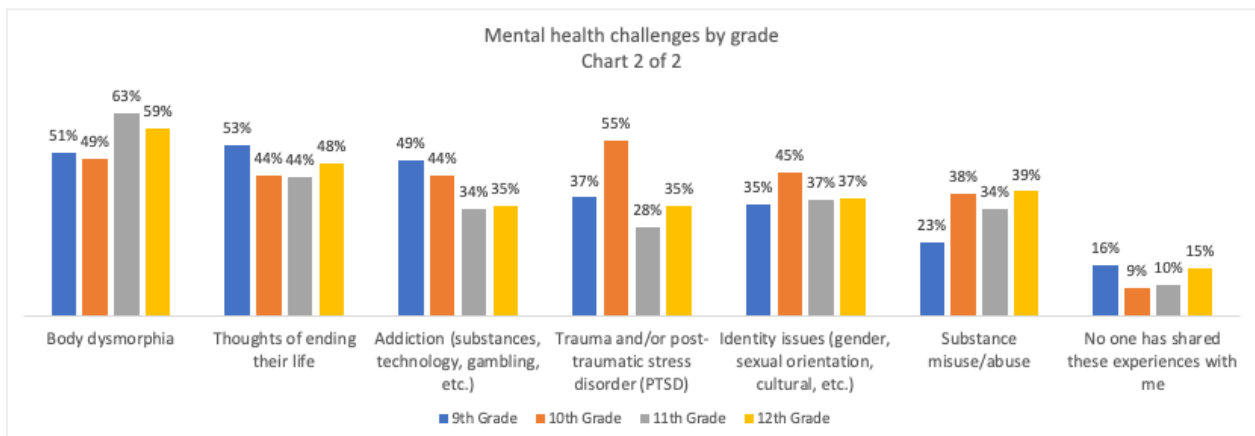


- The number of respondents who have indirect experience with suicidal ideation and self-harm is high, but maybe not surprising given the prevalence of anxiety and depression. However, language about suicidal ideation is often normalized amongst teens and sometimes joked about, which may lead to others not taking such threats seriously.
- Body dysmorphia is high on the list, but not surprising given some of the social media posts from teens about their appearances
- Comparing self to others via social media and/or in person may be a common culprit for challenges related to social anxiety, low self-esteem/self-worth, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia
- A majority of respondents (88%) have heard their friends discuss mental health challenges. This high number can be related to teens developing unhealthy coping habits such as vaping, drug and alcohol use during quarantine due to lack of support and health education.

Top mental health challenges by grade:

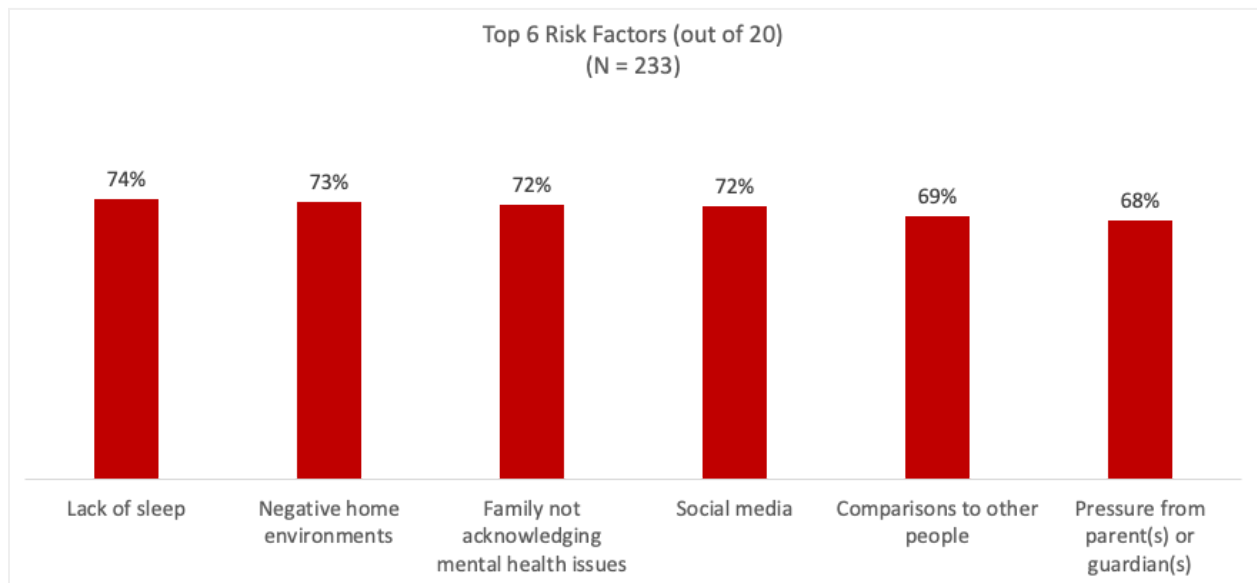


- Juniors are experiencing the highest rates of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem/self-worth, which could stem from the academic pressures during Junior year and the need to make important, life-changing decisions
 - **Recommendation:** Broaden Juniors’ perception of their options after high school by normalizing experiences other than going to an Ivy League college. Make it more acceptable to attend other universities, not going to college, or going to trade school to help reduce the competitive, stressful mindset of Junior year, along with teaching wellness activities and exercises to help Juniors cope with the stress.
- Freshman ranked highest for Loneliness, which could be due to them still adjusting to high school. The Ideas Lab participants noted that while some Freshmen have friends in other grades from participating in clubs and other extracurriculars, those who don’t participate may have a worsened sense of loneliness amongst their 9th Grade peers who have more friends. In addition, some may have friends online which may make it harder to make friends in-person and contribute to that sense of loneliness.
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should continue to encourage 9th Graders to meet more people, through the variety of clubs and extracurriculars the school has to offer.



- Sophomores ranked the highest for trauma and/or PTSD and identity issues, which the Ideas Lab participants thought could be correlated. In addition to 10th grade being an important developmental period where students are exploring their identity, the additional challenges Sophomores are facing related to their identity could be due to their Covid-19 experience. Because of quarantine restrictions, today's Sophomores missed out on middle school, which the Ideas Lab participants described as a mini-HS, where youth can experiment with their identity along with finding their own activities and communities. Perhaps the lack of exploration in middle school has caused built up trauma amongst Sophomores.
 - The Ideas Lab participants also described turning to popular online communities (TikTok, Minecraft, Twitch) during the quarantine, where youth are encouraged to explore their identities and identity-related challenges are often discussed
 - Ideas Lab participants brought up how Sophomores had basically no middle school and had to jump straight into high school after being online during 8th grade and it caused stress and a sort of trauma for that age group.
- Freshmen ranked the highest for suicidal ideation and addiction - could this mean those experiences are more normalized for incoming generations?

Q4: Which of the following do you think worsens mental health for teenagers in SLO County?

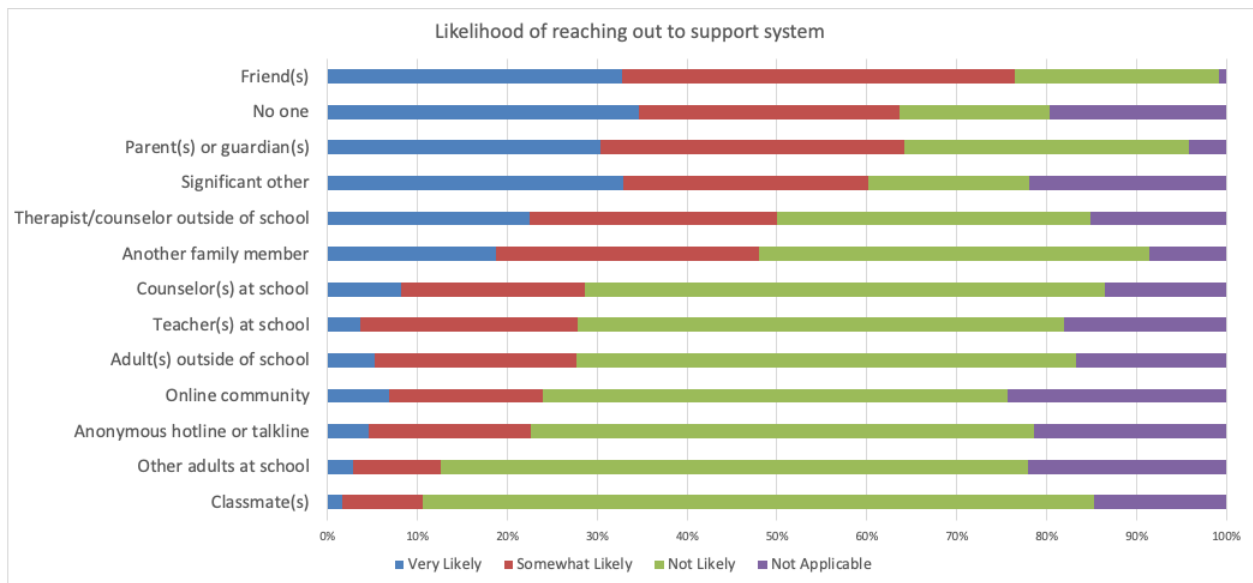


- Lack of sleep is the top risk factor for youth mental health, suggesting that 5-7 hours that the majority of respondents are getting is not enough
 - **Recommendation:** Remind students who participate in extracurriculars and time-consuming work to prioritize more time for their sleep.
 - **Recommendation:** In future surveys, adding an option of “too much sleep” alongside “lack of sleep” because too much sleep is also another unhealthy sign.
- Parents, family, and negative home environments are high risk factors, demonstrating that parents aren't understanding what teens are going through, which can inadvertently harm their kids. The lack of understanding could be caused by different values the different

generations have, including their beliefs about mental health and political issues.

- **Recommendation:** Increase parent and guardian education on mental health and how they can support their children who face these issues.
- Social media is an unsurprisingly high risk factor, given its pervasive and addictive nature. Ideas Lab participants identified two types of social media content that could negatively impact youth mental health:
 - Aspirational content of rich, beautiful, cool lives that creates FOMO (fear of missing out), and sets a high and unattainable bar for how teens should be living. Trying to emulate these influencers' lives causes teens unhappiness because they're changing themselves and believing in false realities. Because content on social media is up to algorithms, teens have very little control of what they see online.
 - Negative content where teens are venting about their issues, insecurities, and traumas, which can worsen or even cause viewers' own mental health challenges. This type of content can also trendify mental illness, which can be harmful.
 - **Recommendation:** Encourage students to take breaks from social media and focus on IRL peer connections because sharing similar experiences allows a stronger sense of community that can contribute to overall improvement of mental health. Practicing gratitude and focusing on the things we do have rather than the things we don't can also be beneficial.
 - **Recommendation:** Encourage students to take information on social media with a grain of salt and educate them on how to be a conscious user and consumer of social media.
 - **Recommendation:** Parents should be encouraged to educate themselves on the dangers of social media content, therefore more equipped to make appropriate decisions for their children in regards to restricting social media.
- Comparisons to other people is also a high risk factor, which can be due to social media or school activities such as grades or sports. While high school has always been a critical time for teens to figure out who they are by comparing themselves to others, today's teens also have processed the different signals they're receiving on social media.

Q5: If you were going through a challenging time, how likely are you to ask the following people for mental health support?



- Friends are the top source of support for youth
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should ensure all students feel equipped to support their friends. They can dedicate Advisory periods to promote mental health and learn skills to help teens support their friends
- Not reaching out to anyone is very high on the list, which is alarming and shows that many teens don't feel safe enough to reach out for support
- Counselors at school are fairly low on the list, which could reflect Arroyo Grande's high counselor-to-student ratio.
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should make students more aware of the emotional counselors at school and what type of support they can provide. The school should also educate students on how to contact a counselor and what happens when you do to provide additional transparency.
 - **Recommendation:** Counselors at Arroyo Grande HS also need to respect the boundaries of their students by asking if they are allowed to inform the parents of what's going on. If the student says no, the counselors should respect that boundary. Otherwise, it can lead to a lot of mistrust in counselors at school.
- Teachers at school ranked low on the list, which makes sense since some teachers at Arroyo Grande HS have been perceived as unsafe in the past.
 - **Recommendation:** Teachers should be encouraged to create personal and confidential relationships with their students. Teachers should also respect students' boundaries and provide support if requested.
- Anonymous hotline or talkline is very low, which is not surprising since most students don't seem to know how that resource works. While Arroyo Grande HS puts the 988 crisis line number on the back of students' ID cards, they do not provide more information to

encourage students to use it.

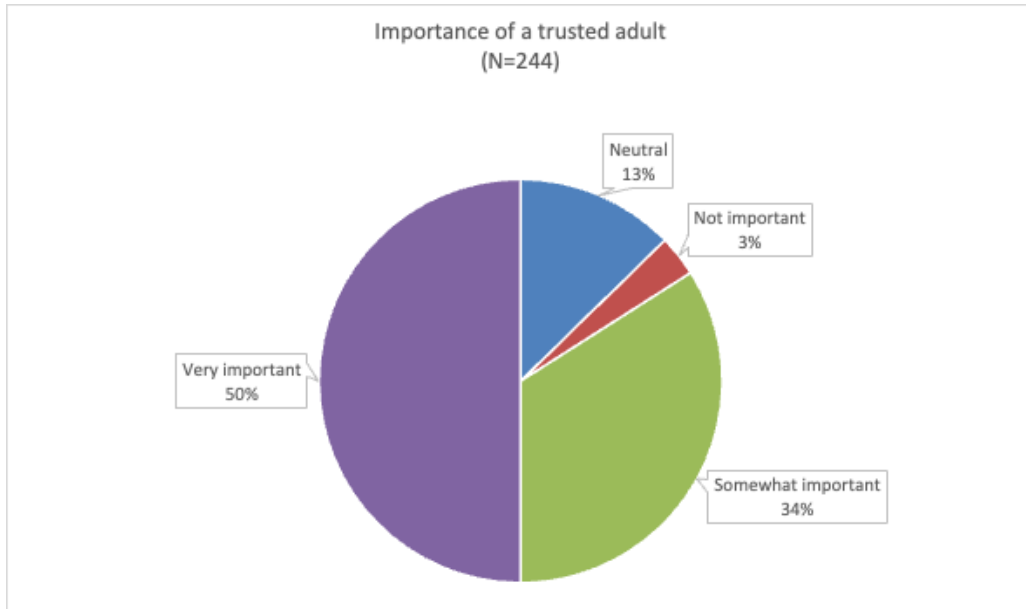
- **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should inform their students about what happens when someone calls the hotline number. This can easily be communicated during assembly, on the advisory bulletin, or added to the advisory video.

Q6: What type(s) of mental health support do you think would be most helpful at your school?

Most helpful mental health support at school (N = 229)	
69%	Ability for students to take mental health days
69%	Free mental health resources
60%	Support that doesn't require parent/guardian permission
58%	Access to anonymous support
56%	Educating parents/guardians about youth mental health
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56%	Educating students on healthy coping skills and self-care activities
52%	Wellness center and/or safe spaces in school

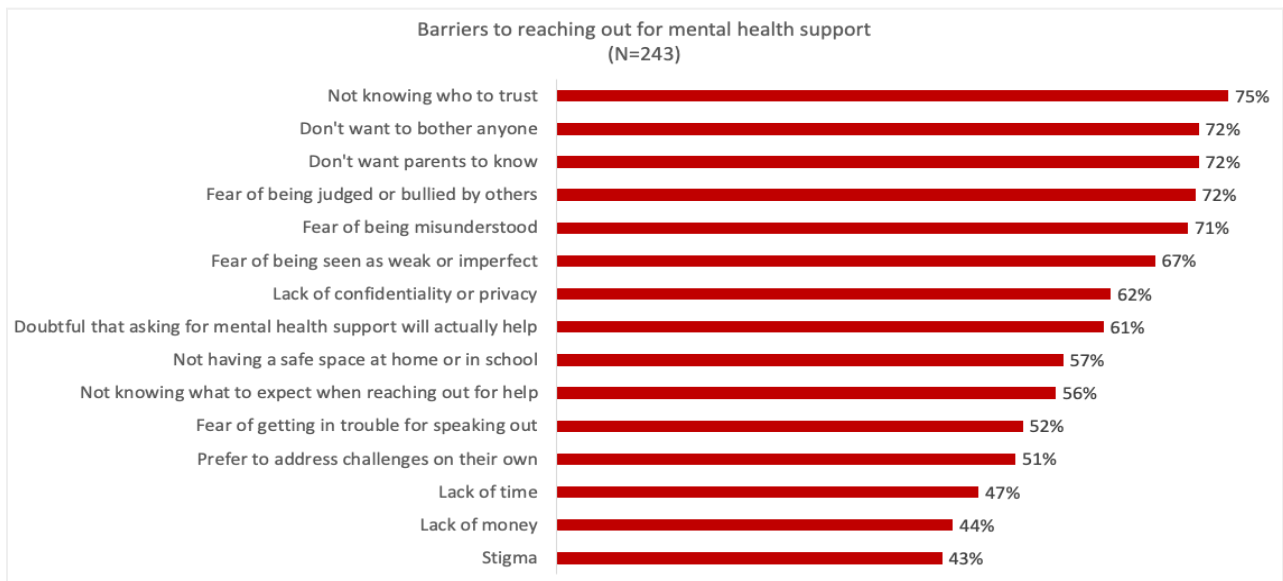
- Respondents want students to have the ability to take mental health days from school, which can be really helpful for select students. However, the Ideas Lab participants acknowledged the concern that students can take advantage of the policy to avoid school. Along with this, the many late work policies can cause students to fall behind on schoolwork during their mental health day, which may cause more stress.
 - **Recommendation:** Teachers should provide some flexibility with schoolwork for students who are taking mental health days, such as a work pass since having work after being gone from having a day for yourself just adds to the pile of stress.
- Respondents are also interested in learning more about ways to support their own mental health through resources, healthy coping skills, and self-care activities
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should do more to advertise and promote mental health resources and coping skills to its students, maybe via a mental health fair on campus.
- Respondents identified the need to educate parents/guardians, teachers, and school staff about youth mental health
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS staff board should create educational meetings on youth mental health and include parents/guardians. Educational materials such as flyers would help too.

Q7: How important is it to have a trusted adult at school that you can turn to?



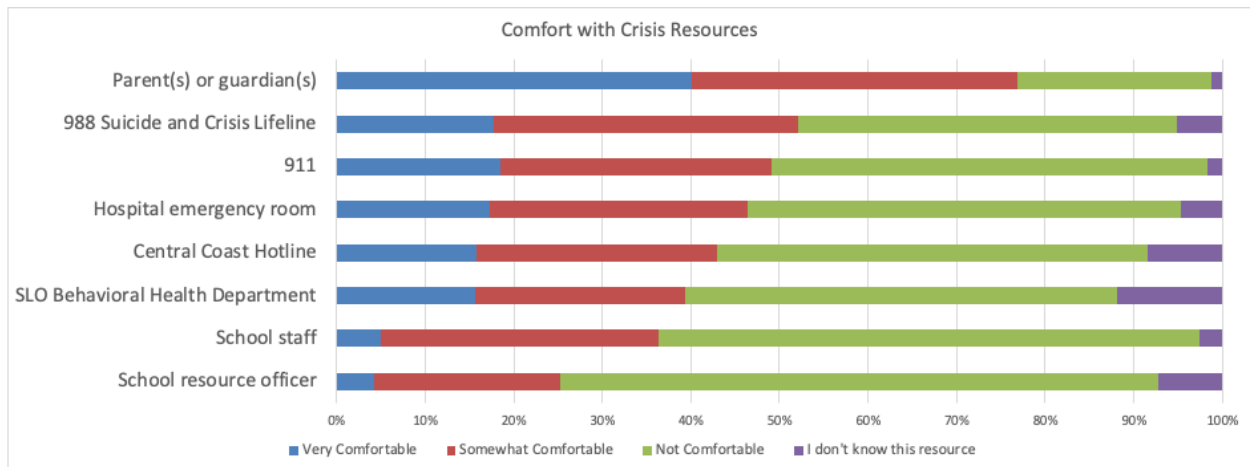
- Students may feel closer to their Advisory teacher but not all students have Advisory periods, which may mean that those students do not have a dedicated teacher they can trust
- **Recommendation:** Encourage students to better connect with their advisory teacher, and allow students to continue with their current advisory teacher on Mondays, so that a relationship with a trusted adult (their advisor) can become one where they can turn to for help related to mental health challenges

Q8: Which of the following do you think prevents teens in SLO County from asking for mental health support?



- While stigma ranked the lowest barrier, it is misleading since all of the barriers are associated with the negative stigma of talking about mental health.
 - **Recommendation:** Youth can share experiences and stories about their mental health challenges and solutions with one another to reduce stigma
- Respondents seem to have the most issue with knowing who to trust with their mental health, which may be related to the previous question Q7 where they identified the need for a trusted adult at school.
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should help reduce students' barriers to seeking out mental health support. Because the Ideas Lab participants understand there are barriers inhibiting systematic change, they recommend a tiered list of changes for the school to make:
 - *Lowest Cost/Lowest Impact:* Promote mental health resources and services via bulletin/newsletter.
 - *Medium Cost/Medium Impact:* Hiring more mental health professionals who are dedicated and equipped to support student needs.
 - *Highest Cost/Highest Impact:* Revamp mental health curriculum in freshman health class and have a dedicated mental health clinic/wellness center.

Q9: If you or a friend were in a mental health crisis and needed immediate support, how comfortable are you asking for help from the following resources?

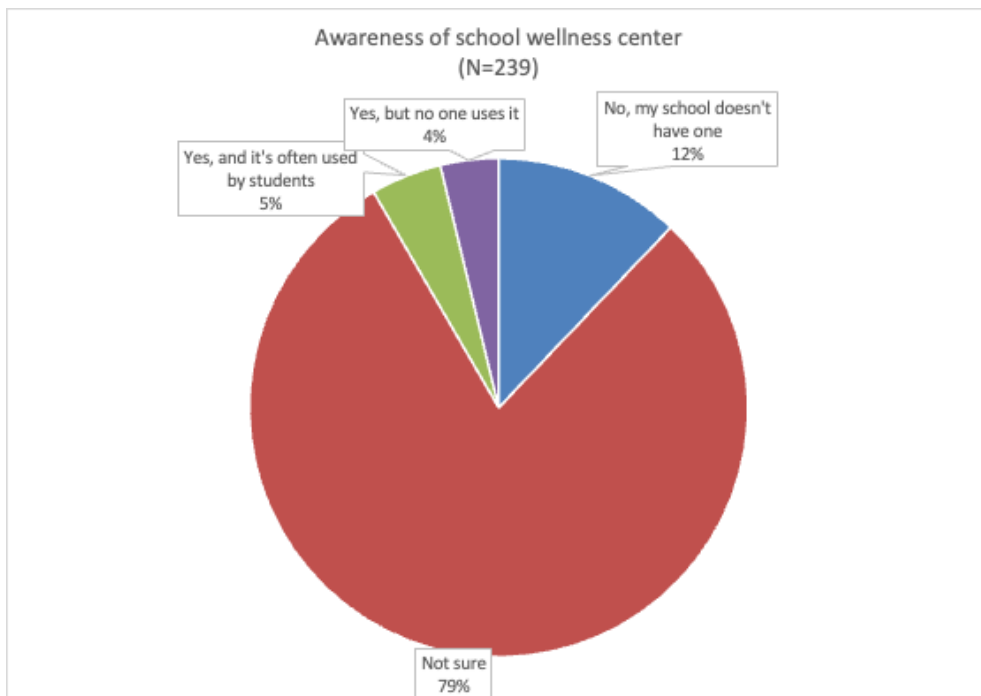


- School resources ranked the lowest on the list. While school resource officers can help students feel safer, they are meant to be authoritative and can be very intimidating and not approachable
- School staff is surprisingly low on the list of crisis resources, ranked below hotlines and emergency services, whose services are provided by strangers to the majority of students. Part of this may be caused by the idea that school staff are mandated reporters.
 - **Recommendation:** Inform students of teachers and counselors' mandated reporting policy, what's included and what's not. Students may feel discouraged to reach out

because there's a lack of confidentiality.

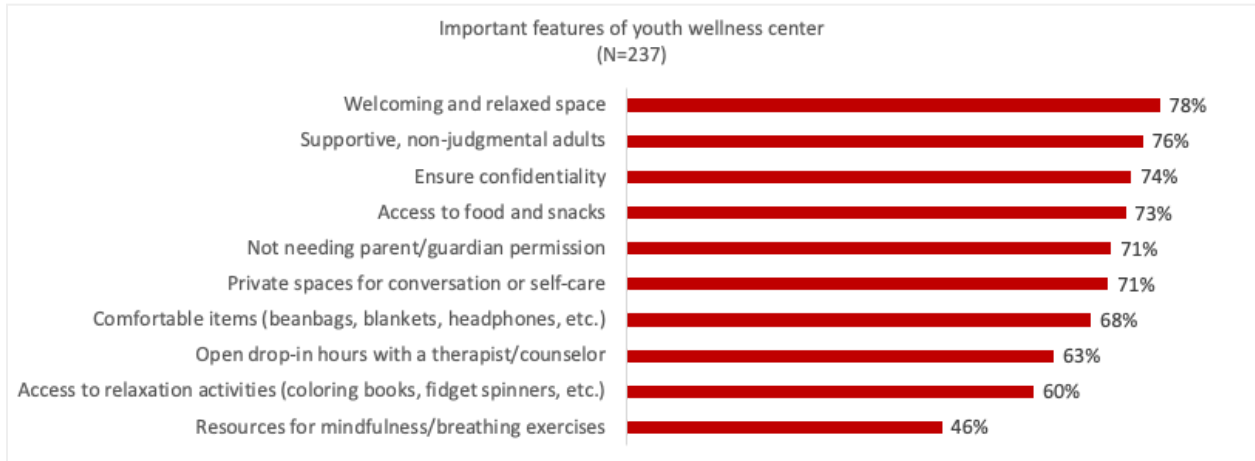
- **Recommendation:** Central Coast hotline and the SLO Behavioral Health Department should be more promoted due to the small percentage of students not recognizing said resources.
- **Recommendation:** Conduct further research to recognize why students are not comfortable turning to the Crisis Lifeline despite anonymity and confidentiality.

Q10: Does your high school have a youth wellness center?



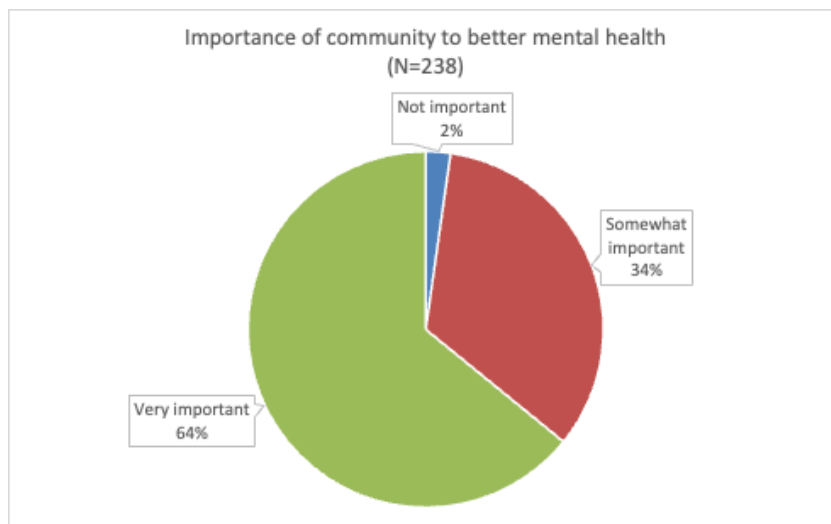
- Respondents are not aware of the wellness center at Arroyo Grande HS
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande HS should promote its wellness center and mental health resources and services more, separately from the health center
 - **Recommendation:** The wellness center should be turned into a safe, comfortable environment where students are able to freely talk to mental health professionals, such as therapists or counselors. In addition, the Health and Wellness Center should not be limited to only receiving physical medical attention but mental health attention as well.

Q11: Which of the following do you think are important to encourage teens to use the youth wellness center at your high school?



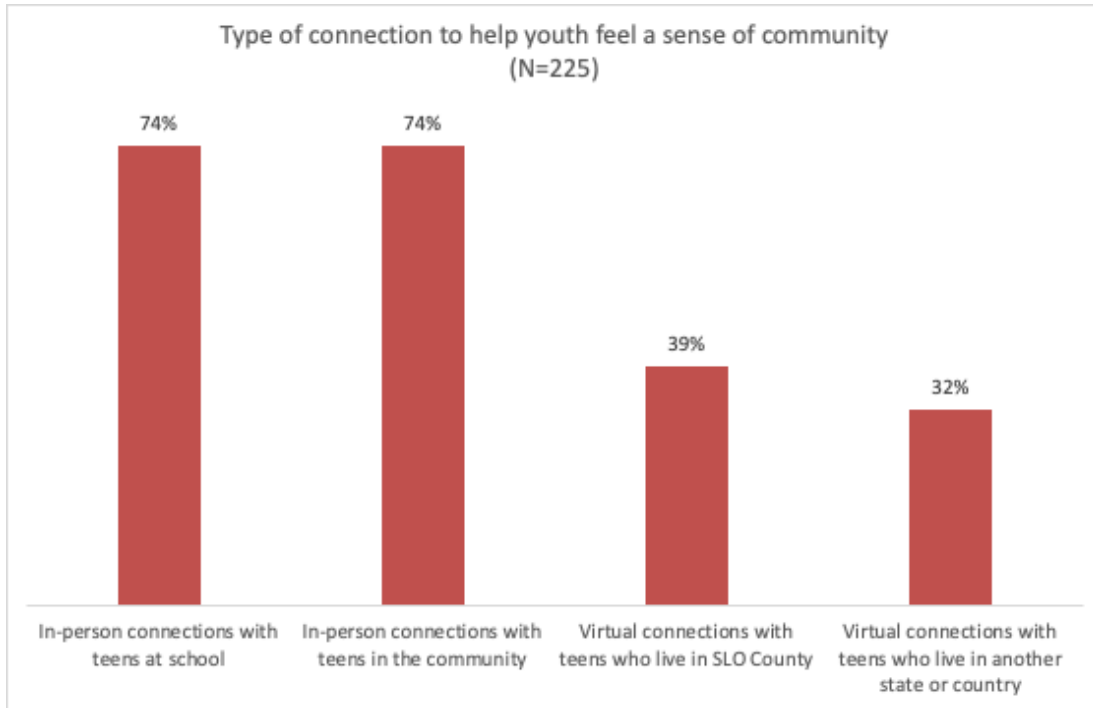
- The current center at Arroyo Grande HS is for both “health and wellness” but students seem to only use it as a health center and visit it when they are sick, which makes it uninviting as a wellness space
 - **Recommendation:** Arroyo Grande should create a separate space for its wellness center with the most desired features in mind, including private areas, access to self-care activities, snacks and the other resources shown above to help encourage a positive space dedicated to student mental health.

Q12: In your opinion, how important is having a sense of community to improving youth mental health in SLO County?



- Connections to people sharing similar mental health experiences can help students feel less isolated and help work on issues together
- Connections with people with similar identities (e.g., LGBTQ+, BIPOC, etc) can also help students feel less isolated

Q13: What kind(s) of connections do you think would help teens in SLO County feel a sense of community?



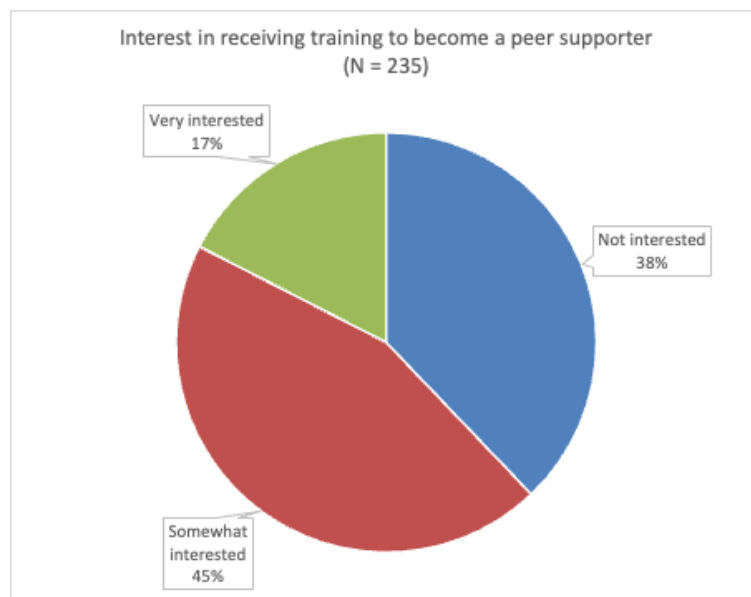
- Despite more virtual connections amongst teens today, in-person connections are still more highly valued. IRL connections have more meaning.
- Meeting people virtually isn't necessarily "meeting" someone because you're not physically talking to them and seeing their body language, especially if you're on mute the whole time and only talk when you want to virtually raise your hand.
 - Virtual is kind of a "trigger" word for people nowadays

Q14: Which of the following do you think would help teens in South San Luis Obispo County build a sense of community?



- Many students don't have enough free time to spend building a community because of work, extracurriculars, sports, which can be overbearing.
 - **Recommendation:** Allow students participating in extracurriculars more time flexibility with their other responsibilities, including less homework since it puts a lot of stress on students.
- **Recommendation:** To help teens participate in more activities, provide a virtual center to view all activities within the community so students are aware of everything happening and are better able to participate e.g., a list of clubs, events, activities, etc.

Q15: Would you be interested in receiving 8-10 hours of training to learn how to support your peers and their mental health?



- The majority of respondents are somewhat interested compared to those who are not that interested. But only 17% are very interested, which may be because 8-10 training hours is a time commitment most teens don't have or desire to give.
 - **Recommendation:** An increase in awareness and education on youth mental health may help more students become more interested in becoming a peer supporter. In addition, if students are able to recognize their own peers who are struggling with mental health, there could be a potential increase in interest in being a peer supporter.
 - **Recommendation:** Could teens learn to become peer supporters in 1-3 hours?

Q16: How do you think teens in SLO County can address youth mental health? (Open-ended)

(N = 90)

Common Themes	Direct Quotes
Find trusted people and places to help teens feel more comfortable reaching out to others	<p>“It's hard to reach out when you are going through something so it's important to let students know that it's okay to talk to people about things”</p> <p>“bring more attention to wellness centers or places people can go for support without parent permission”</p> <p>“Don't be afraid to speak out.”</p>
Develop a greater understanding of available mental health resources and what happens when teens access them	<p>“Maybe make a video or ask to talk on the AGHS monday morning bulletin. People could also make a community service project about mental health where you learn about it and talk about your own experiences or ways to help yourself and others.”</p> <p>“Make mental health help easier to access”</p>
Remove stigma to help others feel more comfortable discussing their mental health challenges, however big or small they might be	<p>“Similarly, i feel sometimes like my issues are not as important as others because of the stigma around mental health and that there are different levels of trauma and pain”</p> <p>“By not shaming others for it, or not making fun of others for having to miss school for months at a time due to mental illness treatment”</p> <p>“I feel like we need to spread around the word a lot more that talking things out is okay. And it's not a bad thing to share how you're feeling, it doesn't make you weak”</p>
More discussion and acceptance of mental health in diverse communities with relevant resources	<p>“Be more open! We're a pretty closed-minded community and that needs to change, especially within the POC community. Maybe, if mental health was more well-known, it would make students more comfortable with their family, knowing that they are aware of the type of help they need.”</p> <p>“I think that teens in SLO county need more diverse and specific resources. I have OCD and I've never heard of a SLO county OCD support group before. I think things like this would be hugely appreciated by other people like me.”</p>

Make lifestyle changes that prioritize and improves mental health

“Make changes in their own lives to eat healthily spend less time on phones and connect with loved ones”

“people but more specifically teens need to understand how our psychology works and be able to differentiate bad habits from good ones, even if those habits dont seem like a big deal (like scrolling on tiktok or not socializing or not cleaning their living space). lots of people have truama or chemical imbalances but i think that the majority of teens dont, and the source of their poor mental health is their lifestyle.”